The Adventures of Loki and Sigyn in Midgard
by queenofthenile91

The Adventures of Loki and Sigyn in Midgard as told to Bragi the Skald by Sir Anthony Stark, or: In which, Loki tries to figure out redemption, Sigyn tries figure out how to protect her husband, Thor tries to figure out the toaster oven, and Tony Stark tries to figure out how...
he got into this mess in the first place.

This fic is not canon to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel Universe Earth-616 or Norse mythology, but it will beg, borrow, steal and bastardize from all three from time to time. After all, if the Poetic Edda says the first Frost Giant was licked into existence by a primeval cow and there’s an alt-Marvel universe where Captain America fights Nazi zombies alongside Howard the Duck, I should be able to do what I want.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The last thing Tony Stark expected to be doing on a Thursday at two in the afternoon was hanging out in a parking lot in New Jersey with master assassin Clint Barton and Agent “Call Me Phil” Coulson. It had been eight days since the Battle of New York, and the streets of the city were still littered with dust and debris. While Fury had ordered the members of the Avengers to lay low and keep away from each other for a while, Tony found himself invited out to this non-descript location in the Garden State on the behest of SHIELD. Somehow, Asgard had gotten a communication to SHIELD requesting the presence of the three men. Now, they were waiting to see exactly what had been wanted of them.

“Please tell me Fury didn’t send you guys to off me,” Tony groaned upon seeing the other two men.

“SHIELD doesn’t participate in assassinations of prominent American businessmen,” Phil said officially.

“Besides, we’d be nice and kill you in your lab. Make it look like a bot malfunctioned,” Clint nodded. “No need in making everyone drive out to Secaucus.”

“So, why are we here?” Stark asked.

“We got a message that we should meet here,” Phil explained. “Selvig was included in the invite, but for… health reasons decided it was best not to come.”

“SHIELD still got him under lock and key, huh?” Tony asked. “Are you going to dump him off in some looney bin somewhere so everyone thinks his stories about gods and planets and aliens are bunk?”

“Dr. Selvig is a highly valuable asset to SHIELD,” Phil insisted. “His research has proven vital for many of our endeavors. At this juncture, we are just ensuring his recent encounters haven’t led to any long-term mental effects that might be detrimental to his psyche.”

“Fury made you memorize that whole answer, huh?” Tony smirked. “Any other monologues you got for us? Shakespeare… no, something more modern. Death of a Salesman, maybe?”

“I actually played Biff in high school,” Phil grinned.

“How are you holding up, by the way?” Tony asked Clint.

“Well enough,” Clint grunted.

“So, what was this message about?” Tony asked Phil.

“So you know the origin of the name Secaucus?” Phil asked.
“I’m assuming it’s Algonquin for ‘smells better than Hoboken’?” Tony shrugged.

“It’s Algonquin,” Phil nodded. “Means place of the black snakes.” He paused for a beat. “This is also one of the locations you could have picked to transport our Asgardian friends back to their homeworld.”

“Are you punishing us for not doing it here? Behind a… I guess this a bulk retailer?” Tony asked.

“No,” Phil said. “Like I said, SHIELD received a message requesting that the four of us meet here on this day in approximately… thirty seconds. Apparently, our services are needed.”

“By whom?” Tony asked.

A blaze of blinding light echoed around them, so bright even Tony’s ever-present sunglasses couldn’t block it out. Wind and shocks swirled around them momentarily. When the dust was lifted, the god of thunder himself stood before them in full Asgardian battle gear. Strange runes were now cemented into the asphalt of the business’s back lot, among the dumpsters and loading docks. Tony bent down to investigate the strange markings as Clint and Phil - who seemed like they had seen this kind of thing before - stepped forward to greet Thor.

“I thought you weren’t due back for a while,” Tony said, rising up and shaking hands with his fellow Avenger.

“Asgard has need of your services,” Thor informed him gravely.

“I see you have the bifrost working again,” Phil commented.

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “The Tesseract played a small part in that. I promise, though, it is now locked safely away and under heavy guard. Sigyn played a larger role, however.”

“I thought they said it was going to take a year or more to fix it up,” Clint mentioned. His face scrunched up as if trying to figure out how he knew that.

“Well, apparently no one thought to ask Sigyn for her help,” Thor admitted sheepishly. “She has been working to help restore it since her return - when she is not tending to my brother’s wounds. She was able to convince her dwarven relatives to bring us some much needed supplies at a good price. It can be used, but only for short periods of time before it must be rested. Which is why we must go quickly.”

“Go where quickly?” Tony asked.

“Heimdall!” Thor shouted.

Suddenly, the three men and one god were being pulled through what Tony could only describe as an extraterrestrial tunnel reminiscent of a water park slide, except they were being pulled up it instead of shooting down. The stars and planets of space were rushing by so quickly they appeared like a rainbow. Before Tony knew what was happening, he found himself on solid ground, or at least what passed for it in Asgard. The rainbow flooring was just about see-through and he could see the galaxy underneath him through it. Clint, unsurprisingly, had landed on his feet with a twist. Phil had caught his own slight stumble upon landing. Tony staggered around momentarily, feeling as though he was drunk. It was a shame, too. He really wanted to spend his first seconds on Asgard wondering at the technology rather than trying not to wretch.

“Prince Thor,” Heimdall nodded before turning to the new arrivals one-by-one, “Phillip, son of Coul. Clinton Barton, the Eye of the Hawk, the Golden Archer.” Clint gave him a mock salute.
When they had arrived back on Asgard, Sigyn had expected a full contingent of guards and soldiers would be waiting there to take her and her husband into custody. She was fully prepared to go willingly along with them, as long as they promised to take her husband to the healers before locking him away. She was surprised instead to see Odin, Frigga, Lady Sif, and the Warriors Three were the only ones waiting with Heimdall at the former Bifrost Observatory for them as they arrived back on Asgard. She knew Heimdall had probably been keeping watch over them, but as Odin settled his gaze on her, Sigyn was certain the Allfather had sent his two little pets to spy as well. She could hear their cawing overhead.

Sigyn found herself in the middle of the two brothers, Thor on her left and her husband on her right, as they waited for some kind of recognition from those that had gathered to greet them upon their return. While Thor was trying to keep a calm facade, Loki wasn’t bothering to hide his distaste at being returned to the Realm Eternal. Sigyn waited for Odin to speak, but before the Allfather could say anything, it was Frigga who rushed forward and embraced her youngest son, not bothering to hide the silent tears falling from her eyes. Loki made an attempt to slightly hug his adoptive mother back, though his shackles and chains made it difficult.

“My son,” Frigga said sweetly. Frigga held him tightly then pulled back, smoothing down his hair and looking into his face. “If you ever,” Frigga said, her tone more threatening this time, “put me through something like that again, I will personally make you feel every inch of suffering you have caused me.” Odin cleared his throat and Frigga pulled back from her younger son.

“I understand you are not quite well under this visage you have crafted for yourself,” Odin said to Loki. He obviously wasn’t expecting much of a response as the muzzle was still firmly tied around Loki’s face.

“He needs the infirmary,” Thor agreed, “or at least to have the necessary equipment brought to his rooms so Sigyn may treat him.”

“After the trouble he has caused, I am not sure permitting him back into the palace would be the safest course of action,” Odin mused. “Especially as long as he is in full possession of his seiðr.” Loki shot a furious glare at his adopted father, furious that he was unable to defend himself with the muzzle still locked tight around his mouth.

“If I may,” Sigyn said, stepping forward to stand slightly between her husband and the Allfather, “I believe removing his seiðr entirely at this point would be counterproductive to his healing. It is as much a part of one as blood or bone. Without it, the healing process could take much longer.”
“But binding it would not present this problem,” Odin stated.

“No,” Sigyn muttered.

“He will be treated in the infirmary, that way an eye can be kept on him. On both of you.” Odin pronounced. “Eir will oversee it personally. Once he has recovered, there will be a trial. Words of what have transpired on Midgard have reached the ears of the court, and they will demand justice.”

“And how would that have occurred?” Sigyn asked challengingly as Odin began to turn to leave. Odin said nothing but kept on his way. As he mounted Sleipnir, Loki let out a slight growl. Odin would dare treat him thusly and then trot off on the same horse Loki had given to him. Sigyn turned to Heimdall. “I never took you as a gossip.” Heimdall remained unmoved.

With the Allfather gone, the Warriors Three crowded around Thor while Frigga came to offer her son someone to lean on instead of his wife. Sif brought forward Sigyn’s horse but when Sigyn asked after her husband’s own chestnut stallion, she was informed the Allfather had ordered it be left back at the stables. Sigyn was obviously furious, and Sif decided it would be best to make no further comment. Sigyn helped her husband onto her own horse and then mounted the coal-black stallion behind him. Kolr snorted out wisps of dark smoke, not pleased at having two passengers, but he listened to his mistress’s commands and galloped across the bridge toward the palace. Frigga followed on her own golden mare, seemingly unbothered by the fact that Sigyn’s dwarven-designed stallion occasionally liked to breathe fire when it felt other animals were getting too close.

“Is he really unwell?” Fandral asked Thor, once the small party consisting of the queen, Sigyn and Loki were out of earshot.

“Physically, he looks like he was dragged backward through Helheim after being starved for a year,” Thor said lowly. “He is using his glamour to hide his true appearance, for Sigyn’s sake I believe. However, we saw him without it. I do not care to see such a sight again. Mentally, I fear, he may be worse.”

“And the creature that was controlling him?” Sif inquired.

“It is known as The Other,” Thor explained. “A minion of one called the Mad Titan. He fell to their domain, and they did all within their power to break him, to control him as one might a puppet. We had a brief encounter with The Other on Midgard. It was attempting to capture Sigyn so she might be tortured in his place as punishment for his failure to conquer Midgard. Even if we had not been focused on saving her, I doubt we would have been able to slay such a dangerous creature.”

“We have slain dangerous beasts before,” Volstagg snorted.

“This was no beast and yet no man,” Thor shook his head. “It was… I suppose saying pure evil incarnate would seem overdramatic.”

“And you believe this… that he was influenced somehow by these creatures to do their bidding?” Fandral asked skeptically.

“I know my brother has not endeared himself to any of your nor Asgard as a whole. He has done things for which he ought to be punished, yes,” Thor nodded, “but I do not think blame can truly be laid at his feet for what has just transpired. Perhaps his desire to prove himself to our father, to show that we was worthy of the crown was the impetus, but these beings corrupted that desire to a point that Sigyn could not even recognize her own husband.”

“She is his wife,” Hogun said gently. “Are you sure what she saw was the truth and not what she
was hoping to see?”

“He threatened her,” Thor said. The group exchanged worried looks.

“Your brother is perhaps not the first man I would want at my side in a time of need,” Hogun said, “but I know his love for Sigyn is unrivaled in the Nine Worlds.”

“He loves her more than Volstagg loves food,” Fandral agreed.

“Or Fandral loves lifting up skirts,” Volstagg countered.

“Sigyn loves him, but she is not blind to the truth,” Sif nodded. “Her word would be good enough for me, but as Thor has seen this too… I worry that choosing to believe Loki’s most recent actions are of his own accord may cause Asgard to ignore a much larger threat to its safety looming above us. There is much prejudice against your brother. We cannot allow that to put the Realm Eternal in jeopardy.”

“Then we are agreed,” Thor nodded. “I thank you, my friends. I know Loki may not be trustworthy in your eyes, but he is still my brother, even if he himself refuses to acknowledge it. I will not let him down this time.”

Thor looked up at Heimdall before the group departed, knowing the Gatekeeper had overheard it all. So quickly Thor nearly missed it, Heimdall offered the young prince a slight, comforting smile before retreating into his statuesque pose.

It had taken two and a half days in the infirmary before Eir would permit Loki to even stand beside his hospital bed. Sigyn had bound his magic without removing it, one cuff attached to his arm and the other to the bed as Odin had required. After pestering from his wife, his mother and Eir, Loki had finally relented the bulk of his glamor and allowed them to see true extent of his ravaged body. This time, however, he at least had enough ability left over from Sigyn’s binding to preserve his Aesir appearance. Not that his Frost Giant physique really showed through with his body as emaciated and sallow as it was. Sigyn still wasn’t fully prepared to see her husband this way a second time and Frigga, strong as she was, found herself sobbing and cradling her son like she had when he was a baby. Only Eir remained stoic with her clinical eye, though she did not have the heart to tell Sigyn or Frigga that Loki’s case was among the worst she’d seen.

On the sixth day of his return to Asgard, Eir proclaimed him able to return to his rooms as long as he rested and kept his magical exertions to small chores like cleaning charms or causing a spoon to stir itself in tea. Of course, Odin felt this pronouncement was enough to begin the trial as Loki would really just be sitting down through it. Loki had barely left the hospital wing when he found himself cornered by a contingent of guards and new chains and cuffs placed on him, these not Sigyn’s belongings but rather those the court of Asgard used on his magical criminals.

To avoid any accusations of favoritism - though Loki couldn’t see how anyone could accuse Odin of favoring him - the Allfather had ordered Loki’s guilt or innocence would be decided by a jury of nine Asgardian noblemen. They had been selected among those who had never been particularly outspoken for or against the Asgardian prince, which made the choices very limited. Odin himself reserved the right to final judgement of punishment, though Loki didn’t think his father would let him off with a slap on the wrist. The jury and the Allfather were both permitted to ask questions, though the crowd was informed they would have to limit their outbursts or risk being expelled from the event.
Naturally, Heimdall was the first witness who told all he had seen ranging from Loki’s possible contribution to Frost Giants being led into Asgard, his brief rule of the realm, from his disappearance to his reappearance on Midgard and his participation in both terrorizing and fighting for the small, blue and green planet. His account was largely impartial and straightforward, but the members of the jury kept trying to ask him to give a more personal take on the entire thing. However, Heimdall was steadfast, not indicating if he was in favor of or against punishing the younger prince. The testimony of the all-seeing Heimdall took two days but was apparently not enough to get a conviction for a prince of Asgard - present or former - it seemed.

Sigyn was made to testify next and Loki wished that he could comfort his wife as she stood facing the vicious crowd rather than being confined to the chair in the throne room. She told her story bravely and beautifully, though it was obvious most were skeptical of her account. Sigyn’s faithfulness was widely known, and it seemed entirely possible that she would say whatever was necessary to protect her husband. Despite this, the Vanir and Dwarven representatives seemed to take her side in things. Loki hoped that if they were exiled from Asgard there would be somewhere among those realms that they or at least she could take refuge.

After a day and a half’s worth of Sigyn’s testimony, the Allfather finally granted her a reprieve from the probing and often ridiculous questions fielded her way by the jury. Thor testified next, confirming much of Sigyn’s story. However, the jury indicated that they would like to hear from those not from Asgard, who had no prior relationship with the god of mischief beforehand. And so, as Thor’s testimony finished on the fifth day of Loki’s trial, the call was put out to Midgard. The following day, three Midgardians arrived to provide their testimony but the trial was postponed for another day to allow the new visitors to get used to their surroundings. Loki had been confined to his bedroom - under virtual house arrest - but Sigyn and Frigga were both there to greet their new guests when they arrived at the palace.

Tony, Clint and Coulson were a bit surprised that it had been the Warriors Three and Sif who helped Thor escort them back to the palace of Asgard rather than Sigyn or any other members of the royal family. The journey was a literal pain in the ass for Tony, who had been forced to take horse riding lessons at a ritzy boarding school and hated every second of it. Coulson seemed to be adjusting well enough but Clint was definitely the star of the show. He spent the entire ride talking to Volstagg, Fandral and Sif about his time in the circus and the act he had done involving various trick shots from horseback - not all of them while sitting in a saddle.

When the group arrived at the palace, the three Midgardian visitors didn’t instantly know who was waiting for them until the Warriors Three and Lady Sif went into their bows. It was then the three men looked up to see Sigyn in her official royal princess garb and the wise and beautiful visage that could only be Queen Frigga. At first, Tony thought Sigyn was sitting on a large fur rug only for it to move and reveal itself to be the largest, blackest dog he had ever seen in his entire life. The animal was easily the size of a horse or larger.

“Your Highnesses,” Phil greeted with a bow of his own, Clint doing the same.

“Welcome to Asgard,” Frigga greeted them.

“What is that thing?” Tony asked, as if ignorant to royal protocol.

“Oh,” Sigyn said, stroking the beast. “You have not met Fenrir. I had forgotten.”

“Another one of your protectors, I assume?” Phil asked Sigyn with a slight smile.

“Yes,” Sigyn laughed. “He is not as compact as Jor, however.”
“He’s a good hunting dog,” Volstagg told them, “though he’ll as likely eat whatever he catches before you get to it.”

“I wouldn’t make any sudden movements around him, either,” Fandral said. “He’s as likely bite a man’s arm off as lick him.”

“Don’t listen to them, Fen,” Sigyn said, stroking the massive wolf as it let out a contented sigh. “You’re a very good boy.”

“He’s not the most dangerous pet she has,” Thor reminded the group.

“A horse sets you on fire once and you never forgive him,” Sigyn pouted.

“Well, I do believe our guests could use some rest and respite from their travels,” Frigga announced. “You will be shown to your rooms and then there will be a feast to celebrate your arrival. It has been a while since we have entertained guests from your realm.”

“Not to be rude…” Tony began, earning a side-eye from Clint and Phil, “but why exactly are we here? It’s just, I keep asking and everyone keeps dodging the question.” Frigga sighed, but it was Sigyn who responded.

“You are to testify in the trial of my husband tomorrow,” Sigyn explained to them. “The jury wanted to hear from those whose realm was directly affected by his actions. You each offer a valuable perspective to them. Son of Coul, you were present for his behavior during Thor’s banishment. Sir Barton, you were a victim of his most recent machinations. And Sir Stark, you fought in the Battle of New York and suffered damage to your personal property as a result.”

“I would think you would want witnesses more sympathetic to your husband,” Barton said.

“You are not here to spare my husband,” Sigyn said. “You are here to tell your story. I would not ask you to do anything else but tell the truth.”

“She’s obviously never heard you testify before Congress,” Clint smirked at Tony.

“We will do our best,” Phil said to Sigyn.

“I know that you may not have the best opinion of my son,” Frigga addressed the three men, “nor of our realm after what has happened to yours, but I am grateful you have come here. Do not doubt that.”


“So, this is gotta be like the trial of the century here,” Tony said as the three of them were led into the throne room where the trial would be held. “I mean, I’m sure that doesn’t mean much in a place where people live forever, but still. All it needs is Thor leading some goons on a low-speed chase in a white chariot with Loki cowering in the bottom.”

“I don’t know what the deal with this dress code is,” Clint muttered, tugging on the tunic and leggings he had been given.

He had been presented with some leather armor to wear as well, but had ditched it. This wasn’t more humiliating than some of the clothing Clint had been forced to wear as a circus performer, but it still
wasn’t in his top ten favorite outfits of all time. For some reason, Clint noticed he had also been
given the clothing most resembling the Asgardian peasantry. Tony had been given a doublet and
tights that were rather lavish - the Asgardians seemed to think he was some kind of nobleman from
earth - while Phil had been given a jerkin along with some armor to signify his role as with the
military.

“I think it’s kind of neat,” Phil said.

“I left the circus so I wouldn’t have to dress like this,” Clint grumbled. “Now I’m walking around
looking like some reject from a Medieval Times performance.”

“Well, at least if the whole SHIELD thing doesn’t work out you have an outfit to wear to your job at
the traveling Ren Faire,” Tony shrugged.

As the three entered the throne room, they immediately fell silent before the large crowd gathered
there. Loki was chained and muzzled in one area before the throne while Sigyn was sitting not too
far from the dais, her eyes firmly on her husband. The three men were led to seats on a bench and
were instructed that they were to stand before the jury when they gave their testimony. It was
definitely different from U.S. justice, but the Asgardians seemed to think it worked well enough.

Coulson was the first asked to testify before the Asgardians, starting from what had happened with
the Destroyer in New Mexico. His testimony was not unlike Heimdals, truthful and concise with
little emotion. He then progressed to tell about what Loki had done during his attack on the SHIELD
research facility, which Coulson had been present for. He wasn’t able to give much information
about Stuttgart and the jury was ready to end his questioning when Phil made a comment about
Loki’s actions on the helicarrier. He spoke of how Loki had tried to protect his wife, despite his mind
being under the control of The Other, and then of the blessing he had received for his aid. That fact
seemed to draw Odin’s attention.

“You are telling me that Loki granted you a blessing?” Odin said, not really hiding his shock.

“Yes,” Phil nodded. “I was told that was… sort of rare?”

“Yes,” Odin nodded. “Tell me of this blessing.”

“Um… well…” Phil said, trying to figure out how to best sum up what he had been experiencing. “I
guess the biggest thing is that my girlfriend moved back, so we aren’t having to do the long distance
thing anymore. That can be tricky. I’ve never had to find a parking space since it happened, or stop
at a red light. And I seem to get getting a lot more snacks than I paid for out of vending machines. I
won $50 on a lottery scratcher I bought just on a lark after this all happened. And all of my stocks
and investments have been doing really well recently.”

“And this has benefited your life?” Odin asked curiously.

“Um, yeah,” Phil said. “But that’s not why I did it, I mean. I wasn’t expecting a reward or anything.
It’s just part of the job. Of course, Sigyn’s a nice person, so it was nice to be able to do something for
her.”

“Very well, then,” Odin nodded.

Clint was the next to testify. He told what little he knew about Loki’s attack on Puente Antiguo but
mainly launched into his tale beginning with Loki’s assault on the SHIELD research facility. While
parts of his time under the influence of the Mind Stone were hazy, the vast majority of his experience
was clear as day. He found it annoying when the jury kept asking him questions about the part of
Loki’s mind he had encountered instead of being interested in his own experiences. He did his best to refrain from snapping back at them since he didn’t think the Asgardians would react well.

When Clint got to the part of his story where Loki instructed him and the other captive SHIELD agents to shift from blowing up the helicarrier to protecting Sigyn, he found himself frustrated with the jury even more. They asked him to repeat the account three times. By the time he finished the third time, he was shooting them all furious glares, daring them to ask him to repeat himself again. Odin intervened, thankfully, and asked him to continue on to the battle in New York.

“Actually, there was some other stuff that happened before that,” Clint said.

Odin didn’t seem happy to hear that, but the jury was obviously curious and pressed him on. Clint then told them about the hospital, about Loki’s protective nature toward his wife, of Loki’s sudden cooperation after Sigyn recalibrated his brain via knocking his lights out, and then about the condition of his health when Sigyn removed his seiðr. The jury then asked him some very specific questions about Loki’s appearance. Sometimes, a member of the jury would repeat a question that had already been asked. At least one member of the jury re-asked a question a few minutes after receiving an answer to it. Clint finally couldn’t resist the urge to roll his eyes.

“You said he looked tortured,” one of the jurors asked. “What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“What I just told you,” Clint gritted out. “He looked like he hadn’t been fed in months, that he he’d been physically beaten and broken, and that someone had put his mind in a blender. I mean, you’re seeing him right now, aren’t you? Just imagine that but more skeletal, with less hair and a femur bone totally out of place."

“Sir Barton,” another juror asked. “What is a blender?”

“What?” Clint barked back.

“You said his brain had been put in a blender,” the juror responded. “Was it taken out of his body and replaced or…”

“It’s just a saying,” Clint groaned.

“So, his brain was not put into a blender?” another juror asked.

“It was messed up!” Clint said. “I was just trying to say it seemed like someone had addled his mind. You guys seriously don’t have blenders up here? Does that mean you don’t have smoothies? Or margaritas?”

“Please refrain from agitating the witness,” Odin sighed.

“It’s a little late for that,” Clint muttered.

When Clint finally concluded his testimony, it was finally Tony’s turn. The Asgardians realized that the mortal referred to as the Man of Iron liked to talk, but not always on topic. Tony started with his arrival in Stuttgart following Sigyn’s appearance there. He then went on a five minute tangent about Loki’s choice in helmet wear before Odin got him back on track. He then detailed - much to the humor of the Asgardian court - how Sigyn had captured her husband and then how Thor and Loki had their brotherly tiff on the quinjet.

Since he wasn’t present for most of the battle on the helicarrier, he instead skipped ahead to Loki talking about Sigyn in the hospital, mentioning that the god’s profession of love for his wife struck a chord with himself. He then detailed Sigyn handcuffing her husband and then punching him
followed by a brief tangent asking if bondage roleplay was common on Asgard or if long-lived beings thought themselves above such things before he was again redirected by Odin. Loki, for his part, seemed to be smirking behind his muzzle while Tony went on and on with his supposition about the god’s love life. Sigyn seemed to be trying to look anywhere but at her husband or mother-in-law.

Tony provided probably the greatest detail about Loki’s service during the Battle of New York - though he admitted a lot of it he had heard Cap talking about later. Tony explained what he had been told about how Loki aided him in his epic freefall and then used his magic to convince his body to start breathing again, even though it was obvious Loki had wanted to save his magic reserves to defend his wife if need be. Before he got to the face-off with The Other, he went on another tangent about the destruction of his tower and then about his ideas for rebuilding, mentioning that any architects from Asgard who wanted to chat could talk to him after the trial. He then relayed the encounter with the Other, but was surprised that his sidebar about Loki giving Hulk his cloak seemed to draw the most questions from the Asgardian jury.

With a final redirect from Odin, Tony went into vast detail about their experience at the shawarma joint before realizing he had been asked to detail how the city was recovering post-battle, not what the Avengers had done afterwards. Then, the person who Tony had assumed was the jury’s foreperson made the mistake of asking Tony if he had anything to add to his testimony relative to his experience with Asgardians on Earth.

“Well, first off,” Tony said, “I just wanna say that Sigyn is a pretty, boss ass bitch. Um… which is to say she’s really great. Like, you guys should probably give her whatever the Asgardian equivalent for the Presidential Medal of Freedom is because she puts up with so much sh-stuff from people and still believes they’re all good. Anyway, I didn’t know much about the whole giant mechanized robot dude laying waste to New Mexico, but from what I understand that town only had about twelve people in it,” he shrugged. “And it went down pretty easily. Besides, who leaves some weapon like that lying around where anyone could get a hold of it and use it? No offense, Mr. Odin, Allfather, sir, but weapons used to be a big part of my business. Do you know how much sh-trouble I get in whenever someone even remotely unauthorized tries to get into one of my suits or even create one? Seriously, you guys need some sanctions or something on that kind of sh-stuff.”

“Does this have a point, Sir Stark?” Odin rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, um,” Tony said, “if you had asked me two weeks ago what kind of guy Loki was… I would have said a bat-shit crazy homicidal maniac… but um… turns out he’s not that bad. I mean, he’s crazy as hell, don’t get me wrong… but he and I… we have a lot more in common than I think either of us would like to admit. I’ve done a lot of stuff I’m not proud of. My company has, too. If we were to compare his death tolls and the one’s caused by the weapons my company’s created? Well, I’d probably come out the winner - even if you only counted innocent bystanders. But it took something major in my life to make me come around, to see the truth of what I was doing. I spent most of my life living in my father’s shadow, trying to gain his approval even though he’d been dead for decades…”

Tony paused a beat.

“I think this guy here is at a crossroads, okay?” Tony sighed. “I think that whatever you decide… it could be very make or break. This could mean the difference between him seeking redemption and becoming a better person or just going completely off the deep end… again, I guess, and never being able to come back. It took me to go through some pretty tough stuff and then realize that the people I really cared about still had my back to see that I wasn’t as bad of a person as I always thought I was. And when I realized that, I realized that even as old as I was, I could fix myself and then I could start
fixing things around me. I mean, I know he probably should have learned by now being like over a thousand years old, right? I mean, what’s that in human years?”

“Aesir age at the rate of one year per sixty-two of your Midgardian years with an average lifespan of around 5,000 of your Midgardian years,” one of the jurors offered. Tony did the quick calculations in his head and then his eyes opened wide.

“You mean to tell me this guy’s basically seventeen-years-old?” Tony gaped, pointing at Loki. “He’s a teenager? What? So Sigyn’s like what, fifteen or sixteen? You guys would have been like thirteen when you got married? Sorry, Asgard, but that is super fucked up. What is a matter with you guys? Do you teach all of your teenagers to murder people with hammers and magic and other bullshit? Besides, he’s a fucking teenager. On my planet, he would be figuring out where to go to college and what girl to finger after prom. He’s a fucking teenager and you’re surprised he’s going through some weird emo bullshit? I mean, teenagers fuck up all the time because they’re just trying to figure out who they are and where they belong. That’s all this is, right? Some I’m mad at my dad so I’m going to fuck up some shit rampage? I mean, granted I just got drunk and crashed a whole bunch of my old man’s expensive cars and let the flamingo loose in a board meeting, but seriously, you guys are gods or whatever, so I guess your temper tantrums are supposed to be epic… Christ, Thor you’re like twenty! I let you drink on earth! Am I going to get arrested for corruption of a minor, because I really don’t need that on my record right now…”

“Thank you, Sir Stark, for your testimony,” Odin sighed.

“I can’t believe you guys do child marriages,” Tony said getting off the makeshift witness stand. “No one is going to believe this when I tell them. I mean, I thought your whole geothermal power thing was crazy ass shit but this…”

“Thank you, Sir Stark,” Odin said again, louder this time.

“I would like the record to reflect that I agree with Tony,” Clint yelled out. “Child marriages are some pretty fucked up shit.”

“Thank you, Sir Barton,” Odin groaned. He turned to Coulson expectantly. “Do you have anything to add, Son of Coul?”

“Not really,” Coulson shrugged. “I think the windmills here are neat…” Odin shot Coulson a tired look before turning back to the jury.

“You have heard the testimony,” Odin said. “You may adjourn until such a time as a verdict has been rendered.” With a tap of Gungnir, Odin sent the jury on their way and the room slowly began to empty. Guards were preparing to remove Loki from the room as Sigyn approached Phil, Clint and Tony.

“Thank you,” Sigyn said, “for your testimony. And thank you, Sir Stark, in particular for your kind words about my husband. I know you did not have to share them.”

“It’s nothing,” Tony shook his head as he watched Loki over Sigyn’s shoulder. “So, uh, where is he being held in the meantime?”

“I was thankfully able to convince the Allfather to keep him under house arrest in our quarters,” Sigyn said. “I did not think he would do well in the Asgardian dungeons and… he has not fully recovered from the trauma you witnessed on Midgard. I still feel more comfortable having him where I can heal him if need be.”
“So…” Clint said, trying to find a delicate way to ask his question, “what sort of… punishment is he looking at.”

“Execution is on the table,” Sigyn said solemnly. “However, he is still regarded as a member of the Royal House of Asgard, and no royal family member has ever been executed for their crimes. Banishment is another potential sentence as is serving the rest of his life in prison.”

“Well, I mean,” Tony tried to reason. “That might not be so bad. You have other places you could live, and if he was in prison, at least he would be alive and would be here so you could see him…”

“No,” Sigyn replied quietly. “If he were sentenced to life in prison… the Allfather could order that I am not permitted to see him. The same with banishment. He could order that I may not accompany him. It would be a part of my husband’s punishment, but I think the Allfather would not mind punishing me as well for leaving Asgard without his consent to find my husband. He just cannot do so officially because I am technically a citizen of Vanaheim. Well, the dwarves might argue that point, but…”

“Let us know if you need anything,” Phil offered. Sigyn nodded and then turned to follow her husband and his guards out of the room.

The verdict was returned sometime close to midnight on Asgard. Apparently, there was no such thing as adjourning the jury for the night in the Realm Eternal nor waiting for the morning to read the verdict. Tony, Clint and Phil were woken by the Asgardian servants in their various rooms, made to dress and to head back into the throneroom. They were surprised to see the bulk of the Asgardian court already gathered there and seemingly awake enough to be chattering away as the king and queen filed in, sitting on their thrones. Sigyn was surrounded by a group of women who looked just like her, Tony assumed her plethora of sisters. Loki was then brought in by the guards in his full chains. He was muzzled again, and Sigyn didn’t seem pleased with that fact. Several of her sisters reached out to comfort her as she seemed to tense.

The jury arrived shortly afterward, filing into their seats one by one. While most of the room was focused on them, Tony was watching Loki who in turn was watching Sigyn. The god of mischief and his wife seemed to be having some sort of silent communication between them, though Tony couldn’t exactly tell who was trying to comfort who. When the jury was finally settled in, Loki was ordered to stand before them, his eyes finally turning to those who would ultimately decide his fate. The person who was serving as the jury foreman stood up as he was addressed by Odin. Tony didn’t quite catch his name, so he had nicknamed him Bjorn Bjornson in his head because that seemed like a typical Asgardian name.

“Have you reached a verdict on all the charges?” Odin asked.

“Yes, sire,” Bjorn nodded.

“And this verdict is unanimous among you?” Odin asked.

“Yes,” the men of the jury replied in a single voice.

“Then we shall begin with the first set of charges related to the events taking place first in Asgard and then in the Midgardian village of Puente Antiguo,” Odin nodded. “As to the charges of abuse of power as regent of Asgard, what say you?”

“Guilty on all three counts, sire,” Bjorn replied.
“As to the charges of aiding and abetting enemies of Asgard, what say you?” Odin asked.

“Guilty on both counts, sire,” Bjorn said.

“As to the charges of transporting enemies of Asgard into Asgard, what say you?” Odin asked.

“Guilty on both counts, sire,” Bjorn repeated.

“As to the charge of attempted murder of a fellow member of the Asgardian court,” Odin said, causing Thor to tense slightly, “what say you?”

“Guilty.”

“As to the charge of attempted member of a member of the Royal Family,” Odin continued, causing Thor to look away from his brother, “what say you?”

“Guilty.”

“As to the charges of unlawful attack against the allies of Asgard, what say you?”

“Guilty.”

A murmur went up in the ground, but Odin silenced it with a tap of Gungnir. While Loki was pridefully keeping his eyes fixed on the jury, Tony noticed Sigyn’s sisters crowding around her, attempting to whispering words of comfort. For her part, Sigyn seemed to be focused on her husband, not letting an ounce of emotion show on her face. Queen Frigga seemed the same way, watching her son but not indicating if she was disappointed or in agreement with the verdicts so far. Despite this, Tony could tell this wasn’t good for Loki. These were some pretty serious charges and even being prince of Asgard might not be enough to spare him.

“Moving on to the second round of charges,” Odin said, effectively silencing the crowd, “relating to the events in Midgard, city of Stuotengarten, and city of New York. As to the charges of unlawful attack against the allies of Asgard, what say you?”

“Sire,” Bjorn said quietly, seeming to sense the crowd might not like his answer, “we find the prisoner not guilty on all six counts as we believe the prisoner was not under the influence of his own mind at the time of these events.”

A louder murmur went up in the crowd, mostly seeming to disagree with the findings. Instead of glaring at the jury, Loki looked up to his wife and offered what could possibly have been a smile if the muzzle hadn’t hidden it.

“Silence!” Odin ordered. “As to the charges of aiding and abetting the enemies of Asgard?”

“We find the prisoner not guilty on all three counts,” Bjorn said, “as we believe the prisoner was not under the influence of his own mind at the time of these events.”

“And the charges of subjugation of allies of Asgard?” Odin inquired.

“We find the prisoner not guilty on all counts as we believe the prisoner was not under the influence of his own mind at the time of these events,” Bjorn concluded.

“Very well then,” Odin nodded. “Thank you, sirs, for the great service you have rendered unto Asgard.”

“What does this mean?” Tony whispered to Clint and Phil, as if they would know.
Loki’s guard shuffled him forward to the foot of the throne where he would now stand in judgement before Odin and Frigga. Tony suddenly realized how Pepper probably felt during all of his various trials and public appearances, cringing inwardly that he was about to do or say something that would completely counteract whatever small mercy he might be granted. He really didn’t want Loki to blow this, though he wasn’t exactly sure why. The guy was an asshole, but then again, Tony kind of was too.

“Does the prisoner have anything to say before his sentencing?” Odin asked, waving his hand and removing the muzzle from Loki’s face.

“If I am for the axe, then for mercy's sake, just swing it,” Loki replied. Tony winced and Sigyn looked ready to stomp forth and slap her husband for his impertinence.

“Is there any other member of the court of Asgard who would speak on the prisoner’s behalf before his sentencing?” Odin asked tiredly. Without missing a beat, Sigyn left the sisters that had clustered around her and walked forward to stand with her husband.

“Your Highnesses,” Sigyn said, dipping her head to first Odin and then Frigga, “I know that my husband has been found guilty of these crimes, but I cannot in good conscience believe that he is solely responsible for them. There are mitigating circumstances to his actions that I know have not been made public before the court of Asgard.”

Another murmur went up through the crowd, but Odin waved his hand to silence them, allowing Sigyn to continue.

“I do not believe my husband’s actions began maliciously, but through the intervention of others they became that way,” Sigyn continued. “I also think it would be highly hypocritical to allow one son to seek redemption in banishment for disobedience against the word of the Allfather - tantamount to treason, mind you - breaking a peace treaty with another realm and slaughtering the inhabitants of said realm, while another accused of the very same crimes is punished more harshly. I firmly believe my husband is capable of redeeming to himself and returning to Asgard as a valuable asset toward its future. I believe the loss of the services he could provide the realm over his lifetime would truly be a detriment, and that if given a true chance, his full worth to the Nine Realms could be realized.”

While the murmurs continued, Sigyn acted completely ignorant of them. Loki, for his part, gazed at his wife with what Tony could only call pure adoration. She didn’t need to risk her own reputation to speak for him this way, but she defended him nonetheless. Tony only hoped, if given the chance, Loki would prove his wife right - even if only as thanks for her kindness. However, what came out of Sigyn’s mouth next made Loki look like he was ready to tackle her to the ground in order to force her into silence.

“I know that my words have little meaning in convincing some of my husband’s detractors in his potential,” Sigyn said. “Therefore, in a testament to how firmly I believe that some small mercy upon him will be to the overall benefit of Asgard, I am willing to serve a sentence of banishment alongside my husband. I believe it would be best if he were allowed to serve those whom he has harmed, to learn compassion for them and for himself. Furthermore, if my husband’s actions prove me false during this banishment period, I am willing to return to Asgard and be submitted to the same punishment the Allfather feels he deserves - be that imprisonment or execution.”

“Sigyn,” Loki hissed at his wife over the confusion and conversation of the crowd, “what are you doing? Are you mad?”

“I would ask,” Sigyn continued, the crowd still barely listening, “that the representatives of Vanaheim and Niðavellir present here today carry back to their respective realms that I have made
this choice of my own free will, and do not wish my position in either of those realms effect this
decision I have made.”

With a tap of Gungnir, Odin again silenced the crowd. He then considered his daughter-in-law for a
moment.

“Sigyn of Vanaheim, born of Niðavellir,” Odin said to her, “your reputation of fidelity is well-
earned. I believe there is much we can all learn from your faithfulness.”

“Thank you, sire,” Sigyn nodded.

“Is there anyone else who would like to speak on the prisoner’s behalf before sentencing?” Odin
asked.

“Aye,” Thor said, descending from his position near the dais to join his brother’s other side before

“Proceed,” Odin said. Loki seemed a bit surprised his brother was so willing to defend him.

“I would ask my brother receive the same mercy as was granted to me,” Thor said, “and I agree that,
if given such a chance, he could prove himself to be of great worth and importance to Asgard and all
of the Nine Realms. And to prove my choice to vouch for my brother is not mere lip service, I would
also be willing to accompany him on such a banishment.” Odin shifted in his seat a bit
uncomfortably as Thor spoke, though Frigga looked down at both of her sons in pride.

“Very well then,” Odin nodded. He turned to his younger son. “Loki of Asgard, in light of the nature
of the crimes of which you have been found guilty and following the testimony on your behalf, I
hereby banish you to Midgard for one year or until such a time as I believe you have learned from
your actions. You will be stripped of your seiðr, unless such a time arises wherein your life is in the
balance and only seiðr may spare you. You will work alongside the Midgardians to repair what you
have destroyed. As a good faith effort, Sigyn of Vanaheim shall be sent alongside you to serve your
sentence. Thor will accompany you for the first month to prove that you are taking this punishment
seriously. If, at any point, I believe that you are a danger to Midgard or any of the other Nine
Realms, you will be recalled to Asgard for resentencing. And as she has vowed, whatever
resentencing is handed down to you, Sigyn shall also serve.”

“Thank you,” Sigyn whispered.

“And because of his testimony on your behalf,” Odin said. “I see no better caretaker for you during
your banishment to Midgard than Sir Anthony Stark. You shall be kept in his custody at his castle in
the citadel of New York until such a time as you may return to Asgard.”

“What?”
A Bevy of Blondes

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which Loki is the uncle who gets the kid hopped up on sugar before returning them to their parents.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony knew that he probably couldn’t challenge Odin’s ruling, but he was seriously wondering why he hadn’t been consulted before the Asgardian king decided his tower was the best place for Loki to rehabilitate himself. Odin tapped Gungnir down on the ground to make the sentence official, stripping both the chains from Loki but also the bulk of his seiðr from his body. Loki briefly looked at his hands as the magic flowed out from him before Sigyn rushed toward him. She threw her arms around him in relief, causing Loki to stumble backward slightly. Thor clapped his brother on the back as Sigyn began sobbing into her husband’s chest. Loki gave his brother a slight smile of acknowledgement and then found himself wrapping his hands around his wife, running his fingers through her hair to soothe her. Upon seeing the pair, Loki tucking his wife safely against himself and whispering words of comfort to her, Tony couldn’t find in himself to protest the Allfather’s command any further. When Sigyn had calmed down considerably, Loki held her out from himself, wiped her tears and then scrunched up his face in annoyance.

“That was a damn fool thing you did, Sigyn,” Loki said to her, annoyed. “Putting yourself in such a position. And for what?”

“To save you,” Sigyn said, as if it was nothing. Loki groaned and rolled his eyes.

“We must do something about this savior complex of yours, Sigyn,” Loki sighed. “You realize that if I make any slight mistake the Allfather now has cause to not only recall both of us but force us into imprisonment or… worse…”

“Then you have rather good motivation to be on your very best behavior, do you not?” Sigyn replied with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“You have learned too much from me - whether taught intentionally or not I am not sure,” Loki grumped. “Or have you always known how to weave your wiles in such a way to get what you want and I have only begun to notice?”

“I believe,” Sigyn smirked up at her husband, “the phrase you are looking for is ‘thank you.’ I know it isn’t a phrase you use commonly, so I will give you some time to practice it.”

“You and I are going to have a rather long talk later, wife,” Loki informed Sigyn. “In private.”

“So…uh… I guess we’re going to be housemates?” Tony said, cautiously approaching Loki and Sigyn.

“I understand this might not be ideal,” Sigyn said apologetically.

“Especially if you still haven’t replaced those windows,” Loki snorted. Odin tapping Gungnir drew
“We have much to discuss,” the Allfather proclaimed.

Tony looked around to find the room had emptied out. He, Phil and Clint were still there representing Midgard while Thor, the Warriors Three and Lady Sif had also remained behind. Odin and Frigga remained on their thrones, though the guards in the room had been dismissed. Loki and Sigyn continued to hang on to each other but turned their attention to the king and queen. It appeared the Allfather was going to lay down some ground rules for the banishment he had just handed down. Tony waited eagerly for him to begin.

“I understand, Sir Stark, that this arrangement might be a bit of an inconvenience to you,” the Allfather informed Tony. “I am sure that my son and his wife will be on their best behavior.” Loki muttered something under his breath that Tony didn’t quite catch. “I also know that some things will need to be done to ensure my son’s presence in Midgard remains a secret - both for the protection of himself and his wife as well as those who are keeping watch over him. If you find there is anything you need of Asgard during their stay, do not hesitate to contact us.”

“Sire, if I may,” Phil said politely, “I am sure SHIELD would be willing to provide Prince Loki and Princess Sigyn with identification, background information and the like so long as they cooperate with SHIELD and don’t cause any arm to earth… Midgard, as it were. Because of the… nature of this arrangement, I have a feeling SHIELD would also feel comfortable monitoring them during their stay, which I believe would provide some added protection?”

“I’m going to volunteer for that security detail before I get volunteered for it,” Clint nodded. He turned to Tony. “I want a flat screen in my room, and a load bearing wall for hanging my archery equipment.”

“It can be arranged,” Tony nodded.

“I also don’t want a room that shares a common wall with their’s,” Clint said. Thor, the Warriors Three, Lady Sif and even Odin smirked a little. Frigga rolled her eyes.

“Yes,” Odin said, somewhat conspiratorily, “you might find it best, Sir Stark, if their quarters are kept a bit separate from where anyone else is trying to sleep.”

“Or eat,” Volstagg offered.

“Or hold a conversation,” Fandral added.

“Or concentrate,” Sif nodded.

“Or dance a jig below the harvest moon,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Can we get on with it?”

“I can arrange something,” Tony promised.

“Good,” Odin agreed before turning to his son and daughter-in-law. “I will expect both of you to conduct yourselves in a manner benefitting members of the Asgardian royal family during your stay. Both of you are to give aid to your Midgardian hosts whenever you can.”

“I have no seiðr with which to help,” Loki pointed out. “Sigyn will probably be of more use than I.”

“It is foolish of you to say your seiðr is the only thing you can contribute,” Frigga frowned at her youngest son. “Have you not studied the arcana for years? Do you not have knowledge that could benefit your hosts or our realm and others?”
“I am surprised at you, Loki,” Sigyn agreed, “to imply that our Midgardian hosts are more intelligent than yourself and therefore you are of no use to them.”

“That is not what I meant,” Loki muttered.

“Then speak more clearly next time,” Frigga cautioned her son. Loki’s face soured at being verbally trapped by his wife and mother.

“So, I guess we’ll all meet at the Bifrost in twenty?” Tony suggested.

“Oh no, Sir Stark,” Odin shook his head. “You will all leave the day after tomorrow. Well, I suppose it is tomorrow at this point of night.”

“What?” Tony, Clint and Phil said at the same time.

“Yes,” Odin said. “The Allmother has requested that her son’s departure from Asgard be postponed until after her Name Day feast tonight.”

“It’s your birthday?” Clint said to the queen in surprise.

“May I be the first to say, you don’t look a day over five hundred,” Tony said to Frigga with a smirk. Frigga giggled slightly and Odin rolled his eye before dismissing everyone back to their bedrooms for the night.

“What did you get her this year?” Thor whispered to Loki as they strode forth from the throne room.

“Don’t tell me you forgot again,” Loki grumbled.

“I have been occupied,” Thor muttered. “Perhaps you can put my name on…”

“No,” Loki said. “And I have been far busier than you but still managed to acquire a present.”

“You mean you had Sigyn acquire one while you were under house arrest?” Thor snorted.

“A man may give presents jointly with his wife,” Loki snorted. “Once one reaches a certain age, it is no longer endearing to do so with one’s brother.”

“Don’t worry, big guy,” Tony said, clapping Thor on the back. “The three of us earthlings would hate to show up to this shindig empty handed. Maybe we can all hit up the marketplace at a reasonable hour. You can show us around.”

“Aye,” Thor nodded as Loki and Sigyn turned the corner toward their chambers, already entwining themselves in what almost looked like a two-headed creature attached at the lips. “I have a feeling the palace is about to become a rather uncomfortable place to be anyway.”

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It was nearing midday when Loki was awakened by Sigyn’s efforts to extract herself from the entanglement of naked limbs and silken sheets atop their marital bed. The few nights they had together since Eir had cleared Loki for more strenuous activities had been rushed and a bit tinged with the fear that they might never again get to enjoy the other’s embrace. Every caress, every movement had to be full of meaning and purpose just in case they never had a chance to express their love in that manner ever again. Now that Loki’s fate had been determined and they had been given a reprieve, the couple had been able to show their love for each other in a more languid, meticulous manner. As Sigyn stretched out - giving her husband a delicious view of her naked backside - Loki
smirked to himself, recalling how he had pressed his lips to every beautiful inch of his wife’s skin the night before as a small token of thanks for her standing by and supporting him during this trying time in their lives.

Feeling her husband’s eyes on her back, Sigyn glanced over her shoulder at him coquettishly. He could make out the curve of her breast, though her long blonde hair was covering his favorite aspect of that part of her anatomy. Loki leaned backward on the bed, tucking his hands behind him so they rested between his head and the pillows beneath him. Sigyn had pulled the sheets off of both of them as she had risen - not that Loki ever felt any desire to cover any part of his body when he was alone with his wife. Loki felt no shame in teasing his wife a little as she had just given him a rather delectable show of her own assets. Sigyn rolled her eyes as her husband gave an over-exaggerated roll of his hips in a terrible attempt to make it seem as though he was merely finding a more comfortable spot on the bed. She often wondered if he realized how overt his attempts to seduce her were. Sometimes, she took pity on his overacting and gave in, but there was too much that needed to be done to give in this time.

“We should dress husband,” Sigyn said, using her seiðr to bring a ribbon and her hairbrush from the vanity across the room into her hands. “Your brother and his compatriots will return soon from the market. I have no doubt they will make an uninvited stop into our rooms seeing as the hour is late, and they will assume we are out of bed. And we have to get on with our packing before your mother’s celebration tonight.”

Loki watched as his wife began to comb her long hair, brushing out the tangles their exercise the night before had caused. He was particularly fond of the way her breasts rose with her arms as she reached up to comb the top of her head. Noticing that her husband wasn’t making any move to get up and start readying for the day, Sigyn placed her hairbrush aside and looked back over her shoulder at her husband in annoyance. It was barely six hours after his sentencing and Sigyn feared her husband already wasn’t taking his punishment seriously enough. Loki adjusted his gaze from his wife’s midsection to her disapproving face.

“Are you even listening to me?” Sigyn asked him quizzically.

“I’m sorry, lykyng,” Loki said gently, rising up toward his wife. “but you are terribly distracting, especially in your current state. I haven’t had as much time as I would have liked to enjoy you these past few days, either.” He leaned forward, kissing her bare shoulder, but Sigyn wasn’t in the mood to be seduced.

“We have things to do, husband,” Sigyn reminded him, using her seiðr this time to retrieve the shimmery silken robe her husband had acquired for her on a visit to Alfheim. As Sigyn began putting on the garment, Loki knelt behind her and began braiding her long hair, twisting through it the ribbon she had brought over from the bed. Every so often, he would bend down and kiss her shoulder again.

“I know, I know,” Loki replied. “I suppose we have to narrow down what we shall bring with us.”

“Actually, I’m planning on bringing that trunk my father gave to me,” Sigyn informed him as he continued braiding. “Though there are some more arcane items in our collection I doubt the Allfather would allow us to bring to Midgard. I was mainly thinking the bulk of the library contents, some clothing and a few things to keep myself busy as I assume they will have you working most of the time. I am thinking about bringing my loom… I doubt I can bring anything from the gardens. And we will have to see if my sisters will look after Fen and Kolr.”

“I’m sure we can get Idunn to watch over Kolr since she does tend to spoil him with her apples,” Loki mused, finishing up the braid he had made of his wife’s hair and then twisting it upward to pile
on her head. Sigyn had to conjure the pins he needed for that task, but he retrieved them from her hands nimbly. “Snotra and Syn always like to take care of Fenrir when we are gone. I’m sure both of your pets will be rather fat when we return.”

As if summoned, the giant black wolf wedged open the bedroom door and trotted in from his bed in the main parlor of his owners’ quarters. Loki continued to pin up his wife’s hair as Fenrir came forth and laid his head on his mistress’s lap, looking up at her with pleading eyes. Loki rolled his eyes at the creature’s behavior. The beast would soon tear a man apart as look at him, but he melted into a virtual puppy in the presence of his mistress. While Fenrir usually obeyed him, the creature was most definitely Sigyn’s pet and did whatever it took to please his mistress. Sigyn stroked the wolf behind the ears with a smile.

“I know you have missed me,” Sigyn said to her pet gently, “and I know you aren’t pleased we are leaving again. But my sisters will take good care of you. And I promise we will be adequately protected in Midgard.”

“You wouldn’t like it there much, anyway, Fen,” Loki informed the wolf, drawing the creature’s curiosity. “There would hardly be enough room for you to run around. No streams for you to get muddy in, and I doubt very much there are creatures there for you to hunt down for fun. At least not tasty ones.” Fenrir let out a huff, seeming to agree with Loki about the matter but then began nudging Sigyn’s snake bracelet with his nose.

“I know,” Sigyn sighed. “It isn’t fair that Jor can come and you cannot.” She looked over her shoulder at her husband.

“We are not going to the Allfather to ask if we can bring Fen along,” Loki shook his head. “I have a feeling our stay on Midgard is already tenuous at best, and Sir Stark doesn’t seem like one to like pets. Fenrir wouldn’t do well there anyway, Sigyn. And you know how he gets when he's bored. It’s for the best.”

“I suppose,” Sigyn said sadly, turning back to stroke the beast that was now whining in her lap. Loki rolled his eyes again. Most in Asgard believed the creature to be one of the most deadly in the realm. None of them would believe the way Fenrir whined and pleaded with his mistress like a spoiled brat.

“Come along, Fen,” Loki said, sliding off the bed and pulling on his trousers. “How about we go see about getting you a nice bowl of fresh meat, hmmm?”

Fen bounded after his master’s heels and followed him into the living area. The canine’s bed had been moved in the night toward the now dimming fire in the fireplace. Loki pulled the bell rope that sent several maids and footmen scurrying into the room to begin cleaning things up. The prince ordered a large midday meal for himself and his wife as well as some food for Fenrir, who plopped back on his pillow at his master’s feet. Just as Loki had gotten comfortable in the armchair and ottoman before the fire, he looked up to find his own silk robe hanging above him in midair, no doubt a message from Sigyn to at least attempt to dress properly in the presence of servants and anyone else who might appear.

Donning the robe in a huff, Loki listened as his wife clattered around in their bedroom. He reached down to give Fenrir a scratch and then looked up as the door opened, several servants bearing trays of food entering into the room. They had managed to arrange everything and started to leave when the door opened again. Loki grumbled under his breath as Thor burst into his room without knocking - again - along with his Midgardian friends trailing behind him. At least, Loki thought, the Warriors Three and Sif were not with them. Volstagg would most likely eat all of the brunch Loki had ordered before anyone else had a chance to sit down. Sigyn appeared at the doorway to their bedroom fully dressed and gave a pointed look at her husband for still being in his nightwear.
“Brother!” Thor said happily as he bounded into the room, earning a slight growl from Fenrir as the dog traipsed over to his overflowing dish. “I have acquired Mother a most pleasing gift for this evening!”

“Congratulations,” Loki muttered, leaning forward to start picking at the food he had been brought.

“It is a music box!” Thor pronounced, producing the gift from the bag at his side and showing it off to Loki. Clint, Tony and Phil slunk inside the room taking their own seats around the lavishly decorated parlor as Loki inspected the bauble. The golden lid opened to reveal a baby goat gazing in wonder at a butterfly that had landed on his nose. Another butterfly had landed on the goat’s tail, which appeared to be in mid flick. The creatures turned about as music played. It was a quintessential Thor-type gift and had Loki not known better, he would have assumed his brother had it specially commissioned.

“I thought lunch wasn’t for another half hour,” Clint said as Sigyn took a seat near her husband and began to eat from the massive trays of fruit, fish, and what appeared to be a roast pig made out of different colored cheeses.

“This is breakfast,” Loki said.

“Get dressed,” Sigyn ordered him, plucking some strawberries into her mouth. “You know my sisters will be here soon, and you know how they like to tease.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed, getting up and heading into the bedroom.

“I’m sure Frigga will appreciate your gift,” Sigyn said to her brother-in-law kindly.

“What did you get her… if you don’t mind me asking?” Thor asked curiously.

“I’ll show you,” Sigyn smiled.

She summoned into her hand a rather large glass ball. It appeared to Tony to be some sort of terrarium except within was a massive garden that had been miniaturized, complete with a marble staircase and marble gazebo that looked like something out of Greek myth. Miniature vining flowers were growing up the side of the gazebo and it looked as though a slight wind was rustling the various leaves. There was even a small birch tree growing in one corner of the garden. Thor seemed completely taken aback by the gift, though he wasn’t as awe-inspired as his earthling friends. Sigyn seemed ready to hand Thor the gift to get a closer look, but when Loki reappeared, fully dressed, he shot a glare at his wife.

“Don’t let him break it,” Loki said.

“It is the garden at Fensalir,” Thor said proudly as Sigyn collapsed the terrarium into
nothingness. Tony was a little surprised that Thor seemed happy his brother had gotten such a thoughtful gift instead of jealous that Loki’s gift was superior to his own. Of course, Thor was just the type of guy who was glad that his mother was being made happy by something.

“Sigyn did most of the work,” Loki admitted begrudgingly. “I just miniaturized everything.”

“Well, now I feel bad,” Tony grumbled. “Thor told us to just get her this big potted plant… Some kind of flower that seems to sneeze stardust?”

“No, she will like that,” Loki nodded. “Eldamarian shooting stars are notoriously hard to keep alive, but Mother enjoys a challenge.” Having eaten the contents of his bowl, Fenrir got up and started searching the room to see if any of its other occupants had treats for him. Tony nearly crawled on top of the weirdly shaped couch he and the other guys were sitting on when Fenrir attempted to stick a snout down his pocket.

“Fen, down,” Sigyn ordered.

“Where did you get a dog like that?” Tony wanted to know.

“Hela,” Sigyn replied. “And he’s a wolf.”

“Who?” Tony asked.


“You literally have a hell hound,” Clint said, realizing he wasn’t as shocked as he thought he should be. It wasn’t the most shocking thing he’d seen in Asgard, to tell the truth.

“It was a wedding gift,” Sigyn shrugged.

“Why did the goddess of death give you a wedding present?” Tony asked.

“It’s a long story,” Sigyn said.

“It’s about how we got married,” Loki said, giving his wife a lascivious look.

“Yeah, Thor filled us in about your whole bait and switch,” Tony nodded.

“Well, Fenrir was more of a present because of what happened to Theoric… after the ceremony,” Sigyn admitted.

“I hate it when you say his name,” Loki muttered, causing Sigyn to roll her eyes.

“What happened to him?” Tony asked, not sure he was ready to hear the answer.

“Well, you know the Warriors Three and I had tied him to that tree,” Thor explained. “Sigyn and Loki were wed, we had a feast and then the two of them went off to visit her father’s people for a time. The Warriors Three and I waited until about three days after the ceremony… in the hopes Theoric had learned his lesson. Then we went to the tree and freed him. He wasn’t very pleased, but he also wasn’t in any condition to quarrel with us. We let him go back to the city…”

“And then I murdered him,” Loki interrupted with a grin.

“Loki!” Sigyn huffed, exasperated as everyone else in the room chimed in at once.

“You did what?” Phil asked. “Whoa, you got the girl. Why’d you kill him?”
“And you said he didn’t have murderous tendencies,” Tony snorted toward Thor before turning back to Loki. “You just… straight up murdered him?”

“He probably deserved it,” Clint shrugged before furrowing his brow and wondering if he still had some mind-control he needed to shake out. Sigyn picked up one of the decorative throw pillows and launched it her husband.

“For once, could you tell the story the correct way?” Sigyn glowered.

“As far as anyone is concerned, that’s what happened, isn’t it?” Loki snorted. “It’s the story they all tell on Asgard and in Vanaheim, anyway.” Sigyn rolled her eyes and then returned her gaze to the assembled audience.

“Not long after he was freed, Theoric made… advances toward a married woman at the mead hall,” Sigyn said. “The woman’s husband didn’t take too kindly and challenged Theoric to a duel of honor. He offered to let Theoric sober up first, but Theoric took his honor very seriously. While Theoric had a reputation as a skilled swordsman, he was extremely inebriated. The man killed him quite easily.”

“He killed him for insulting his wife?” Tony asked with raised eyebrows.

“That is how a duel of honor is done,” Thor shrugged. “The fight is to the death.”

“My husband has never been… particularly popular in Vanaheim and since it was shown he could so easily mimic Theoric’s appearance, many people believed he had shown up in the husband’s guise to slay Theoric.”

“But he didn’t, right?” Clint asked, looking between Sigyn and Thor for verification.

“I had won,” Loki shrugged. “What would have been the point? Besides, what man returns from a three-month honeymoon after only three days to call out his wife’s ex-betrothed?”

“He’s got a point,” Tony nodded. The rest weren’t exactly convinced.

“I didn’t kill him,” Loki grumbled. “In fact, I was rather annoyed I did not get the pleasure. I would have at least waited until things calmed down and then maybe…”

“We were at a feast in Niðavellir my father was hosting for us that entire day well into the next morning,” Sigyn interrupted. “I think the testimony of some three hundred dwarves would be enough of an alibi.”

“But the rumors persisted anyway,” Thor finally spoke up.

“I rather liked them,” Loki said haughtily. “I not only managed to steal away the bride-to-be of the most glorified warrior in Vanaheim but also took his life.”

“Except none of that is true,” Sigyn snorted. “You didn’t kill him. And Theoric was hardly the most glorified warrior in Vanaheim, though he was well respected. It’s hard to ‘steal’ someone that is looking to be taken away.”

“You always have to ruin the story by telling it the right way,” Loki pouted.

“At any rate,” Sigyn continued, “Theoric’s death spawned a sort of blood feud between his family and the family of the man whose wife he had insulted. We hadn’t been married two months when several members of both sides had been killed in various honor duels. The Goddess of Death was very pleased that so many souls were coming to her realm earlier than expected. She showed up with
Fenrir while we were in Alfheim and offered him as a gift to us for our role in her recent acquisitions.”

“Neither of us were particularly excited about it, but one does not reject a gift from the goddess of death,” Loki shrugged. “He has proven a very capable protector and is the best hunting dog in the Nine Realms… when he doesn’t eat his quarry. While he may have been a ferocious hell hound when we first received him, two hundred years with Sigyn has turned him into a spoilt brat.” As if to illustrate Loki’s point, Fenrir collapsed on his big pillow near the fireplace in a huff because there were no treats to be found in the room.

“Well, I know you guys are probably close to him,” Tony said, “but I don’t think there’d be room for him in the tower. I mean, he’s bigger than some of the doorways.”

“We’ve already spoken with Fenrir about this,” Sigyn nodded. “My sisters will take care of him in our absence…”

“Speaking of which…” Loki muttered as feminine giggles were heard out in the hall.

Within seconds, a troupe of blonde women and one small girl with dirty blonde hair had made their way into the rooms. Loki slipped into his armchair and seemed to be trying to lie low as the five women crowded around his wife. Four of them began chattering over each other to the point nothing they were saying was distinguishable while the fifth stood behind Sigyn, shooting death glares at all of her sister’s guests. Only the small girl came toward Loki, looking up at him expectantly. With a smirk, Loki leaned forward to the girl. Tony noticed Loki’s gaze was more playful than menacing, and the child actually seemed excited to see him.

“Yes, little one?” Loki asked her.

“Do you have something for me?” she asked quietly. Tony judged her age at around six.

“Let’s see,” Loki said. He curled a loose lock of hair over the girl’s ear and somehow retrieved a gold coin. The girl’s eyes lit up and Thor chuckled slightly as Loki put the coin in the girl’s hands.

“Can I buy a sweet with it?” the girl asked Loki conspiratorially.

“Whatever you want, little one,” Loki nodded.

“Idis,” one of Sigyn’s sister’s said, “what have I told you about badgering your uncle into giving you money? It isn’t nice to make him perform to his tricks for you.”

“Sorry, mama,” the girl pouted.

“Ah, she isn’t hurting anything, Idunn,” Loki said, waving his hand dismissively. “Besides, it’s nice to have someone who appreciates my tricks.”

“At least say thank you,” Idunn said to her daughter.

“Thank you,” Idis said shyly, pocketing her coin. As her mother turned back to Sigyn, Loki reached out and took the girl’s hand.

“Come on, Idis,” Loki said to the child with a wink. “I’m sure your Aunt Sigyn has hidden some treats for you somewhere. Perhaps we can get you something good to eat.” Idis’ eyes widened and she followed her uncle into the room.

“Oh, you have guests!” one of Sigyn’s sisters said, finally noticing Tony, Clint and Phil for the first
time. Phil and Clint offered short waves to the women while Tony nodded his chin toward them.

“Yes,” Sigyn said. “This is Sir Tony Stark, Sir Clint Barton and Sir Phil, son of Coul.”
“You are the one who took down our sister’s attacker,” Idunn said to Phil. “For that we are eternally grateful.”

“No need to baby me, Idunn,” Sigyn pouted.

“But you are the baby,” another one of the sisters said, pinching Sigyn’s cheek.

“These are my sisters,” Sigyn continued. “You know Idunn,” she said, pointing to the woman who was clearly the eldest of the bunch. She was dressed like she had just come in from gardening. Sigyn then pointed to the woman dressed in the uniform of the Asgardian healers. She was the tallest of the women. “This is Nanna. She works in the infirmary here.”

“Sigyn does too,” Nanna smirked, “when she’s not busy being a princess.” Sigyn’s sisters giggled as Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“This is Var,” Sigyn said, pointing to the one member of the bevy of blondes who didn’t smile. In fact, she didn’t look capable of smiling and didn’t seem very interested in anything happening in the room. She was barely shorter than Nanna, and reminded Tony of some models he had known back in the day - despite the fact she only seemed a little taller than five-five.

“And I’m Snotra,” said the woman sitting to Sigyn’s right.

“And I’m Syn,” said the one on Sigyn’s left. Both women were very close to Sigyn in height.

“We’re the babies,” Snotra announced. “I was the youngest until Syn was born.”

“And I was the youngest until Sigyn was born,” Syn smiled.

“They’re also the troublemakers,” Idunn warned.

“We serve Queen Frigga,” Snotra said.

“As her handmaidens,” Syn nodded.

“Are you two twins?” Tony asked curiously. The pair giggled.

“No, Lofn and Sjofn are the only twins among us,” Snotra shook her head. “They live in Vanaheim with our mother and our two eldest sisters.”

“So… there’s ten of you total?” Clint said.

“Twelve if you count our father’s sons by his late wife,” Syn said.

“They live in Niðavellir and work in our father’s forge,” Snotra said.

“Var is hoping to get permission from our grandfather and the Allfather to go study with them there so she can improve her crafting,” Syn said, making Var glare at her.

“Maybe she’ll come back with a dwarven husband!” Snotra giggled, causing Var to switch her glare to her other sister.

“Come now,” Idunn chastised them, “Var wanting to improve her work is nothing you should tease her over.”
“So… you’re a blacksmith?” Tony said to Var, attempting to start some conversation. “I kind of work with metal myself…” Var pierced him with a glare that made Tony cringe.

“Var does jewelry, not armor,” Snotra explained.

“It’s best not to leave her alone with sharp objects,” Syn giggled.

“Are you all so…” Tony began before looking at Var, who was still frowning at him. “Blonde?”

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded. “We get it from our mother.”

“Now, let’s not take up all of Sigyn’s time,” Idunn said in a motherly fashion. “She has guests to entertain, and we came here for a reason.”

“I’m glad you are here,” Sigyn said to Idunn. “I was hoping you could watch after Kolr.”

“Of course,” Idunn said to her baby sister lovingly. “He’s a good horse.”

“When he’s not breathing fire,” Var muttered.

“See,” Thor said to Sigyn pointedly. Var then affixed her glare on him, causing Thor to cower slightly.

“Do we get to look after Fen?” Snotra asked hopefully, causing the wolf’s ears to perk up.

“Please, Sigyn?” Syn nodded.

“Of course,” Sigyn laughed. “I doubt very much he would want anyone else to care for him.” The two women turned and were soon on the ground beside the wolf, petting him. Fenrir, for his part, rolled over to allow them to scratch his belly. As the two women continued to pet the wolf and tell him how wonderful he was, Idunn rolled her eyes. She then produced a basket and handed it to Sigyn.

“I thought the pair of you might like some apples while you are gone,” Idunn said.

“Thank you,” Sigyn smiled, taking the basket and then hugging her sister.

“I feel I should be cross with you,” Idunn said, “but I know if it were my husband, I would follow him as well. Be safe.”

“I’ve brought you a healing kit,” Nanna said, presenting her own wrapped package to her sister. “Just for emergencies. I know Loki will not have his seiðr, so I thought…”

“Thank you, Nanna,” Sigyn smiled, hugging her sister.

“If you need anything…” Nanna began.

“We will be in the best of care,” Sigyn assured her older sister.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Don’t worry. We’ll take good care of them.”

“Alright,” Idunn sighed. She began looking around. “Idis?”

“Here, mama,” Idis said, emerging from Loki and Sigyn’s library with chocolate and powdered sugar around her mouth. Loki stood behind her, smirking, a bit of sugar on the corner of his mouth as well.
“Loki!” Idunn said, frustrated. “We are just about to meet Bragi for lunch. Now her appetite will be spoiled…”

“Come now,” Loki said, “the best time to eat sweets is childhood when one can truly enjoy them without consequence. And fruit tarts hardly count as dessert. The child is practically starved for something with actual sugar in it.” Idunn glowered at Loki but the grin on Idis’ face made her sigh. She motioned her daughter over and then took out a handkerchief, wiping down the child’s face.

“I would say, Loki, that I hope one day you have a child as troublesome as you are,” Idunn said, “but I don’t know if I would wish such a thing on my sister.” Loki ignored Idunn, instead crouching down to talk to his niece.

“Be good for your mother while we’re gone,” Loki said to Idis, “and perhaps Aunt Sigyn and I will bring you back something special from Midgard.” Idis’ eyes widened in expectation while Idunn rolled her eyes at her brother-in-law and his attempts at spoiling her daughter. Secretly, Idunn had to admit the trickster was very good with children, but she would never give him the satisfaction by admitting such a thing.

“We have to see your father, dear,” Idunn said to her daughter. “You can see Aunt Sigyn and Uncle Loki at the feast tonight.” Idunn ushered her daughter along out of the room. Idis waved to her uncle as her mother escorted her from the room.

“Must you always wind Idunn up?” Sigyn asked her husband in annoyance.

“What? And risk my reputation as Idis’ favorite uncle?” Loki snorted as he returned to his chair.

“Technically, you’re the only one of her uncles that she gets to see regularly,” Sigyn pointed out.

“I’m still her favorite,” Loki said dismissively. “Everyone knows she likes me best.”

“She’s terribly shy,” Thor explained to his Midgardian friends. “Loki is one of the few people Idis opens up to, mainly because he gives her sweets and presents all the time.”

“Isn’t that bribery?” Clint pointed out.

“It works,” Loki shrugged.

“We will see you at the feast later,” Nanna said, giving Sigyn a hug before following Idunn out the door.

“Should we come and get Fen early tomorrow or late tonight?” Snotra asked.

“We’ll send him to you after breakfast,” Sigyn said.

“Bye, Fen!” Syn said, waving at the wolf as the two of them exited the room. Only Var remained behind looking cautiously at her baby sister.

“There are large beasts on Midgard,” Var finally said to her sister. “Try not to be gored to death.” She then turned and silently exited.

“What was…” Tony began.

“I don’t believe it,” Thor laughed.

“What?” Clint asked, trying to figure out what was funny.
“For Var,” Loki explained, “that was exceptionally sweet. Probably the closest thing to her being a blubbering mess.”

“Well, now that my sisters are gone we should start packing,” Sigyn announced.

“You pack,” Loki said. “I still haven’t eaten yet.”

“Fine,” Sigyn groaned. She levitated a large trunk into the living area.

“Should we…” Tony began.

“You’ll want to see this,” Thor quietly informed the Midgardians as Sigyn raised her hands and set forth a spurt of golden seiðr.

What happened next Tony could only describe as the “Higitus Figitus” scene from The Sword in the Stone. Every book in Sigyn and Loki’s library seemed to fly and float its way into the open trunk. There were definitely more books than there was room in the trunk, but even after Tony thought the trunk should have been filled twice over books were still coming. The books were followed by various objects Tony was certain were magical in nature, several plants, some medieval type weapons and finally the contents of the couple’s wardrobe.

Loki easily had more clothes than Pepper, and Sigyn seemed to have double the amount of clothing as her husband. She didn’t exactly strike Tony as the type of woman who obsessed over clothing. Judging by some of the more outlandish outfits of Loki’s that disappeared into the trunk, Tony theorized that much of Sigyn’s wardrobe was a gift from her husband. He seemed like the type of guy who might find dressing his wife up just as alluring as undressing her. Of course, Tony wasn’t sure the bulk of their Asgardian wardrobe would help them stay inconspicuous on Earth. New York could be an eccentric place, but it wasn’t that eccentric. When Sigyn was done levitating items into the trunk, Loki did his part by kicking the trunk lid close and then resting his feet on it.

“I suppose we can do the rest tomorrow morning,” Sigyn sighed, flopping back into the armchair that matched her husband’s.

“What else do you need?” Clint asked, surprised.

“Well, we do have another night here on Asgard,” Loki pointed out. “I personally wouldn’t mind being naked tomorrow, but I believe some of you might.”


“I gave you that yesterday,” Thor frowned.

“Then give us a tour of the dungeons or something so I don’t have to think about your brother being naked in my Tower eventually,” Tony said.

“Alright, friend Stark,” Thor said, getting up to leave with his Midgardian friends. He turned back over his shoulder to his brother and sister-in-law before leaving. “I shall see you tonight!”

“Finally,” Loki groaned as Thor slammed the door shut behind himself. He motioned for Sigyn to slide into his lap. She did so begrudgingly. “Now, wife, we have several hours until my mother’s celebration. Whatever shall we do?”

“You’re incorrigible,” Sigyn rolled her eyes, trying her best to hide her smile.
I see Idunn was sort of the closest thing Asgard has to a “crunchy mom.” Loki is the uncle who thinks her parenting style is bunk and so gives her kid all the stuff she isn’t allowed to eat at home.
Darkness had fallen and feasting had already been going on for an hour in the dining hall when Loki and Sigyn arrived to the party. At his wife’s behest, the god of mischief had kept off his ceremonial armor and helmet in a more subdued outfit and Sigyn herself dressed in a modest green gown, figuring it was best not to draw attention to themselves. Tony watched as the pair found a seat at a table containing mainly Sigyn’s family. Loki found himself sandwiched between his wife and Idunn, Var directly across from him and Syn and Snotra on either side of her. Thor had earlier pointed out to Tony, Clint and Phil earlier that the man sitting next to Idunn and with Idis in his lap was Bragi, a palace skald and orator who was also Idunn’s husband. Nanna was on Sigyn’s other side and various young Asgardian noblemen had crowded around to sit near Nanna, Syn and Snotra as they were the unmarried and un-scowling sisters remaining.

While Clint and Phil were being entertained by Thor and his friends, Tony was intrigued by watching Loki interact with his wife’s family. He mainly talked to Sigyn, but he was entertaining her sisters when she wasn’t paying attention to him. Not long after he sat down, Loki began using his spoon to try and launch grapes and olives into the wine cups of one of the men flirting with Nanna and Syn. Tony realized Loki was trying to cause Var to break character and at least smile at him. While Var’s eyes did light up when Loki knocked over an entire pitcher of wine on accident, she didn’t give in to him by actually laughing or smiling. As a servant came over to clean up the shattered wine pitcher, Sigyn took her husband’s spoon with a glare and then tried to get him involved with some conversation she was having with her sisters’ suitors. Judging by the faces Sigyn was making at her husband’s contributions to the conversation, it wasn’t going well.

“Does Loki usually sit with Sigyn’s family?” Tony asked Thor. In response, Thor looked over at the table where his brother was sitting and then back to his friend.

“Sometimes,” Thor shrugged. “He would sit with us one night and then he would sit with them another - usually depending on who he felt was less annoying at the time. Other times, my parents would place him and Sigyn with visitors from the other realms. While he may not have acted like it on Midgard, my brother can be quite diplomatic. He is usually in charge of entertaining foreign guests - both because of his knowledge of other cultures and Sigyn’s heritage. Somehow, they both know how to put people at ease when need be. And then sometimes Lady Sif, the Warriors Three and I sit with him and Sigyn’s family together.”

“You know them pretty well?” Phil asked, joining the conversation.

“Sigyn was a little younger than Idis is now when she and her sisters were brought to Asgard,” Thor explained. “Loki was not much older than that, and I only a bit older than he. Var and I are about the same age. Loki is actually only a few moons older than Snotra. Nanna was a bit older, around the age of maturity. Idunn had been settled here and married for a decade or so. We grew up with them, and we saw them often since they were in our mother’s care. Of course, neither Loki nor I were keen on playing with a bunch of girls as young boys. We were mainly forced into playing with them. Save
for Sigyn. She and Loki were always drawn to each other. She was very shy - like Idis - when she came here. Loki and my mother were really the only ones she spoke to outside of her sisters for a while. She started following him around a lot.”

“Most kids I know wouldn’t like having a younger kid shadowing them,” Clint mentioned.

“At first it annoyed him,” Thor shrugged, “but soon, he decided he liked having someone he could boss around and could force to play the games he wanted to play, since I usually made him play the ones I wanted to play. He would throw fits sometimes when Mother told him Sigyn was too busy with lessons or doing her handmaiden duties to play. Sigyn never complained, and I think her sisters thought the entire thing was adorable. At least until they were older. Then I think they worried they were getting to close to one another. It worked out well enough in the end, I suppose.”

“I’m surprised her sisters aren’t angrier at him for everything he’s done,” Tony pointed out.

“Sigyn, like most of her siblings, is as stubborn as a goat,” Thor shook his head. “They claim it is a dwarven trait, but their mother can be just as hard to bend. We all learned a long time ago that Sigyn takes any slight against her husband as a personal offence. Her sisters also care more about how Loki treats her than anything else. Destruction on Midgard they can forgive, but the fact that he left her to believe he was dead for so long… that might be harder to overcome with them.”

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of Gungnir on the marble floors. It was apparently present time for Queen Frigga. The evening’s entertainment was her presentation of gifts, starting from small trinkets and toys brought to her by the children of the palace and city surrounding them. Frigga was delighted by each small gift and seemed to give a blessing to each child that brought her something. When the children had given their gifts, most of them were escorted off to bed. It was then the citizens from Asgard’s farming and merchant classes began presenting their gifts. When that was done, it was time for the palace occupants to do so. Tony, Clint and Phil found themselves and their plant pushed into the line for palace residents. The line moved more quickly than they expected, and soon the three men found themselves before the Allfather.

“Thor thought you would like this,” Tony explained as Clint sat the plant before the Queen.

“Ah, an Eldamarian shooting star,” Frigga smiled. “I have been hoping to add a few to my garden. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Phil said shyly.

“It was kind of you,” Frigga smiled. “You didn’t have to get anything for me.”

“Well, it seemed rude not to get you one,” Tony shrugged. “I mean, you invited us into your home and given us the five-star treatment.”

“Thank you, gentleman,” Frigga smiled before they were ushered off and the next gift-giver was brought forward.

When the members of the court had finished giving their presents, the members of the Royal Family were gathered to present their gifts to the queen. Tony couldn’t imagine giving a gift to his mother in a crowd, though his father had done so quite often. For Tony, gifts to his mother had been personal moments between the two of them. Judging by the uncomfortable looks on Thor and Loki’s faces, the pair of them seemed to agree. As the younger brother, Loki was allowed to go first. Sigyn retrieved the bauble from whatever dimension she was storing it in and then allowed Loki to pass it to his mother. Frigga admired it greatly and made a comment on Loki and Sigyn’s magical talents. Loki seemed to smirk at the Allfather, as if daring him to top his present.
“Thank you, my dears,” Frigga said to them, closing up the circular terrarium. “While you are gone, I will look at this and think of you often.”

Thor was a little more shy when he was called up next to hand over his gift. It was a bit comical to see the massive thunder god handing his mother a small little music box that prominently featured a baby goat that looked like it had come straight from a Hummel figurine factory. Odin seemed to roll his eyes at the gift, though no one else made any comment when Frigga opened up the music box to examine it. For his part, Thor only focused on the bright smile across his mother’s face as she closed up the box and turned to him.

“Thank you, my dear,” Frigga said to him sweetly. “I will play it every night until you return to us.” She looked back between both of her sons. “I am the happiest and most fortunate mother in all of Asgard to have two such loving sons who dote on me so. Thank you, dear hearts.”

Both men embraced their mother quickly, allowing her to whisper something into their ears, before returning to their seats. As they did so, Odin pulled the attention to himself, announcing that his own present for his wife was being brought forth. It took six men to bring in the expertly crafted golden spinning wheel that Tony thought looked like something out of the Grimm fairy tales. There seemed to be an entire story etched into the wheel with figures and runes adorning it from various angles. Thor gaped at the gift and Loki seemed somewhat displeased by it. Sigyn looked confused. Frigga seemed pleased but somewhat annoyed at her husband, probably because of the big display he made presenting it toward her.

“Dwarven made,” Volstagg surmised.

“Though I doubt by any of Sigyn’s,” Sif nodded. “She would have said something.”

“Let’s hope Loki doesn’t feel insulted that Odin didn’t commission this gift from his in-laws,” Fandral agreed.

“I fail to see what use the Allmother has for another spinning wheel,” Sif snorted. “It will end up a showpiece.”

“No one said the Allfather knew much about spinning,” Volstagg pointed out.

The queen’s gift carried out in a similar fashion to the pageantry of how it had been brought in, Odin declared it was time for post dinner dancing. Within an instant, Tony found himself, Thor and the Lady Sif the only three remaining at their table. Volstagg went off with his wife and Fandral with some woman Tony didn’t recognize. Sigyn’s sisters Syn and Snotra yanked Clint and Phil up before they could protest, each promising to come back for Tony during the next set. While the Allmother and Allfather watched over the crowd, Tony spied Loki and Sigyn in one of the corners. The pair were dancing much more closely than anyone else in the room, probably the closest thing Asgard had to dirty dancing.

“Why aren’t you out there, Thunderstruck?” Tony asked Thor.

“I didn’t want to abandon you, friend Stark,” Thor said.

“I’m fine,” Tony waved his hand. “Go have some fun.” Thor looked uncomfortable.

“Ah, the Mighty Thor does not want you to know his secret shame,” Sif snorted. Tony was starting to get the impression she was a little buzzed.

“And what is that?” Tony asked her conspiratorially.
“He is afflicted with two left feet,” Sif whisper-laughed back. “Dancing has never been his forte.”

“Had you learned to dance the way I had, you wouldn’t be so harsh to judge,” Thor huffed. Tony raised an eyebrow, looking for an explanation. Thor sighed. “At first Mother attempted to teach Loki and I to dance together, but she found it quickly became contest of which brother could stomp more on the other’s foot. Then, she roped in her handmaidens. Loki always paired off with Sigyn - who took the entire thing seriously - while I often found myself with Snotra or Syn. It was a game of theirs to see who could make me have a worse time of it.”

“Serves you right for all the braid pulling and putting of frogs in beds you did as a boy,” Sif snorted. Thor looked at her curiously. “I hear stories.” Thor opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Sigyn. Despite the fact that Thor was sitting down, he was still taller than the woman standing before him.

“Come on,” Sigyn said, working to pull him off the bench as a new song started to play. Thor groaned, not wanting to come with her.

“Where is your husband?” Thor grumbled as Sigyn managed to get him onto the dance floor.

“I think he’s off with Nanna,” Sigyn replied as Syn ran over and grabbed Tony, pulling him onto the floor.

Thor noticed Phil was now dancing with Snotra while Clint was being twirled around by a woman who had been flirting with Fandral earlier during the feast. He didn’t see Loki and Nanna in the crowd, but there were so many twirling forms it was hard to keep track. For his part, Tony was just trying to stay standing up. The current dance, apparently, involved a lot of partner swinging and Tony found himself being exchanged rapidly between Syn and Snotra. Tony errantly thought that the last time he had been around this many blondes had been that time at the Playboy Mansion. He was pretty glad that his phone didn’t work on Asgard so there would be no questionable photos for Pepper to ask about later.

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It had been easy enough for Loki to sneak off amid the twirl of dancers. The only major obstacle to his escape was Sigyn, but upon informing her of his intentions - and her spending a few minutes studying his face to make sure he was telling the truth - he was easily able to evade her. Truthfully, Loki could have been more stealthy about his escape. He stopped to watch his wife hilariously twirl his brother around for a few minutes before continuing on his way. He also passed several people on his exit from the main dining hall who were already whispering about what he was up to. Ignoring to them, Loki went about his quest through the palace halls and finally toward the stables. As quietly as he could, Loki saddled up his horse - handing off a few sugar cubes to Kolr to keep him silent and more importantly not snorting fire - and then he rode off toward the Bifrost Observatory.

Save for his arrival and the testimony at his trial, Loki had not really seen Asgard’s Gatekeeper. He was fully prepared to be spurned by Heimdall since their last real encounter hadn’t been all that pleasant. Heimdall had been privy to the vast majority of mistakes in Loki’s life and particularly the rather disastrous ones he had made of late. The only thing Heimdall hadn’t seen was what Thanos and The Other had shielded from him. With Heimdall’s all-seeing powers a part of Loki honestly thought seeking the man out to speak with him was a foolish endeavor; the Gatekeeper probably already knew what was on his mind.

However, Sigyn had raised her expectations of him, and Loki was beginning to fear that disappointing his wife again might be the beginning of the end for his marriage. Certainly, they could never be officially separated, but Sigyn could always chose to live apart from him with her other
family members. To tell the truth, his marriage and his wife were among the few things still keeping him together, and he wasn’t going to risk losing Sigyn when he needed her support more than ever. He had already quite literally fallen from one precipice in his life. He didn’t think he could survive another.

When Thanos had gotten ahold of him, Loki had already felt mentally destroyed after his fall from the Bifrost. He was only now just physically recovering thanks to Sigyn’s ministrations, but his mental state was as shattered as his body had been. Seeing Odin still presiding over Asgard as if he was blameless seemed to only exacerbate the anxiety caused by his year with Thanos. Sigyn seemed to think that seeking redemption from those he had wronged would help him not only overcome his current mental issues but find himself a niche that would leave him more satisfied than any throne could. Sigyn had reminded him she had no desire to be a queen, pointing out how all of her royal relatives seemed to be miserable. Leave the crown to Thor, she had begged him, do not seek another’s burden.

So now he found himself very near the very spot where he and Thor had fallen, where Odin had grabbed onto one son but so easily let go of the other. He tried not to look at the spot itself, instead focusing on how well the Bridge had been put back together. The Observatory itself still had some minor touches, but it was usable. Once Eir had assured her that Loki was recovering, Sigyn had dedicated her time and seiðr to helping restore the remnants of the bridge and observatory. Loki had heard some offhanded comment about how the entire observatory could have been fixed much earlier of Sigyn hadn’t been so selfish in her mourning. Normally, he would have found some trick to play on the gossips, but Sigyn had asked him to at least try and turn over a new leaf, especially considering his reprieve. He owed that much to her.

“I am not surprised that you have returned here,” Heimdall called out as Loki made his usually stealthy appearance, “though I understand it took courage for you to come back to this place of your own volition.”

“I suppose neither of us have happy memories of this place as of late,” Loki said quietly.

“Your wife’s seiðr has been of great use during the repairs,” Heimdall said diplomatically. “And the craftsmanship of her relatives on the observatory is superior, as always. I think the new structure will be much grander than the old.”

“She has been happy to help,” Loki agreed politely. “It is rare she gets a task that allows her to employ all of her talents.”

“She knows you quite well,” Heimdall continued. “She sees things in you before anyone else can. Before you see them in yourself.”

“Foresight is said to be a particular talent of the Vanir,” Loki said.

“Precognition of events is a Vanir trait, perhaps,” Heimdall agreed, “but I was rather referring to her ability to her ability to see what lies beneath the surface at the present. She is like the gardener knows the flower’s potential to bloom before the seed has yet begun to sprout. It is a rare gift. Though I can see everything that passes in the Nine Realms, I myself can only conjecture how those various decisions and actions will play out.”

“She has earned the title goddess of fidelity,” Loki pointed out. “She is faithful in most things, willing to hope that the best will result no matter what.”

“But you are not here so we may discuss your wife,” Heimdall pointed out.
“No,” Loki admitted.

“I heard your conversation with your wife on Midgard,” Heimdall mentioned.

“I had assumed,” Loki snorted.

“She was correct in assuming you should take more time in crafting your apologies,” Heimdall said. “I believe that is why you are here now?”

“It will be a while before I return to Asgard,” Loki said. “I felt it might be awkward for both of us if I waited until my departure tomorrow for this. And, to be frank, I haven’t exactly had the time nor the freedom to approach you before now.”

“No,” Heimdall said with a slight trace of a smile. “Between your wife, your healers and your chains, I doubt even you could have managed to slip away.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. He was silent for a moment, knowing he should begin his apology but not exactly sure where to start. This was why he hated apologies. Well, it was one of many reasons why.

“Before I begin, there is something I must ask you.”

“Yes,” Heimdall prompted, though Loki had a feeling the guardian already knew the question at the tip of his tongue.

“Did you know?” Loki asked. “Did you know that Odin had taken me from Jotunheim.”

“No,” Heimdall responded. “That was before I began my duties here.” Loki looked at him quizzically and Heimdall smirked. “I was not always the guardian of the Bifrost, and this observatory was not always here. Shortly after you arrived here, after the war with the Jotuns on earth ended, the Storm Giants invaded.”

“Storm Giants?” Loki asked quizzically.

“Children formed from relations early Jotun had with the Muspel. They once lived in Asgard,” Heimdall explained, “until they were chased from these lands by Buri, father of Bor. They went to live in the more temperate climes of Jotunheim and lived rather peaceably there with the Jotuns for a time. The Storm Giants were smaller than Frost Giants, both in stature and number. They were not perceived as a threat. However, the removal of the Cask of Ancient Winters also removed what warm places remained in Jotunheim. They came here in an ill-conceived attempt to retrieve it. The first of many ill-conceived attempts.”

“I assume they did not get it,” Loki said, ignoring the not-so-subtle jab.

“No,” Heimdall said. “The Allfather had decided by that time that a guardian should be put on the Bifrost bridge to judge who could come and go from the Realm Eternal. I was a lowly guard then, but it was my perception that allowed me to realize the Storm Giants were coming. Following the obliteration of the race, I was given an enhancement to by sight and this post as my… reward for my loyalty.”

“How strange that our reward can so easily be our cage,” Loki nodded.

“Now, young prince,” Heimdall cajoled, “I believe you had something you wished to say.”

“Yes,” Loki muttered. “I wish to apologize for my behavior. I know very well that aiding Jotuns into Asgard could have cost you your post based on my actions. It was honestly meant as a bit of mischief, and nothing more. It was Thor who blew things out of proportion…”
“But you are not Thor,” Heimdall prompted. Loki grimaced and bit his tongue. Sigyn had warned him that bringing up the faults of others was not a good tactic when delivering an apology. Loki was not responsible for Thor’s actions, and therefore should not act as though Thor was responsible for his own, Sigyn had chided him.

“I am not,” Loki frowned. “And that is perhaps why instead of using my time as regent to prove myself a capable leader I instead turned it to my own undoing. Sigyn has informed me the Midgardians have a saying: ‘absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ Perhaps there is some truth in that. While I know that I have made you a victim of my pranks and jests before, I understand my actions crossed a line. I also should have known that your loyalty is first and foremost to Asgard, not necessarily its king. Perhaps the thing I should apologize most for is underestimating you.”

“Your apology for that is accepted,” Heimdall said. “But I do not believe underestimating my intelligence or ability is the thing you should apologize most for.”

“No,” Loki frowned. “No, I suppose that is for attacking you when you refused to bend to my will. It was unfortunate, and I doubt very much it will happen again. I suppose I should also apologize for the destruction of the bridge and your observatory, even if technically it was Thor’s actions that caused it.”

“His actions motivated by your own,” Heimdall reminded him.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “So, if you want to thank someone for the new observatory being built back larger and more grand than ever, I would fully accept.”

“You have not completely lost your arrogance,” Heimdall observed. “I doubt you truly ever will. I suppose I should be grateful that you even deigned to apologize for your actions since I know you most certainly would not have before…”

“I suppose I deserve that,” Loki snorted.

“Do you plan to tell me about your secret path from Asgard?” Heimdall asked him, already knowing the answer.

“No,” Loki smirked, “where would be the fun in that?”

Tony was surprised that so few people showed up the next morning to send Loki off. He had thought with the huge turnout at the trial that more people would want to make sure that the trickster prince was safely off of Asgard. Then again, he wouldn’t have been surprised if most of Asgard was sleeping off their hangovers from Frigga’s epic birthday party the night before. Tony couldn’t remember the last time he had seen so much alcohol consumed, and not just because of his own liquor-induced blackouts. Asgardians definitely knew how to party.

Tony was also a little surprised that the All-Daddy was letting mere Midgardians leave his realm with souvenirs. The billionaire, playboy philanthropist himself had taken the most - mainly odds and ends for his lab now taking up a gunny sack - but not all of his gifts were for himself. He had purchased Pepper a bracelet that at first glance was made of pearls but inside each bead seemed to be a spinning galaxy. He purchased a second for himself so he wouldn’t get in trouble for taking apart Pepper’s to see how it worked.

Clint had gotten a bow, quiver and some Asgardian arrows along with some weird Asgardian hearing aids he said were much more comfortable than his standard-issue SHIELD ones. All Phil
was taking was a small model of one of those windmills he admired to much. Upon closer inspection, Tony realized the little windmill model was in fact some kind of perpetual motion machine. Tony briefly considered that Odin wasn’t throwing a fit about their souvenirs because everything they had picked to take home was considered a children’s toy on Asgard. Thor himself had brought down a trunk of his own, slung over his shoulder like it was nothing, before setting it down.

Of course, Sigyn and Loki’s massive trunk being hauled over by a pair of servants was easily the largest item being transported back to Earth with the group. While Sigyn and Thor both appeared dressed down - at least in the Asgardian sense of the word - Loki had decided to show up to his banishment in full regalia and armor. His apparel was clearly designed to piss off Odin and it was clearly working. Tony had to admit he had sunken to this level of petty himself, like the time he showed up in a suit jacket and his underwear when his old man had been presented some fancy award. While dressing up for an occasion never would have bothered Howard Stark, the ruler of Asgard seemed a bit affronted that Loki would dare set off on his banishment looking like he was preparing for a coronation.

Once the servants sat down the trunk, they headed back into the palace. Odin, Frigga, a smattering of palace guards and Thor’s friends remained the only Asgardians willing to see them off. The Warriors Three and Sif all had their horses and Odin was standing by his eight-legged monstrosity. The rest of the group had been provided sleighs to travel down to the Bifrost. Tony, Phil, and Clint piled into one while Thor helped his mother and Sigyn into another. Loki followed behind his wife and then Thor into the sleigh beside his mother. With Odin and his Santa Claus appearance, Tony decided the only thing that this weird Asgardian sleigh ride lacked was snow and some jingle bells.

When the sleighs came to a stop at the Bifrost Observatory, Tony could tell that the carriage he and the SHIELD operatives had shared had been the fun carriage. Frigga was glowering at both of her sons, who seemed a bit chastised though Loki seemed a little smug. Sigyn seemed annoyed with her husband, though she did let him escort her down from the sleigh while Thor helped Frigga. While Odin dismounted off of his octopedal horse, Frigga hugged her daughter-in-law and then both of her sons. The queen smoothed down one of Loki’s cowlicks before progressing on to his older brother, curling a loose lock of hair over Thor’s ear. Volstagg and Hogun helped take down the trunk that was Sigyn and Loki’s while Thor picked up his own trunk. Tony wanted to see Loki do the same with his trunk, but instead watched is Sigyn made the trunk levitate. It stood behind her like a pet, waiting to follow its master.

“Heimdall will be keeping watch over you,” Odin informed his sons and daughter-in-law. “I expect you to represent Asgard in a good light during your time in Midgard.” He turned to Loki in particular. “We will be keeping an eye on you.” Loki seemed to be trying really hard not to roll his eyes or make a sarcastic remark. Tony actually thought of a few to make himself.

“Be safe,” Frigga added. It was obvious the queen wanted to say more, but short and sweet would probably be easier for everyone.

With that, the group trooped forward to Heimdall, Sigyn’s trunk floating behind them. With a knowing glance at the two sons of Odin, Heimdall seemed to smirk slightly as he removed his giant ceremonial sword. Before any further comment was made, the group were sucked back down to Earth. Gaining his bearings after the tie-dye-like tunnel that was traveling via Bifrost, Tony looked up to see they were back behind the dumpsters of the major big box store retailer they had left behind in Secaucus just days before. Tony’s phone suddenly pinged to life with hundreds of unanswered texts, voicemails and messages from Pepper, Rhodey and Happy. It appeared that it had taken a day and a half before SHIELD bothered to inform anyone that Tony had been transported to Asgard. Either that, or that’s when his reception had been cut off.
“I am in trouble,” Tony muttered.

“What is this foul smelling place?” Loki grimaced.

“New Jersey,” Clint replied.

“It was built on a marsh,” Phil offered, as if that would explain the scent.

“Why are we where the refuse is disposed of?” Sigyn asked curiously, wrinkling her nose at the dumpster.

“Hey, your Bifrost sent us here,” Tony snorted.

“Perhaps you guys should disguise yourselves…” Clint pointed out.

“So I am not murdered by your vengeful peons?” Loki snorted.

“Here,” Sigyn said, waving her hands over her husband’s face.

“What just happened?” Tony asked.

“I have changed my husband’s appearance,” Sigyn explained. “To those of us here, he will retain his normal visage, but the rest of Midgard will see him in a different form. I thought that, perhaps, if his true identity was concealed completely he might be harder for your to find.”

“Thank you,” Phil smiled at her.

“Do not tell me you have given me that insipid stable boy’s face again,” Loki huffed.

“That’s all well and good,” Clint said, “but I was more pointing out that your Asgardian wardrobe isn’t exactly easy to ignore. The three of you stick out like sore thumbs.”

“Well, this is a market, is it not?” Sigyn suggested. “Why don’t we find clothing inside while we wait for your means of conveyance to arrive?”

Tony could officially check shopping at a big, blue megastore created in Arkansas off his bucket list. When the group emerged after thirty minutes of shopping, Clint was in possession of both a gallon of pretzels and a gallon jar of pickles. Tony, who had never considered himself the buying in bulk type, found an incredible deal on tools, screws, nails and other hardware. Sigyn emerged with the Odinsons in tow, Thor comically wearing a “Somebody in New Jersey Loves Me” t-shirt and cargo pants while Loki was donning a much too large hoodie above what appeared to be his original Asgardian leather pants. Baby steps, Tony supposed. Sigyn was dressed in yoga pants - which were definitely flattering on her figure - as well as a giant old lady sweater with kittens on it. While Phil had acted like he hadn’t been tempted by anything, Tony later caught him attempting to sneak a bag containing some Captain America socks and a World War II trivia book into the SHIELD SUV.

Thor, Clint and Coulson worked to stuff Loki and Thor’s trunks into the trunk of the two massive SUVs SHIELD had sent while Loki watched them bitterly, trying his best not to touch anything that a human might have touched. It was hard in the massive parking lot filled with screaming children, frustrated parents, and loose shopping carts. Once the trunks had somehow been fit into a vehicle, Tony was ready to head back into the city. Unfortunately, Thor had begun thinking with his stomach sometime around the freezer aisle. Free samples were apparently not enough to sustain a god during the drive to Midtown.

“I am famished,” Thor commented.
“We barely broke our fast an hour ago,” Loki pointed out.

“Something smells delicious,” Thor said as Coulson opened his mouth to try and persuade Thor to get in the car. “This way compatriots!”

Despite Clint, Tony and Phil’s protests, Thor had insisted he was far too hungry to travel any further and determined the buffalo wings joint was the place where the delicious smell was coming from. The group found themselves walking across the street to where Thor had identified the source of the smell, the SUVs rolling along at a snail’s pace behind them. Within ten minutes, Tony found himself calling Pepper from a Buffalo Wild Wings in New Jersey, attempting to explain his absence. With Pepper somewhat appeased that Tony’s impromptu Asgardian vacation had been beyond his knowledge or power to stop, the billionaire rejoined Sigyn and Loki at the booth they had snagged. Loki was glaring at the menu in disgust and Sigyn didn’t seem much happier as Clint and Phil tried to explain to Thor what “pieces of flare” were.

“This Midgardian tavern is most odious,” Loki grimaced, glaring at the various televisions playing sports, “The building is loud and the odors are most foul. And why in Hel would they think we would want to watch grown men chasing a ball for entertainment?”

“It’s a bar with that serves wings,” Clint shrugged. “If you wanted fancy, we could have gone to the Olive Garden.”

“Or, you know,” Tony interjected, “an actual Italian restaurant.”

“There is not much on this menu I recognize,” Sigyn said, chewing her lip worriedly. “The chicken does look tempting but… I don’t know… I’m not sure I want to consume a chicken that is ‘sweet and sassy’ or ‘made with unrelenting heat.’”

“Yes, Thor,” Loki huffed, “couldn’t you have chosen a place that provides more than… what in the Nine Realms is a chicken buffalito?”

“Hi,” a peppy voice echoed, startling most of the booth’s occupants. “My name is Chet and I’ll be your server today.”

“Ah. good,” Loki nodded. “Perhaps you can explain the atrocities the owners of this tavern believe pass for sustenance. Tell me, servant boy, what exactly is a mini corn dog?” It was at that exact moment that Tony realized he was probably going to have to leave a huge tip to avoid possibly being sued for mental anguish by the waiter.

While the three Midgardians took to burgers, fries and an appetizer of wings shared among the three of them, Thor ate enough for a small Midwestern family. True to his Viking heritage - or perhaps more accurately the heritage Vikings had garnered from him - Thor had ordered three baskets of cheese curds, two massive cheese burgers, buffalo mac and cheese, three wing samplers, and a giant pretzel. He also consumed enough beer that the waiter took Tony aside and suggested a good rehab facility or at least that Thor stop by the local hospital to check for possible alcohol poisoning.

Loki stuck to chicken tenders with onion rings, all of which he ate with a knife and fork. Thankfully, the waiter had guessed that he was a strange foreigner, which Tony encouraged by explaining that in Loki’s native country being blunt verging on plain rude was just how people talked. Sigyn eventually settled on a Mediterranean style salad with a veggie boat and some stuffed mushrooms on the side. She hilariously managed to coax Loki into trying the carrots and celery dipped in ranch sauce in what Tony assumed was the Asgardian version of getting a baby to eat food by pretending the spoon was an airplane. Loki actually seemed to enjoy both the food and Sigyn’s coddling only until he realized everyone else was watching him enjoy it. While Thor won the prize for the most
entrees and appetizers, Loki and Sigyn won the round for most drinks, each of them ordering and sampling the various different teas the restaurant offered.

“The many ways in which these tiny wings are prepared are ingenious,” Thor said, licking his fingers as he finished off his final plate. “And to fry cheese in such a manner!”

“Your definition of genius is lacking.” Loki muttered.

“Hey, just because the wasabi wings nearly knocked you on your keister doesn’t mean you can call buffalo wings stupid,” Clint snorted.

“I, for one, do not see the allure of this particular establishment,” Loki said, “and Sigyn agrees with me.”

“I can make up my own mind on what I like,” Sigyn huffed.

“Yes, lykyng,” Loki said, a bit of condescension in his tone. “You have been known for your good decisions as of late.”

“I decided to marry you,” Sigyn retorted with an arched brow. Thor sent some bubbles into his beer stein, trying not to laugh. “Tell me, how was ensuring your life was spared and removing you from Odin’s presence so the two of you no longer grate upon each others’ nerves a terrible decision?”

“You realize if Thor thinks you enjoy this establishment, he may make us return,” Loki pointed out, annoyed.

“Perhaps I would like to return,” Sigyn said. “This might become my favorite Midgardian tavern.

“Dude,” Tony cautioned Loki as the godling opened his mouth, “trust me. Quit while you’re ahead.”

“Come compatriots!” Thor thundered, plopping down what seemed to be several actual silver coins down on the table, “We shall return to the Tower of Stark!” Tony groaned and turned to Clint and Phil.

“What has SHIELD gotten me into?”
Chapter Summary

Or, in which Sigyn makes friends and Loki is distrustful of artificial intelligence

Clint and Phil had been smart enough to pile into the SHIELD SUV with all the other agents, leaving Tony in the back of the other one with the Asgardians in tow. While Loki sat and brooded - swallowed up by the too big hoodie Sigyn had made him buy - Tony found himself answering the incessantly curious questions Sigyn and Thor kept asking. He learned Thor couldn’t understand the concept of toll roads and that Sigyn was perfectly thrilled by the Lincoln Tunnel, comparing it to the ones in her dwarven homelands. As they emerged into Hell’s Kitchen and the Garden District, Sigyn began smacking her husband on the chest repeatedly, excitedly pointing out the buildings she recognized from their previous brief foray into the city.

However, is fellow passengers grew quiet as they headed further and further into Midtown, seeing the destruction left behind by the Chitauri and the faces of the New Yorkers going by, acting as if a giant alien space ship bringing down the skyscraper across the street was no big deal. Tony tried to diffuse the awkwardness by pointing out various landmarks, Thor and Sigyn nodding along. The only thing that seemed to draw Loki’s interest was when he pointed out the main branch of the New York Public Library and its massive stone lions. Finally, they arrived at the remnants of Stark Tower on Park Avenue, sandwiched between Grand Central Terminal and the Helmsley Building. Tony briefly thought about the time he met Leona Helmsley, the old battle ax whose cutthroat business sense had impressed his father. Tony wondered how Howard would feel knowing the old broad had left the bulk of her money to a Maltese.

Tony was jerked back into reality when the car came to a stop in the garage underneath near the private entrance for building tenants. Ushered to the elevators by the mix of SHIELD agents and his own security crew, Tony found himself, the Asgardians, Clint and Phil shoved into the private elevator and sent upward. Tony relaxed a little bit, at least knowing he was again on his own turf and in a place where he, not some one-eyed old man with an ax to grind, made the decisions. Before he knew it, the elevator doors had opened into the main common area of the upper levels and Tony found himself staring straight into the face of Nick Fury.

“You’re late,” Fury informed the group. Tony hoped he was addressing Coulson and Clint.

“We stopped for wings,” Clint said, as if that was a normal mid-mission occurrence. Tony glanced around the room to find the rest of the Avengers somewhat assembled.

Romanoff - if that was her real name - was standing to Fury’s left while Maria Hill was to his right, all three of them in the “I am tired of your shit” pose. Banner was in deep conversation with a young woman Tony briefly recognized from the files as Dr. Jane Foster a.k.a Thor’s three-night stand from New Mexico. A slightly younger, much bouncier woman beside Jane was excitedly asking Capsicle questions about things that had changed since the 1940s. For his part, the formerly frozen soldier seemed to be struggling to form a coherent sentence about some apparent “banana apocalypse” following his disappearance. Tony wasn’t sure if that was because he had no idea what the intern was talking about or if this was just how Cap talked to all women who he was unfamiliar with.

Pepper and Happy were sitting together at the conference table in deep conversation about
something. Tony grumbled as he emerged from the elevator. Someone could have at least brought up snacks for whatever uncomfortableness was about to happen. Thor seemed to grin at the others in the room as he emerged, but when Loki and Sigyn walked into the room, the faces of those assembled - save perhaps for Fury and Hill - changed to a mix of worry, confusion and anger.

“Jane!” Thor said, happily striding to greet her. Loki rolled his eyes and Sigyn elbowed him in the gut.

“Um… who’s that guy?” Banner asked awkwardly, looking at Loki who was now scowling at his wife.

“Oh!” Sigyn said. She waved something around her husband’s face and a bit of a jolt went through the room as Loki’s original face appeared.

“He’s back?” Cap muttered as Bruce let out a sigh.

“That’s what this briefing is about,” Fury said.

“Do we have to do this now?” Tony moaned, hunting around for the bag of peanuts he was sure he had stashed in this room earlier.

“I think what Tony is trying to say,” Pepper said, glaring at him, “is that our guests might want to take some time to freshen up following their… travels…”

“Is she implying we have an odor?” Loki hissed at his wife. Sigyn shot him a warning glance and Loki stepped back from her, almost as if he expected her to stomp down on her foot.

“Loki, Sigyn,” Thor said happily, bringing a nervous-looked Jane Foster toward them. “This is Dr. Foster. Jane, this is my brother and sister-in-law.”

“I’ve seen her before,” Loki said, brushing a piece of lint off of his clothing. Sigyn glared at her husband again before stepping forward to grab Jane’s forearms with her own. Jane was a little surprised at the gesture, but took it in stride. She had been a little nervous about how Thor’s family would treat her.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Sigyn smiled at her comfortingly. “I have heard much of you since Thor’s return to Asgard.”

“What up,” the other mortal woman said, sticking her hand out to Sigyn. “I’m Darcy Lewis. Jane’s intern.”

“Darcy is my lightning sister,” Thor said proudly to Sigyn. “I told you of how she felled me with Mjolnir’s twin.” Loki looked at the diminutive college student with renewed interest. Loki then glanced between his wife and his brother, silently communicating that one of them was going to recount how how the small woman defeated the might Thor later on.

“It is nice to meet you,” Sigyn said. She extended her hand to clasp around Darcy’s forearm but instead found Darcy shaking it. A confused look crossed Sigyn’s face, but she quickly attempted to mask it.

“That voice is more annoying in person,” Loki huffed.

“Well, if it isn’t the grumpy puss who tried to level the Big Apple,” Darcy said sidling up to him. “I thought you’d be taller. Guess that’s why you sent the big guy to New Mexico, huh? Didn’t want anyone to think you were… compensating?”
“Intern,” Loki said sounding out the word. “Is that some kind of servant?”

“More like a slave actually. Until I get my credit and can graduate,” Darcy shrugged.

“Good,” Loki nodded. “Fetch me an apple and a cup of ale.”

“I’m Jane’s personal slave, not yours,” Darcy snorted.

“As entertaining as this, there is a meeting we need to get underway,” Fury demanded.

It took about another three minutes before everyone was assembled around the massive table in the common area. Thor spent some time saying hello to his friends while Jane made Clint and Phil promise to let her interview them about their experience with Bifrost travel. Tony found his peanuts and was sharing them with Happy while Pepper and Maria consulted about something. A final clear of Fury’s throat prompted everyone to at last take their seats.

“I am not a happy man right now,” Fury announced to the group. Tony choked back a laugh. Fury was never a happy man. “Imagine my surprise the other night when I was awoken to a giant bird tapping on my bedroom window with a message in its mouth informing me that Asgard had decided to return the prisoner Loki back to earth after all the trouble we went through sending him home. Thor, I understand your father sees himself as some sort of galactic overlord, but here on earth we typically don’t exile prisoners to other places without informing them first, especially not one with such a dangerous reputation.”

“I can’t be the only person here who thinks this is a bad idea,” Banner spoke up.

“The Allfather’s judgement was final,” Thor insisted.

“We didn’t exactly get a say in that judgment,” Fury pointed out.

“He’s practically harmless,” Sigyn insisted, causing her husband to sputter. “His seiðr has been removed, save for a small bit to maintain his visage and to call upon in case he needs protection.”

“Yeah, but isn’t he also a quasi-immortal demigod with years of combat experience?” Natasha pointed out.

“So is your soldier,” Loki hissed, pointing at Steve.

“Point taken,” Cap agreed. “What’s he supposed to be doing here in this exile, anyway? He like a prisoner of war or something?”

“Loki is to redeem himself,” Thor explained.

“He’s sort of our intern now,” Tony said, throwing a wink at Darcy. “We’re supposed to put him to work fixing what he broke until such a time as he’s proven himself.”

“Sounds familiar,” Darcy and Jane both muttered at the same time.

“I will remain here to supervise my husband,” Sigyn said. “Thor shall be here for a month’s time to ensure that we properly settle in and then he will have to return to Asgard unless he is needed.”

“And apparently my tower got selected as their barracks without my knowledge,” Tony said.

“So we can’t take him to a SHIELD facility?” Natasha frowned.

“The Allfather has provided protections for the tower, no doubt,” Thor insisted. “And as this was the
epicenter of the destruction, I believe this would be the best place for Loki to learn his lesson.”

“Then why weren’t you sent to Jotunheim?” Loki sneered.

“Peace, brother,” Thor shot back.

“So far, no one outside of this room knows about this, and unless you want a major incident, we will have to keep this quiet,” Fury said. “If it was found he is back on earth, there are multiple governments that would seek some kind of trial for war crimes or crimes against humanity. There’s already a debate in Congress over whether or not diplomatic immunity should be extended to leaders not from this planet.” He turned to Sigyn. “Your little mask trick would be helpful with that.”

“Right now, the only people who can see my husband’s true face are those in this room,” Sigyn said.

“So, he stays?” Tony asked.

“As long as he remains on his best behavior,” Fury nodded. “SHIELD can manufacture false paperwork and identities that will not be questioned. I’m not putting a clearance level on this because the only people I want to know about this are in this room right now.”

“Too late. I already texted Rhodey in the car on the way here,” Tony admitted sheepishly.

“I suppose we can give Colonel Rhodes clearance,” Fury said, annoyed.

“What about Dr. Selvig?” Jane piped up. The room was quiet for a moment and even Loki focused on picking at his hands rather than face the glares.

“Our psychological evaluations indicate he is not yet in a position to handle this information,” Fury explained. “It wouldn’t be a good idea to bring this up to him. For now, I think it would be best if we could all stick to telling him the SHIELD cover story.”

“You’re a healer,” Jane said to Sigyn hopefully. “Is there anything you can do?”

“The mind is a treacherous place when it comes to healing,” Sigyn admitted. “A physical wound is no matter, but even if I had access to an Asgardian soul forge, a healing of the mind, of the psyche could be dangerous. There are some things that are even beyond the powers of our most skilled healers, and I would not wish to work on your friend’s mind for fear I would leave it worse than I found it.”

“I understand,” Jane nodded. “So… what is this soul forge? Is it…”

“Back to business,” Fury interrupted, earning a grimace from Thor. Sigyn shot Jane a smile, as if to indicate they could continue the discussion later. “SHIELD already has some projects in mind for you once you’ve proven yourself trustworthy.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna say those projects will never get done,” Clint snorted. Fury ignored him.

“The Allfather said his first project will be helping with the repair of the city,” Thor interjected. “I plan to help as well.”

“Does he know how to clean anything without magic?” Steve asked incredulously.

“He’ll learn,” Thor replied, earning a glare from his brother.

“I think the bigger problem is passing as human,” Natasha pointed out. “Sure, his face may appear normal, but I don’t think waltzing around in Asgardian battle armor will help him blend in.”
“I can set up something with Tony’s personal shopper,” Pepper offered. “Subdued though. I think cleaning up debris in a ten thousand dollar suit would draw some attention. More sweat pants and t-shirts, probably.”

“These Midgardian clothes are quite soft,” Thor nodded. Loki muttered something, sinking down into his hoodie.

“I can try to find something in your favorite colors,” Pepper offered to Loki kindly.

“A lot of green, then?” Tony smirked, causing more than a few snickers.

“Black,” Sigyn replied. “My husband’s favorite color is black.”

“But…” Tony began, feeling as stunned as everyone around the table felt.

“My favorite color is green,” Sigyn replied. “That’s why I always wear it.”

“Why does he wear it then?” Tony asked curiously.

“You have honestly never worn something because a woman said you looked nice in it?” Loki asked him pointedly. Tony shut his mouth promptly, though he was secretly delighted at the way the tops of Loki’s ears had turned red.

“As nice as the fashion advice is,” Fury continued, “I want to lay down some ground rules.” He turned to Loki. “Even without your powers, there is considerable concern that your presence here is more of a threat and a liability than a benefit. Until you can prove us otherwise, you will will abide by these conditions. You are not to leave the living quarters of this tower without a SHIELD approved escort, and - before you ask - your wife is not a SHIELD approved escort. Any trips you take outside of the tower will have to be reported to and logged with SHIELD. Until SHIELD says so, you are not to leave Midtown Manhattan. If at any time SHIELD feels that your presence is unwelcome, you will be detained until you can be returned home. I don’t care if your daddy doesn’t approve.”

“I assume by SHIELD you mean yourself,” Loki huffed. Fury didn’t respond. “Well, it appears I have gotten out from under the thumb of a one-eyed tyrant just to be placed under another’s.”

“Loki,” Sigyn hissed at him. She turned back to Fury. “We accept your offer, Furious One. And I will do my best to ensure my husband behaves appropriately and within your conditions.”

“I hope you can,” Fury nodded. He turned to Pepper. “Ms. Potts, perhaps you, Dr. Foster and Ms. Lewis would like to give these new guests a tour of their new living space.”

“Is he trying to get rid of us?” Darcy gaped.

“Come on, Darce,” Jane said, urging her up. She smiled meekly at Thor as Pepper closed the laptop she had been working on. None of the three women seemed pleased that they were being kicked out of the Avengers Only (plus Happy, Hill and Phil) meeting. Loki seemed even less enthralled that he had been so easily dismissed. Only Sigyn looked actually pleased at the promise of a tower tour. Loki trudged out behind the four women, annoyed that he was being forced out of the chair he had just gotten comfortable in. With the group gone, Fury refocused his attention on Stark.

“Do you have cameras set up to monitor his activity?” he asked.

“Not in private quarters,” Tony said. “JARVIS is already around, but I don’t make it a habit of spying on people in their own rooms.”
“How long do you think it would take to set something like that up?” Fury asked.

“Not more than a day,” Hill said. “

“Are you sure they wouldn’t detect them?” Phil asked.

“I don’t feel comfortable monitoring them in their private rooms,” Tony shook his head. “Even if the guy is a threat, I don’t think anyone should be filmed while they’re on the can. Or their more… intimate marital moments.”

“Sometimes you have to do things that make you uncomfortable for security,” Fury said.

“I don’t care if he is a threat,” Steve said, “infringing on someone’s privacy like that doesn’t seem right. And you’re also infringing on Sigyn’s privacy. What has she done to deserve that?”

“Could your brother disable the cameras?” Clint asked Thor.

“Not personally,” Thor agreed. “Your technology… it would be easy for him to detect. And I am sure he could easily convince Sigyn to use her seiðr to counteract whatever surveillance you could place on them. You could very well see visions of the two of them sitting on their rooms conversing while they are out and about elsewhere. I don’t think it would be a wise decision to monitor them in such a way. If we do not show a little effort to trust them in the beginning, I doubt we will ever earn their trust.”

“I’m more worried about your brother bringing down a building than him trusting me,” Fury pointed out.

“How about a compromise?” Tony asked. “I can have JARVIS monitor them - no cameras - but we can reconsider if something major happens. Let’s not go completely Big Brother on them right away. Besides, you’ve got two assassins, a super soldier, Lighting McQueen, the Green Meanie and yours truly living here for the next couple of weeks while the clean up goes on. Between that, JARVIS and the building security team, I think we can manage a demigod known for his temper tantrums. Right, Happy?” Happy looked back at his former boss, filled with chagrin.

“I don’t like it, but I’ll agree to it,” Fury admitted.

“I suppose we just have to hope the guy’s more afraid of his wife than he is of anything else,” Steve offered.

“Trust me,” Thor smirked. “He is.”

If Odin had sought to torture him, forcing him on a tour of Stark’s adobe with a gaggle of giggling women was a good way to start. Ignored completely by his brother’s paramour, her slave, the Man of Iron’s paramour, and his own wife, Loki found himself schlepping behind the four women as Pepper showed off all of the features of the tower, beginning with the rooms adjacent to the common area where the group had met. There was a game room and a small library Loki scoffed at. Pepper explained the communal kitchen was on the other side of the common area and would have to wait until Fury permitted their return.

Next, they took the elevator to the private laboratory she quickly informed Loki he did not yet have the clearance to enter on his own. Despite this, they spent an inordinate amount of time on the three laboratory floors as Dr. Foster had myriad questions about the facility. There was a possibility she was going to be stationed at this tower as well to learn more about Asgardian technology from the
visitors. Loki did not relish the idea of having to share the tower with Thor and this woman, making goo-goo eyes at each other over astrological formations and Bifrost travel. To be fair, Loki did find it quite comical that his brother had fallen for a woman considered an intellectual. Thor had never really been the type to seek out a woman who spent more time in the library than cheering at tournaments.

At least the doctor’s spunky brown servant girl seemed a good friend for Sigyn. Loki knew his wife would miss the companionship of her sisters while on Midgard, and there didn’t seem many women around suitable to provide the sisterly bonds Sigyn held so dear. While Sigyn’s friendship with Lady Sif proved she got along well enough with warrior women, Loki found Midgard’s Black Widow and the woman called Hill were too much like Var. And, while Sigyn loved all her sisters, Var was not easy for anyone to get along with, especially not for long periods of time. Pepper seemed nice - though a bit overbearing like Idunn and often Nanna could be. Thor’s lover, despite her intelligence, seemed a bit flighty and absent-minded, reminding Loki of a hummingbird. Sigyn would probably have to provide more care for such a woman than she would receive in return. However, the one called Darcy had the same cheerful disposition of those sisters closer to Sigyn in age. While he personally found the young woman annoying, he felt he owed his wife at least a few small sacrifices all things considered.

They progressed to the training floor with gymnasium that also had a few steam rooms, but nothing like the bathing pools or saunas of Asgard. The floor also had a massive indoor swimming pool with a retractable roof and walls, allowing it to become an outdoor pool with a push of a button. Loki had a feeling he would not be allowed in these chambers unescorted, especially in the rooms where the weapons were stored. However, Loki did like the idea of the swimming pool and hoped that perhaps he and Sigyn might be given some privacy in it. The times they had been able to sneak off to the rivers and lakes in Asgard or the seas surrounding Vanaheim had always proven pleasurable.

They returned back into the elevator and started to head upwards instead of down. The first floor above the laboratories belonged to Dr. Banner and, because of his occasional metamorphosis into a creature capable of tearing cars apart with his bare hands, Pepper had convinced Tony to put an empty floor between the good doctor and the other tower inhabitants. The elevator doors opened three floors above the laboratories, which was where Pepper informed Darcy and Jane they would be rooming. Tony felt that those who would be working in the laboratories alongside him would most likely want to be close in case any scientific inspiration struck at odd hours, as it often did.

Loki had wanted to stay in the elevator while Pepper gave Jane and Darcy the tour, but Sigyn had dragged him out, eager to see the architectural layout of her new home. The two women would be sharing a communal living area and kitchenette though they had separate bedrooms and bathrooms. A small office had also been built for Jane just in case heading three floors down to the labs was too far to go in the name of science. The two women were allowed to explore their rooms. Jane immediately began investigating the equipment Tony had stocked in her office space while Darcy began jumping up and down on her new bed to “test it out.” While furniture had been provided and the rooms had been sparsely decorated to the women’s taste, Pepper informed them that they would be allowed to acquire other decor and could use the Stark company card if necessary.

Crowded back into the elevator, Pepper explained the floor above Jane and Darcy’s belonged to the two spy assassin’s while the Captain had been granted his own floor above that. Loki was a little surprised that the two spies were sharing a floor, especially since they seemed rather prickly and desirous of personal space, while the soldier, who the Man of Iron had indicated once worked as some kind of traveling minstrel, was given an entire floor. It seemed to Loki that the hawk man and the spider woman should probably be afforded more space, but then again, for all he knew the misplaced soldier had been a famous minstrel during his day. Bragi’s fame certainly garnered him and his family favoritism wherever they went. The elevator again opened on the floor above the
captain’s but directly below the common floor.

“The two of you will be sharing this floor with Thor… when he’s around,” Pepper informed Sigyn and Loki. “It has doubly reinforced walls…for Mjolnir’s sake, of course.” Loki snorted.

Like she had with Darcy and Jane, Pepper handed the pair key cards and walked with them out into the hallway. She briefly pointed out Thor’s room before demonstrating to Sigyn how to open the door. Sigyn caught on quickly enough. She took her husband’s hand and practically pulled him into their new quarters. Loki tuned Pepper out as she started giving them the official tour, preferring to take in the rooms on his own. They had a rather massive living area with one of those talking boxes that had been present at the tavern. The kitchen was smaller and there was a small dining area off to the side of it. Everything was rather sparsely decorated, though the kitchen had several of the Midgardian appliances used for cooking.

There was a door off to one side of the living area that Pepper opened, revealing a rather empty room she claimed could be used as an office or library. Loki scoffed, knowing the room wouldn’t even house half the library they had brought from Asgard. Adjustments would have to be made. Another door revealed the bedroom, which was again decorated only a little. It had a door leading into a bathroom area. Loki was at least pleased that the tub in the bathroom was most likely big enough for both Sigyn and himself to sit in together. There was also something Pepper called a shower. When Sigyn crinkled her face at this piece of equipment in confusion, Pepper turned it on. Suddenly, Sigyn’s entire face lit up and she turned to her husband.

“Look! They have an indoor waterfall!” Sigyn said happily.

“It’s for bathing,” Pepper tried to explain.

“What are we? Animals? Goat herders?” Loki huffed. “I can see bathing in a waterfall when one is in the woods and has no choice…”


“No wonder there is such a stench of bodily odor on this planet,” Loki huffed. “Apparently no one takes time to thoroughly wash themselves.” Sigyn rolled her eyes at her husband and then shot Pepper a look as if to say she knew her husband was helplessly rude.

“Well, in that case, I’m sure you’ll want to take a bath soon,” Pepper replied. Loki nearly choked and Sigyn hid her laughter by acting as though she was hiding a yawn.

“Thank you, Lady Pepper,” Sigyn said. “Your hospitality is greatly appreciated. I am sure it was not easily to prepare such comfortable accommodations on such a short notice. It is no wonder Sir Stark desires you as a helpmate.”

“You’re welcome,” Pepper said, still trying to work out the strange compliment.

“How’s the grand tour coming?” Tony Stark’s voice echoed from the common room. The three emerged to find him standing in the living area with Steve holding Loki and Sigyn’s trunk on his shoulder like it was a sack of potatoes. Steve placed the trunk down gently.

“That thing’s surprisingly light,” Steve commented to Loki and Sigyn. “Tony said you packed quite a bit in it though…”

“Dwarven craftsmanship, elven seiðr,” Sigyn smiled. “It’s very useful for traveling between realms, particularly on long stays when one desires the creature comforts of home.”
“Any chance you’ll let me take it down to the labs and try to figure out how it works?” Tony asked hopefully.

“What part of seiðr does he not understand,” Loki grumbled. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Where have the Lady Jane and the Lady Darcy gone to?” Sigyn asked worriedly.

“They’re across the hall with Thor, helping show off his new digs,” Tony explained. “Jane’s probably going to give him a private tour later on, if you know what I mean.”

“Dr. Foster is technically your employee now,” Pepper pointed out. “Am I going to have to make you sit through another sexual harassment class?”

“Depends,” Tony said, wiggling his eyebrows, “can you and I practice the ‘what not to do’ demonstrations later on?” Pepper let out an exasperated sigh and then noticed the sympathetic look she was receiving from Sigyn. From what Tony had indicated, Pepper had a feeling she and Sigyn would probably get along pretty well. If nothing else, they could bond over their infuriating significant others.

“Brother!” Thor boomed as he entered the room, carrying a box of Pop Tarts, “Sir Stark has stocked my room with Midgard’s finest pastries!”

“Yes, of course, immediately start spewing crumbs all over my room,” Loki huffed. “It’s not as though not talking with one’s mouth full is a lesson one should learn in childhood.”

“Taste this,” Thor said, jutting a Pop Tart into his brother’s face as Jane and Darcy wandered back into the room. “It is a most pleasing pastry filled with jams!”

“I will thank you to keep your Midgardian confections to yourself,” Loki hissed, pushing Thor’s hand away from himself, “and not force me to tidy up all of the food particles you leave in your wake! Chew like a bilgesnipe in your own quarters!”

“I feel like I’m getting a flashback to someone’s Asgardian childhood,” Darcy stage whispered, bemused.

“Thank you for bringing down our trunk,” Sigyn said to Steve, ignoring what was essentially the same argument Thor and Loki had been having for more than a millenia.

“It wasn’t a problem, ma’am,” Steve replied.

“The kindness is still appreciated,” Sigyn replied. “I suppose I should unpack.” Sigyn moved to open the trunk when Tony stopped her.

“Wait a second,” Tony began. “Clint saw this on Asgard, but I really think everyone here would appreciate getting a chance to witness Asgardian unpacking. Foster, you’re going to love this. Hey, JARVIS, where’s Banner? He’s got to see this!”

“Dr. Banner is making tea in his rooms,” JARVIS said.

In a flash, Loki had moved from trying to avoid Thor’s attempts to cram a Pop Tart into his mouth and darted across the room. In one fluid movement, Loki flung himself over Sigyn and pushed her to the ground, covering her entire body with his own as he attempted to conceal them behind the trunk. His head lifted up, he began looking around for the source of the disembodied voice, trying his best to summon what little seiðr Odin had left him with in order to protect his wife. In Loki’s experience, disembodied voices were never good things.
“Loki,” Sigyn muttered trying to get out from underneath the cage her husband’s body had formed around her. The rest of the room seemed taken off guard, but Tony seemed to gather what was happening.

“JARVIS, tell Bruce to get up here now,” Tony said before turning back to Loki, still covering Sigyn.

“Where is that demon coming from?” Loki hissed furiously, a few sparks gathering at his fingertips.

“That’s JARVIS,” Tony tried to explain calmly. “He’s the artificial intelligence I created.”

“The what?” Sigyn asked, her voice muffled by her husband’s body.

“He must be vanquished!” Loki said.

“I’m not sure Prince Loki understands the concept of artificial intelligence,” JARVIS informed Tony. A spark shot out of Loki’s hand at the direction the voice came from, but quickly petered out. Loki was furious, and Tony gulped down a performance issue joke. At least now they knew how well Odin’s magical binding worked.

“He’s basically the tower,” Tony shrugged in an attempt to explain. “JARVIS doesn’t have a body or a corporeal form, but he can communicate. I named him after, uh, the family’s butler who I grew up with.”

“Your building is alive?” Loki said, trying to hide the fact he was somewhat impressed.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I know the whole disembodied voice thing can be a little nerve wracking at first, but he can be helpful.”

“Will you get off me?” Sigyn demanded.

“Not until I am sure there is no threat,” Loki hissed back at her. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Look, he just does stuff like control the temperature or play music or let you know when someone wants to see you,” Tony said.

“Ah, so he isn’t a disembodied spy you have tracking our every move to report back to your one-eyed overlord?” Loki spat.

“If it would make you more comfortable,” Tony said, “I could ask JARVIS to basically ignore you in your quarters, but he’s throughout the tower and I think he might make living here a little more easy for you. Think of him as like a ghost butler.”

“If you do not get off me this instant I will have to resort to exploiting your ticklish spot,” Sigyn informed her husband. Somewhat relieved and not wanting to be further embarrassed by his wife in front of such a crowd, Loki pulled himself off of Sigyn and let her dust herself off. “That was completely unnecessary.”

“I’m sorry I attempted to protect you from an unnamed, unseeable threat,” Loki huffed back.

“What did I miss?” Bruce asked, walking into the room.

“Let’s just say Loki here has concerns about artificial intelligence,” Tony said.

“So he’s read every sci-fi novel and seen every artificial intelligence movie ever made,” Bruce pointed out. Tony opened his mouth to defend himself, but was interrupted by Steve.
“You have to admit it’s a little creepy,” Steve interjected. “I mean, I was in the shower this morning and then this disembodied voice informed me breakfast was ready... Not exactly the best way to get a war vet’s attention.”

“I’ll put a bell on him, happy?” Tony rolled his eyes.

“Please do not do that, sir,” JARVIS sighed, making Loki look around the room with a paranoid expression on his face.

“What are we gathered here for?” Banner asked.

“To watch Sigyn unpack,” Tony grinned. He was immediately faced by several raised eyebrows. Only Thor - happily munching on his Pop Tarts - and Jane - seemingly intrigued in the trunk - seemed unphased by this. Tony turned to the small woman. “Alright. Let ‘er rip.”

“I assume he means to open the trunk,” Loki said to his wife. Sigyn rolled her eyes at him and began unlocking the trunk. She popped up the lid and Steve, being the closest, leaned over to look inside. His eyes widened and he stumbled back a little bit.

“It’s a bottomless pit in there!” he said, surprised. Banner and Jane wandered over to confirm this, both of them muttering. Jane motioned for Darcy to give her a pen and paper.

“You might want to take a step back,” Sigyn informed them. She turned to Pepper. “I don’t want to offend, but we did bring quite a bit of our own furniture.”

“The room is yours,” Pepper insisted. “Decorate how you like.”

Sigyn smiled and with a wave of her hand, the reverse “Higitus Figitus” began. Tiny bits of furniture began coming out of the trunk, getting larger as the exited and then situating themselves in various places around the room. Some went into the bedroom while others headed into the study. Rugs unfurled themselves before chairs and sofas were sat atop them. A few tapestries and artworks hung themselves on the walls. Smaller decor and accessories soon began flying out along with a variety of clothing, books, and knickknacks, each piece settling itself right where Sigyn wanted it. Jane and Banner were just as enthralled as Tony by this all.

Darcy seemed rather enchanted, like she was in a Disney movie. Pepper seemed mildly alarmed and Steve had a look on his face like this was way too much weirdness for one day. As the chairs and strange chaise longue type sofas appeared, Loki and Thor both took a seat, as if this were a common occurrence. Loki begrudgingly noticed that Sigyn had not removed the talking box from the walls of their living area. Tony noticed that not all of the items he had seen Sigyn put into the trunk had come out as she closed the lid. She then waved her hands and suddenly the walls changed from the neutral slate gray to a green and gold damask pattern, darkening the appearance of the hardwood floors slightly.

“We will have to make extra room in the library,” Loki informed his wife, propping his feet up on the Asgardian version of a coffee table before himself.

“You mean I will,” Sigyn snorted.

As Banner and Jane bent forward to inspect the trunk, Sigyn walked over to the door to the second bedroom the couple would be using as a library/study. She closed it and then ran her hands over the door frame, strange runes appearing in the wood in her wake. The runes then disappeared and when the door reopened, the library was completely put together. Tony noticed it was also about three times the size of the original room and had a roaring fireplace inside, something Tony was pretty sure
was physically impossible.

“Did you… did you just make that room bigger?” Tony gaped.

“Only on the inside,” she shook her head. “It will not affect any other rooms in the tower.”

“How… how did you do this?” Jane exclaimed, crowding both Tony and Sigyn out of the doorway before heading into the room. “Did you open up a wormhole to another dimension or…”

“Seiðr,” Sigyn shrugged.

“No, uh-un,” Tony shook his head. “There has to be a scientific explanation for this.”

“Could I… could I bring some of my instruments up here and study this room?” Jane begged Sigyn. “Just for my research…”

“Really, Thor? You managed to find someone with as little regard for privacy as yourself,” Loki huffed. “She realizes we have been here only a few hours and haven’t settled in yet. Will she burst in at two in the morning without knocking to demand our attention as well?” Jane seemed a little embarrassed, blushing from ear to ear.

“Hey, Jane has a name and ears,” Darcy said defensively.

“Apologize brother!” Thor roared at Loki, who merely rolled his eyes.

“I’d be willing to let you settle in first, of course,” Jane began, nervously.

“It is no matter,” Sigyn waved her hand. “Let me know when would be convenient. I daresay my husband forgets how unaccommodating to others he can be when he is working on a new spell or potion. He of all people should understand devotion to one’s research.” Jane smiled slightly, feeling somewhat comforted.

“This is maddening,” Loki huffed, getting up from the sofa where he was lounging, picking up the trunk and then marching with it into the bedroom, kicking the door closed behind him with a heavy slam.

“Is he… alright?” Banner asked worriedly, stealthily checking out the new room himself.

“Just needs some time to brood,” Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“Perhaps some time tomorrow I could come up here and take readings of the room.. and your trunk maybe?” Jane asked hopefully. “I would also like to talk to you a little bit about seiðr and some other things.”

“I would be delighted,” Sigyn said. “Perhaps you and the Lady Darcy could return the favor and help me in my adjustments to Midgard?”

“Pop culture expert right here!” Darcy beamed. “I will most certainly catch you up. Cap, Thor, you guys are welcome to sit in on the lessons.”

“Thanks for the offer, but we’ve got clean-up duty,” Steve pointed out.

“Which hasn’t started yet,” Darcy pouted. Steve smiled shyly and shrugged.

“You are most kind,” Sigyn said to Darcy. “Perhaps there is something from my homeworld I will be able to teach you in exchange.”
“Well, magic would be cool, but I guess that’s something you’re born with, huh?” Darcy sighed.

“Typically, yes,” Sigyn smiled.

“Well, I suppose we should allow our guests to get settled in,” Pepper said, starting to push Tony out the door. The rest of the group seemed willing to follow, but Tony didn’t exactly want to abandon the magic trunk or magically growing room. “Dinner will be around seven if you would like to join us. Otherwise, I can have something sent up. You can just tell JARVIS if you decide to stay in.”

“Thank you,” Sigyn nodded to Pepper. As the door closed behind the retreating group, Sigyn let out a sigh. Now, she just had to deal with her husband.

______________________________________________________________

Sigyn found her husband the same way she usually found him when he retreated to their rooms to brood. Perhaps in some kind of protest he had changed back to his Asgardian clothing, though he was wearing his typical lounge around wear rather than the princely garb he had worn for their departure. Stretched across the bed, his bare feet peeking out from beneath a blanket, he was looking upward at the ceiling, one hand tucked behind his head and the other tossing up and then catching a mechanized silver ball used typically used by children in their early stages of combat training on Asgard. Sigyn leaned against the doorframe, watching her husband’s sour expression as his absently threw and then caught the ball. With a sigh, she walked forward and grabbed the bauble mid-air before he could catch it again, causing Loki to look up at her.

“For once, spare me your lectures,” Loki sighed.

“Lady Pepper invited us to sup with the rest of the tower’s guests,” Sigyn said, “but she said if we were not up to dining with the rest that she would have a meal delivered to us.”

“And I suppose you want us to join them?” Loki huffed. “I am beginning to think a prison sentence would have been preferable to this farce.”

“I was going to ask you what you would prefer to do,” Sigyn replied, “but since you are in such a foul mood, I suppose it would be best if I joined our hosts for the evening meal and allowed you to stay here and sup alone. It is obvious that you want some time to yourself to brood and wallow in your own misery. Norns forbid I should interrupt such activity.”

“I know what you are trying to do, wife, and I will not fall for your tricks,” Loki insisted. “If you intend to allow me to wallow, best leave me so I can get on with it.” Sigyn tossed the ball back to him and turned to head out of the door. She paused briefly and then turned to face her husband, who had resumed his game of catch.

“For what it is worth,” Sigyn said, “thank you for attempting to protect me, even if it was a false alarm. I hope that one day you will share with me the entirety of what happened after you left Asgard. You never like for me to bear my burdens alone, and I do not want you to do so either. Perhaps it doesn’t seem so, but I really do believe this banishment is what is best for you… for both of us. Everything I have done for you, I have done out of love. I hope you believe that.”

Sigyn exited the room, closing the door quietly behind her. She could only hope her husband’s foul mood did not last for their entire duration of their stay on Midgard.
Chapter Summary

*Or, in which Natasha bets on a dark horse and Loki makes peace with a computer in exchange for snacks.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#).

No one seemed surprised when Sigyn arrived in the common dining area for supper all by herself. By the time Sigyn made her way up, Thor, Darcy, Jane and Steve were already gathered around the table. Pepper was directing the delivery guys who had brought up the four dozen or so pizza’s Tony had ordered, anticipating the big appetites of a super soldier plus three Asgardians. Not to mention Clint would could easily polish off a whole pie himself even when he claimed to not be hungry. Instead of helping Pepper, Tony was in the corner with Happy, getting the run-down on how things had been going during his brief absence. When the elevator doors opened and revealed Sigyn, the assembled group looked up instinctively. A rosy blush covered Sigyn’s face and it seemed she had left her self-confidence behind in her quarters.

Thor rose up from his seat and went to escort his sister-in-law to the table. Sigyn’s early childhood in the dwarven realms had made her rather confident and self-possessed around warriors. However, being coddled by her older sisters Idunn and Nanna as well as being constantly talked over and used as a dress-up doll by her younger sisters often rendered Sigyn shy in the company of other women. She was not very good at making female friends and tended to drift toward women like Sif, who were more confident on the battlefield than at home keeping the hearth. Sigyn had seemed rather relaxed around the Black Widow, but as she yet did not know the make up of Jane, Darcy or Pepper, she was rather shy to be around them without the comfort of her husband’s presence.

“Come Sigyn,” Thor said to his sister-in-law kindly, “Jane and Lady Darcy were just regaling us with tales of their adventures in Tromsø. It is where the kingdom of Hålogaland once stood. I believe your grandfather was quite fond of King Olthere?”

“He has always been fond of all of those called to the sea,” Sigyn nodded demurely as Thor guided her to a seat beside himself. Jane was on his other side while Darcy and the Captain were sitting across from them.

“You ever been to Norway?” Darcy asked Sigyn as she sat down.

“No,” Sigyn shook her head, “though my mother visited those lands frequently as a young woman along with her father.”

“What was it like back then?” Jane asked curiously.

“To tell the truth, my mother never spoke of it much,” Sigyn said. “She has never been particularly fond of Midgard or its inhabitants. However, my grandfather often regaled us with stories of the seafaring adventures of his Midgardian comrades while teaching us how to make various sailing
knots. He was not sure how best to entertain his plethora of granddaughters, but he tried his best.”

“Hey, Cap, maybe you can challenge Sigyn here to a knot tying competition,” Tony called out.

“I was in the Army,” Steve rolled his eyes. “The Navy teaches you to tie knots.”

“I was referring to the fact that you’re a total Boy Scout,” Tony quipped back.

“So, like, I saw your battle armor on TV,” Darcy addressed Sigyn. “It was totally badass. Where did you get it?”

“My father made it for me,” Sigyn shrugged.

“Really?” Tony said, intrigued. He began coming over to the table. “I heard he was some kind of blacksmith…”

“A jewelry smith,” Sigyn shook her head, “but all dwarves learn the basics of smithing before they reach maturity. All are educated in the construction of armor and weaponry as during times of conflict everyone is needed to produce them.”

“I could set up a forge if it would make you feel more at home,” Tony said. “It’s been a while since I’ve used one myself…”

“I am not educated very well in the dwarven arts,” Sigyn admitted. “I was very young when we were removed from my father’s home. Of my sisters, Var is the only one who has ever shown an interest or talent in that side of our heritage.”

“I am not sure Asgardian forges are similar to the ones you have on Midgard,” Thor agreed. “And the dwarven fire used to power them… it is a thing of magic, not the mere flame used here.”

“Are you saying I am incapable of designing a forge that stands up to yours?” Tony huffed. “Pep, cancel dinner. I am taking everyone to California to look at the industrial forge there.”

“No, Tony,” Pepper shook her head as she shut the door on the exiting pizza boys. “It’s time to eat anyway.”

“Barton said to send his down to him,” Natasha said, seeming to have appeared silently out of the shadows. “I think he’s a little tired from interdimensional travel.”

“My husband is not here,” Sigyn offered. “You may tell Sir Barton that if it would make him feel more comfortable eating with the rest of us.” Natasha offered a rare comforting smile at the diminutive woman. She liked that Sigyn didn’t pull many punches.

“I promise, he’s just tired,” Natasha smirked. “If he were cowering, I would have pulled him up here by his hair.”

“Alright! Taking all bets!” Tony proclaimed as he took his seat at the head of the table. “Who’s going to eat more pizza this round? Cap or Thor? Taking all bets!”

“No offense Mr. Captain America Sir,” Darcy said, “but I hardly think that’s a fair fight.”

“Thor did fill up at Buffalo Wild Wings earlier,” Tony pointed out. “Did the cartoon thing where he stuck a chicken wing into his mouth and it came out sparkling clean bone.”

“I don’t know,” Darcy bit her lip thoughtfully. “Mr. Lighting Rod can pack in the pounds.”
“So you want money on your guy?” Tony suggested.

“Pretty sure my student loan officer wouldn’t want me betting what little money I have,” Darcy said.

“I’ll put in a twenty for you,” Tony shrugged. “Foster? Want some money on your man?”

“What are we betting on?” Bruce Banner called, arriving at the table.

“Whether Thor or Cap can shove more pizza in their mouth hole,” Tony said.

“You’re always so eloquent,” Pepper groaned.

“Cap, Thor want to put anything down?” Tony asked.

“Doesn’t betting on the outcome of your own fight defeat the purpose?” Steve asked curiously.

“I shall put coins down on my friend Steven,” Thor said, sliding a huge hunk of Asgardian gold toward Tony. “That way, no matter the outcome, I shall win.”

“Good idea,” Steve agreed, sliding a ten toward Tony. “Put this on Thor.”

“You guys are lame,” Tony groaned, collecting the money. “Pep? What does your business sense tell you?”

“That gambling is a waste of money?” Pepper replied. Natasha stood up, handed Tony some money, whispered something in his ear and then resumed her seat. Tony’s eyebrows shot up at whatever she had to say, and he smirked as she retook her seat.

“Well, I’ll put my money on Cap since I don’t want to be accused of not being patriotic,” Tony said. “Any other takers? Going once, going twice…”

“Let’s just eat,” Pepper groaned, handing out paper plates to the assembled group.

It took Sigyn a little time to get used to the assembly-line style of grabbing food and drink that took place in the communal kitchen. Even during the rowdiest of the dwarven feasts she had attended, the food was still brought out to the table to be dished out not the other way around. Still, she seemed to delight in the cherry-flavored soda provided and downed an entire two liter of it herself much to the secret amusement of several of those gathered around the table. Sigyn quietly nibbled at her various slices of cheese and vegetable pizza, listening to Tony razz Thor about how he could think pineapple and ham was a good combination. He then badgered Pepper about why she had ordered such an abominable topping combination in the first place, only to go back to harping on Thor when Darcy informed him pineapple and ham was Thor’s favorite.

It was Steve who noticed how delicately and slowly Sigyn was picking apart her pizza rather than cramming the entire slice in her mouth like everyone else was. Tony had regaled the group earlier with a story about how Loki had eaten a basket of chicken tenders and fries with a knife and fork, dipping this food into various sauces with the fork so as not to get his fingers dirty. While Thor had no problem eating things with his hands, but seemed much more concerned about dirtying herself and was therefore eating rather slowly. Without saying anything to anyone, Steve stealthily got up, fetched a knife and fork and brought them to her. Sigyn smiled at him widely and Steve felt the stretch from his cheeks to the tops of his ears. It was too bad a pretty dame like that was already married to a guy like Loki. Of course, the nice ones always did seem to be wrapped up with jerks.

With knife and fork now in hand, Sigyn ate much more quickly than she had been and easily polished off a few more slices while the others continued to talk. Jane and Darcy attempted to ask her
questions to get Sigyn in on the conservation, but her nerves led to minimal contributions. Natasha recognized Sigyn’s floundering, sometimes having the same issues herself. The Black Widow program trained its initiates to kill every one of their fellow students in order attain the final rank, and so Natasha had never really been encouraged to learn about “girl talk.” Natasha slyly suggested someone explain some modern scientific terminology to Steve so he could keep up, only for Stark, Banner, and Foster to inundate the poor super soldier with their best attempts at dumbing down astrophysics, nuclear physics, quantum theory and advanced robotics.

“Thank you,” Sigyn whispered to Natasha quietly.

“I’m not a big talker either,” Natasha admitted. Sigyn nodded and continued eating her pizza. The meal finished, Thor resisted the urge to smash his cup instead returning to the table. Tony sat back and began counting.


“Verily,” Thor nodded. “Though I believe the garlic bread does not count?”

“No,” Tony shook his head. “Come on cap. Eight? Seriously? You couldn’t fit another one in?”

“Eight is a good round number,” Steve shrugged, patting his stomach.

“I hate losing,” Tony groaned, beginning to divide the money up between Steve and Darcy.

“Not so fast,” Natasha smirked.

“You don’t really expect me to believe your dark horse pulled away at the last minute, do you?” Tony snorted.

“Who?” Bruce said, confused.

“How many did you eat?” Natasha asked Sigyn, who blushed.

“Ten, but they were mostly just the cheese…” Sigyn said.

“Had I known Sigyn was in the running I would have laid my coin purse on her!” Thor huffed. “No offense, friend Steven, but dwarven appetites are notorious.”

“It is also polite not to comment on them,” Sigyn huffed.

“I can’t believe this,” Tony groaned at Natasha. “You threw a ringer into my bet!”

“Hand it over, Tin Can,” Natasha ordered. Tony slid the money forward. Natasha divided it up, keeping the American currency and one of the Asgardian coins for herself then handing the rest to Sigyn. “I think it’ll be of more use to you.”

“Please do not tell my brother I wagered against you, even unknowingly,” Thor begged Sigyn. “You know how odious he can be about such things. And he might tell your sisters and then…” Thor shuddered at the thought of what the Ivaldiadottirs might do to him in retribution for siding against their sister in anything.

“Yes, they are rather sensitive,” Sigyn agreed.

“Hey, Nat, give me a chance to go double or nothing,” Tony suggested. “How about a belching contest?”
“No, Tony,” Pepper ordered. “And for that, you have to help the bots clean up.”

“But Dum-E always wants to wash plates with the fire extinguisher!” Tony groaned.

“You build him, you fix him,” Pepper shrugged, getting up from the table. “Well, I bid you all a goodnight.”

“There’s still some pizza left,” Steve said to Sigyn.

“I can pack you a doggie bag for the hubs,” Tony nodded.

“I’m not sure he would welcome the offer,” Sigyn said, biting her lip.

“Eh, if he doesn’t I’m sure someone will be along to polish it off soon enough,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Darcy agreed. “Those of us who don’t require ten thousand calories a day to function sometimes go on science benders that lead to the overconsumption of weird foods at odd hours of the day.”

“Hey, that entire jar of gummy worms was a one-time thing,” Jane huffed.

“Helping clean up your rainbow puke afterwards better be a one-time thing,” Darcy snorted.

“The sour rainbow worms are delicious,” Thor nodded.

“I once ate my weight in Little Debbie Zebra Cakes while trying to create a car engine that would break the world land speed record only to realize seventy-two hours later it was too large to fit back into my Bugatti,” Tony nodded.

“I thought my Cheetos binge in grad school was bad,” Banner smirked softly.

“Here it is,” Tony said, handing off the box of pizza he had packed up to Sigyn.

“Thank you,” Sigyn said. “I shall alert the rest of you if it is not consumed within a proper time frame.”

Thor stood from the table and offered to escort Sigyn back to her rooms, but she waved her brother-in-law off. She knew that he would prefer to be in the company of his friends, and Sigyn doubted very much Loki was up for his brother’s company, even if Thor was merely wishing him a good night. The cooling meal in her hands, Sigyn took a deep breath as the elevator doors closed around her and took her back to the floor she was sharing with her husband. Hopefully, his mood had improved.

It was a matter of seconds after Sigyn had left to join the others for the evening meal that Loki deigned to emerge from the bedroom. A part of him wanted to rip apart every piece of furniture in his new quarters piece by piece. The act would be much easier and more satisfying had he the aid of his seiðr, but without it and still a bit physically weak from his year of torture, Loki decided against such destruction. After all, Sigyn had done a rather nice job of replicating their quarters back in Asgard, and he wouldn’t want to ruin her good work.

Despite all that had passed since his return, their relationship was still somewhat tenuous at best. While Sigyn would never admit to it, she frequently looked at him as if she expected him to disappear again before her eyes or waste away into sickly nothingness. Once, in a fit of passion, Loki
had promised his bride that not even Death could stop him from coming to her if she were ever in need. Despite his reputation for tricks and travels, Sigyn seemed for the first time to genuinely doubt she could count on him to remain by her side. He could see that she feared they would again be separated, either through his own machinations or some unseen force. Loki had never doubted his wife’s love for him, but it was a bit heart-rending to see her fear of losing him so clearly manifested. Well, for him at least. Most couldn’t see through Sigyn’s veneer, but his wife’s emotions were so easily given away through her eyes and the subtle ways she played with her hands.

Loki spent a few minutes picking up various knickknacks around the room and then putting them back down where he had found them, walking about and investigating the furniture to make sure nothing had been damaged during transit. He flopped onto a chaise and then continued to flip himself around on it, unable to get comfortable. After several minutes of attempting to rearrange pillows with no positive results, Loki heard his stomach growl. With a sigh, he decided to head into kitchenette - relatively untouched by Sigyn’s magic - to see if he could scrounge up something a bit heartier than bread and water.

He began rifling through the various drawers in the cabinets, only coming across pots and pans. There was nothing in what he figured out was some kind of oven. Loki decided against opening the large buzzing appliance that seemed cold to the touch. Loki briefly contemplated the bowl of fruit sitting on the dining table before the disembodied voice haunting the tower drew his attention, sending him under said table in an unwitting attempt at self-defense.

“If I may suggest the cabinet above the stove, Your Highness,” the voice said. “I believe there are some foodstuffs there that do not require preparation.”

“Foul spirit, begone!” Loki hissed, emerging from the table.

“My name is JARVIS, sir,” JARVIS said rather wearily. “And I am only trying to help.”

“I do not recall seeking your help,” Loki retorted.

“No, but it appeared as though you needed it,” JARVIS said, adding “Your Highness,” as an afterthought.

“I recognize your voice,” Loki said, still looking for some physical source of it. “You spoke with Sigyn when she treated my injuries.”

“Your wife is very resourceful,” JARVIS commented. “And her affection for you obviously runs rather deep.”

“I should hope so,” Loki snorted, making his way to the cabinet JARVIS had pointed out, “we’ve only been married two hundred and seventeen years.”

“I see, sir,” JARVIS said. “If you have further need of me, feel free to ask.”

“And what exactly can you do for me?” Loki snorted, pulling out a bag of pretzels and then the box of raisins behind them. There were also several tin cans of various fish and a Volstagg-sized bag of dried fruit in the cabinet. Loki was beginning to believe that the only foods provided for them were ones Stark thought Sigyn would enjoy. Only when he came across strips of pemmican did he find something he felt was worthy of his snacking.

“Sir has programed me to be a personal assistant with a wide variety of capabilities,” JARVIS explained.

“You are a servant,” Loki nodded.
“A butler, Sir once said,” JARVIS agreed. “Or at least I believe that is who I was originally based on. Sir once referred to me as his own personal Ask Jeeves come to life… though I am sure you do not understand that reference…”

“You still have not displayed to me any evidence of your worth,” Loki snorted. “So far, all I have experienced is a disembodied voice that pops up at the most inopportune of moments.”

“I do tend to take after my programmer,” JARVIS replied dryly. “I believe I can assist you in your transition to Earth. I can provide information you wish to know about the world around you.”

“I doubt very much there is anything worth knowing about this realm,” Loki snorted. “Unless you would happen to know of a way for me to escape this tower undetected.”

“I am afraid aiding you in such an endeavor is against my programming,” JARVIS replied.

“Of course,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I also provide services such as keeping the rooms conditions optimal for your stay… everything from temperature to bath water to monitoring appliances, locating misplaced items, and the like,” JARVIS said.

“I was reading Ingegard Kljedsdottir’s third volume of Metrics of Elementalism,” Loki said. “You wouldn’t be able to locate it, would you?”

“I am still scanning the works of your personal library, Your Highness,” JARVIS explained. “As the room your wife constructed was not originally part of my makeup, it is taking me a bit of time to infiltrate it.”

“And here I had hoped there would be at least one room where we would have reprieve from Stark’s prying eyes,” Loki snorted.

“I do have privacy settings,” JARVIS tried to explain. “And Sir has made it abundantly clear to me that I am not to interfere or observe any private marital moments between yourself and Princess Sigyn.”

Loki was a bit annoyed that the disembodied spirit dare bring up his private personal matters, but he was heartened by the fact the A.I. had the decency to refer to Sigyn by her proper title. There were those in Asgard who still referred to her as Lady Sigyn, a sign that they would never accept someone with dwarven blood as a princess of the realm. The spirit was obviously loyal to Stark, but Loki also knew his own powers of persuasion were legendary and not part of the magic Odin had stolen from him. If he played his cards right, perhaps this ghostly servant could be of use to him. Arranging himself a plate of dried fruits, pemmican strips and something labelled “pretzel sticks,” Loki debated whether or not to trust the being.

“Might there be any cheese about?” Loki asked curiously.

“In the refrigerator,” JARVIS replied, swinging open the door. Loki raised his eyebrows slightly, going through the strange, cold pantry of food. He procured some cheese and grapes for his plate and then a can of what seemed to be Midgardian ale. Thor had explained that Midgardian mead was often served in cans, preferably chilled ones. Closing the door back, Loki headed into the living room with his now complete meal.

“Inform me if you locate the book I requested,” Loki said to JARVIS. “Otherwise, I believe it would be greatly appreciated if you did not speak to me unless spoken to and definitely not attempt to awaken me. I typically do not trust those with disembodied voices as they have not always been kind
“I understand, Your Highness,” JARVIS nodded.

Loki continued to munch on his assorted foods, more the type of fare he would consider worthy of a picnic or a hunting outing than a true evening meal. It wasn’t that he had never learned to cook because of his princely status. In fact, cooking meals had usually been one of his duties when he, his brother and their friends had gone on hunting expeditions. Sif was the only other one who knew how and she refused to prepare meals just because she was the sole female on the expedition. After all, Loki was a master of the alchemical arts. Baking a cake or overseeing a pot roast was child’s play when it came to many of the potions whose recipes he had mastered over the years.

However, Loki was not familiar with the Midgardian devices for cooking and did not want to further anger those around him by destroying the kitchen area Stark had provided them with. Thor had apparently told Sigyn of the various dangers of operating these machines without proper instruction and his oafish brother still had issues with the device that employed electromagnetic waves to heat food. Thor was, according to his own admission, much better with the miniature toasting ovens. Still, Loki never considered Thor’s ability to use something as a proper gauge of how difficult the device might be. Even as an adult, Thor had gotten himself caught in the Vanir finger traps meant to entertain children more than once and had to seek aid from someone to free himself. Loki knew with minimal guidance he could probably master the cooking devices. Hopefully, Sigyn would seek instruction on how to operate the Midgardian cooking devices and then he could learn how to use them himself by watching her. Loki was not about to sink to the level of asking Thor’s compatriots about how to use the various strange black cooking machines.

The fact that Loki was seiðrless was also a bit of a hindrance to his meal preparation skills, he loathed to admit. Usually, his meal preparation did involve his magic in some way. He wasn’t about to hurt his wrists whipping together ingredients or wait on something to heat properly if he had seiðr to do so for him. There was nothing quite like a pudding topped with cream whipped to perfection by a seiðr-directed spoon or a piece of fish expertly blackened or pan-fried using a bit of elemental fire magic. He doubted any Midgardian meal could compare. Seiðr also made cleaning frightfully easy. Loki had always been rather fastidious with everything from his clothing to his workspaces to the way his horses tack was organized in the stables. The lack of seiðr for cleaning might drive him mad.

Deciding not to worry about such things for now, Loki reclined on the sofa and began popping grapes upward and into his mouth. It probably wouldn’t be long until Sigyn tired of the company of Thor’s new friends and returned to their rooms. When she did so, Loki had a feeling he was in for some sort of lecture. Might as well enjoy the solitude for a bit longer.

When the elevator doors opened and Sigyn turned down the hall toward the door to her new quarters, she could almost instantly tell her husband was in a better mood than the one she had left him in. The pizza box in one hand, she opened the door to their rooms to find him sprawled out on the sofa, a book in one hand and the other reaching out toward the table beside the sofa for the tray of of various nibbles he had prepared himself. Sigyn was glad to see he no longer appeared to be brooding and had, in fact, taken the initiative to feed himself rather than sitting around and complaining about Midgard and all he hated about it. Her husband could be rather resourceful and while he often liked to play on the spoiled prince stereotype, Loki was actually rather self-sufficient.

“I have brought you some supper, but I see you have already prepared something for yourself,” Sigyn said, drawing his attention. “However, if you still desire some of the meal I have brought, you
“I am fine for now,” Loki replied. “I believe you will want to store those victuals in the device for keeping things cold.” Sigyn seemed a little surprised that Loki knew about the device. “I spoke with the spirit called JARVIS. He and I… came to an understanding.”

“I do hope you have not harmed him,” Sigyn said, heading into the kitchen to store the leftover pizza.

“Yes, be concerned over the disembodied character that is stalking us rather than the wellbeing of your husband,” Loki rolled his eyes, sitting up on the chaise. Sigyn closed the refrigerator door and then turned back toward her husband, a kindly look on her face as she walked toward him.

“I am glad that you and JARVIS have reached an accord,” she said. “Of course, you have always been adaptable to whatever situation heads your way.” Loki reached out toward his wife as she approached him, pulling her into his lap.

“I don’t know why everyone thinks I’m so hard to get along with,” Loki huffed as Sigyn brushed some hair back from his forehead. “Starks’ invisible servant and I might become fast friends.”

“I do hope that is not a subtle hint that you and JARVIS are up to something,” Sigyn snorted. Loki rolled his eyes, and Sigyn continued. “I know that banishment here is not what you desired, but I know you are more than capable of fulfilling the terms Odin has set before you.”

“What concerns you, lykyng?” Loki asked, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Sigyn sighed.

“I fear that you will make this task more difficult upon yourself than it need be,” Sigyn admitted.

“What? Because I refuse to dine with those who imprisoned me? The same simpletons who are now my jailors for all intents and purposes?” Loki snorted.

“That attitude is what concerns me,” Sigyn corrected. “They are not your enemies. And were you in their position, I don’t know if you would have been as merciful as they were.”

“They may not be my enemies, but they certainly are not my friends,” Loki huffed.

“Why? Because they are friends with Thor?” Sigyn asked with a raised eyebrow. Loki ignored the barb, instead filling his mouth with more pretzel sticks. “The fact that someone is kind to Thor does not make them your mortal enemy. If anything, Sir Stark has shown a desire to be helpful to you.”

“Please do not begin this conversation,” Loki groaned. “It will only end in another argument between us.”

“I just want what is best for you,” Sigyn insisted as her husband curled a loose lock of her hair over her ear. “After all, I got you into this mess, didn’t I? I think it is well within my duties to ensure the entire thing ends up a success.”

“You shouldn’t have to pay for my past deeds,” Loki frowned. “You knew nothing of what I was doing on Asgard.”

“I wish I had,” Sigyn said. “I do not like when you keep me in the dark. Besides, you know I will take any vacation from the Asgardian court that I can, and I was not about to be separated from you again.”

“You do have a tendency to follow me to Hel and back,” Loki smirked. “One might think by now
you would have learned better than to traipse after me.”

“One would assume that you would have learned not to get yourself stuck in such terrible situations for me to follow you into,” Sigyn replied.

“If you will recall, my past few ventures into unpleasant places haven’t exactly been my own fault,” Loki said. “The visit to Jotunheim…”

“Please, Loki,” Sigyn snorted. “Thor may not have the sharpest mind, but don’t believe for an instant I am not wise to your machinations. There is a reason they nicknamed you Silvertongue. Had you honestly wanted to persuade Thor out of going, you certainly could have. You’ve been talking him into giving you his dessert since you were children. Not to mention that time the two of you went hunting and the lake dried up overnight so you convinced Thor he had drunk the entire lake after getting drunk himself? He still brags about it as if it actually happened. Talking Thor out of a visit to Jotunheim should have been easy for you.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to talk him out of it,” Loki pouted, sliding Sigyn off his lap so he could get up and pace about the room. “Maybe for once I wanted everyone to see what Thor’s brashness would lead to. You would think Asgard would be happy that I helped teach him a lesson.”

“It wasn’t your lesson to teach,” Sigyn pointed out. “You aren’t his father.”

“As if Odin could ever see anything perfection in his favorite son,” Loki spat. “Had it not been for me he wouldn’t have realized how unprepared Thor was.”

“I am sure Thor would have done something eventually to provoke such ire from your father,” Sigyn replied. “Of course, had you not intervened, that would have come after Odin had deemed Thor worthy as a regent of Asgard, and then they both would have looked foolish. Had you really wanted to embarrass both of them, you would have had more patience.”

“No one is as patient as you are Sigyn,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Perhaps if I had your patience I would rule all the Nine Worlds by now. You certainly could if you desired it.”

“I really do not understand the allure of ruling,” Sigyn shook her head. “My mother has always been jealous that her younger brother will one day rule Vanaheim. She thinks him too kind for such a role. Personally, I would rather not have thousands of people dependant on my decisions, quick to anger when I make small mistakes and seldom to celebrate when I accomplish something worthy.”

“Oh, yes, because it would be far better to sit back and what my brother make mistakes and then be forced to clean them up for him without any thanks,” Loki snorted. “I have spent my entire life doing that. I would rather not be Thor’s personal maid for the next couple millennia or so. And had Thor’s friends not intervened, I would have proven myself as Asgard’s regent.”

“You have said time and again you do not wish for the throne,” Sigyn pointed out. “Has that changed?”

“No,” Loki frowned, “but it wouldn’t be terrible to be respected for once. And do not say had I been resigned to my fate that would happen. No one respects the little brother that lets Thor walk all over him.”

“I am no one then?” Sigyn asked. Loki rolled his eyes.

“I have gotten you banished to this pitiable realm to watch me perform hard labor,” Loki huffed, plopping back on the sofa beside her, “and you have the audacity to claim you respect me?”
“You are my husband,” Sigyn said, gently beginning to massage her husband’s tense shoulders. “You are also quite possibly the greatest magister I have ever met. You have shown me again and again what a great man you are, what a great man you will become. You are kind and wise and clever and sweet... when you want to be.”

“Sigyn...” Loki began.

“Choose your next words carefully,” Sigyn smirked. “I don’t take too kindly to anyone who says negative things about my husband.” Loki smirked as well, resting a hand against Sigyn’s cheek and then guiding his wife’s lips to his own.

“Ruling Asgard... even though it was temporary and no one wanted me there... was an interesting challenge,” Loki said, “but it did leave me such little time to spend with you.”

“Another reason why I don’t think ruling would suite either of us,” Sigyn nodded. “It wasn’t easy to be alone in that cold, dark bed each night wondering when you would return to me, and then to awaken in the morning and find you already long gone. I hardly knew what to do with myself.”

“I’m sure you came up with a few ideas,” Loki smirked lasciviously, leaning over her. “I wonder if our furniture is as sturdy on Midgard as it is on Asgard.”

“Well,” Sigyn grinned at her husband. “There is a way to find out...”

Chapter End Notes

The pemmican strips Loki finds are actually beef jerky.
Over the next three days, Tony, Pepper and the personal shoppers they hired learned that dressing Asgardians was much easier in theory than in practice. It was agreed by all three Asgardians that they needed to dress in a manner that would prevent them from being detected, but the actual attempts to do so had mixed results. Tony’s personal shopper was brought in to provide clothes to help Thor and Loki blend in on Midgard while Pepper’s was hired to do the same for Sigyn. Tony was pretty sure he had gotten the short end of the stick and decided that he might as well go for broke. He tricked Steve into coming to the initial meeting as well. Tony had become convinced that shirt sizes must have changed a great deal since World War II as that was the only logical explanation for why Capsicle was always buying shirts two sizes too small.

Loki, naturally, insisted that Sigyn wouldn’t need that much because she would be better off remaining in the safety of the tower than venturing out and about in Midgard. He insisted her Asgardian wardrobe would suite her just fine for remaining indoors. As a result, Sigyn seemed determined to procure the largest wardrobe of the three. Pepper found that the only issue with dressing Sigyn properly was steering her away from all of the fancy ball gowns and red carpet ready dresses she was drawn to - possibly because they resembled her Asgardian wardrobe. In the end, Sigyn did pick out a few things for parties but the bulk of her clothing went more towards comfort than fashion. Sigyn’s personal shopper had come back armed with what Pepper considered sick day clothing - tank tops, oversized sweatshirts and sweaters, massive t-shirts, yoga pants, leggings, and flowing hippie skirts. Pepper quickly learned that Sigyn had the same taste in sweatshirts and sweaters as someone’s grandmother from the Midwest. It seemed the only physically uncomfortable part of Sigyn’s wardrobe were the massive high heels she had discovered, allowing her to be closer in height to her husband. All in all, shopping with and for Sigyn turned out to be a rather pleasant experience and Pepper found herself bonding with the young woman over coffee and biscotti.

Tony, meanwhile, was both feeling grateful he was an only child and starting to suspect that Odin had sent his sons away so he didn’t have to deal with their bickering. Besides looking hardly anything alike, the two princes had complete opposite taste in clothing. Loki - the brother who needed clothing for working in rubble - only wanted to try on suits and gave very specific instruction as to their tailoring. On the other hand, Thor didn’t want anything that would be considered appropriate at any of the galas, fundraisers or events the Avengers had been invited to in order to benefit the city, instead wanting to try on all of the surfer shorts, t-shirts and flip flops that had been brought in.

Somewhere in between Loki whining about ties to match his pocket squares and Thor attempting to tip the personal shopper and his assistants in what appeared to be real silver coins, Capsicle had snuck out. Abandoned, Tony threw in the towel and just let the brothers do what they wanted. The following day, the personal shopper announced to Tony he was taking a “personal health month” once he had completed delivering the Odinsons clothing. Tony was glad the entire ordeal was over with until Pepper arrived to survey what the guys had purchased. Thor had only gotten two weeks
worth of clothing, all of which was more suited to a day at the beach than any event he had been invited to. By contrast, Loki had enough bespoke suits to last him two months without wearing one twice but nothing he could wear while cleaning up debris.

“Can’t believe this,” Pepper grimaced. “Two days and neither one of them has suitable clothing.”

“I beg to differ,” Loki said, still holding up ties to pocket squares to ensure they matched.

“What am I supposed to do, Pep?” Tony groaned. “They aren’t exactly cooperative and Jean-Luc said he would quit if I made him come back any time in the next month.”

“That’s what you get for choosing a personal shopper based on Star Trek,” Pepper snorted.

“What, so your whole Asgardian dress-up experiment went perfectly?” Tony scoffed.

Pepper raised her eyebrows as Sigyn literally danced into the room, twirling around in a pair of sparkly ballet flats, yoga pants and an oversized shirt with floral print that looked like it had been stolen from the wallpaper of someone’s great-grandmother’s bathroom. Sigyn danced over Thor - who was sleeping under a pile of cargo shorts - and straight to her husband. Loki ceased pairing off his ties and squares long enough to nearly suck Sigyn’s face off and then the pair began playfully debating which one of Loki’s newest outfits best matched his eyes. Tony turned back to Pepper.

“Can’t we just get a whole bunch of bargain brand t-shirts, exercise shirts and underwear and call it a day?” Tony moaned. “I mean, I’m pretty sure we could feed a small African country with the money all of those useless suits cost. Is he really going to lounge around in them during his free time?”

“Yes,” Loki called, annoyed. “And he is in the room with perfectly functioning hearing that is superior to that of your race. One’s apparel is very intertwined with how one perceives oneself and how one wants to be perceived. I have found that nothing makes Midgardians quake more than a well tailored suit.”

“Last time I checked, you were here to clean up rubble not make anyone quake,” Tony pointed out.

“Perhaps in the interest of public safety we should lock up his suits until he proves he won’t use them for evil,” Pepper suggested.

“A novel idea,” Tony agreed.

“Thanks,” Pepper smiled, “I’ve considered using it on you.”

“But that would hardly be fair to Sigyn,” Loki interjected. “She’s yet to see how dashing I look in them.”

“I do apologize,” Sigyn said to Tony and Pepper. “I should have suspected my husband would do something like this. He does the same thing when Frigga sends the royal tailors to us. Whenever he is supposed to get something nice for a palace function, he always ends up purchasing new hunting gear or night clothes and vice versa. One would almost think he finds pleasure in being difficult. It doesn’t help that he has horrible taste in clothing.”

“I do not!” Loki said, his voice strangled and angry.

“Your helmet begs to differ,” Sigyn snorted.

“You love that helmet!” Loki insisted.
“I loved it when it was one of the last reminders I had of your life,” Sigyn shot back. “Now that I have you back, it’s effect on me is waning.” Loki groaned, knowing he was not going to win this debate.

“I do find your Midgardian methods of shopping interesting,” Thor admitted, having woken up to the sound of his brother and sister-in-law bickering. “True, the palace employs a tailor, but I much prefer to find my clothing among the shops in the Merchant District.”

“Of course you think that,” Loki snorted. “All you ever wear are hunting clothes and armor.”

“Maybe that’s the solution,” Pepper suggested. “Take them down to Fifth Avenue and go shopping. It might be better to have a lot of choices before them then for someone to bring them some pre-selected options.”

“Loki doesn’t have an ID yet.” Tony pointed out. “And the last thing we needed is for Thor to get mobbed on Fifth Avenue with questions about why he’s buying clothes and not helping with the clean up yet.”

“Simple,” Pepper snorted. “Because the officials are still doing rescue operations and aren’t allowing cleanup to start before that. And spending money encourages everyone to come back to New York following this disaster and shop. Besides, Phil had Sigyn and Loki’s IDs couriered over a few minutes ago. I was just bringing them.”

“Great,” Tony muffled.

“I am eager to see your Midgardian shops,” Thor boomed.

“I want back up,” Tony said. “The two of them are too much for one man to handle.”

“I’ll see if Clint and Steve are free to accompany you,” Pepper suggested. “Nat will be watching Sigyn this afternoon while she helps Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis in the lab with some of their experiments.”

“Do I have a card?” Sigyn asked happily. Pepper sighed and produced the paperwork for Asgardian inspection.

The official paperwork from SHIELD proclaimed Loki and Sigyn were actually Loren and Victoria Olsen, hailing from Ranheim, a suburb of the Norse city of Trondheim. Coulson had explained the SHIELD employees who had created the fake IDs thought it was hilarious as this was the location of a large ancient Norse temple that had been discovered earlier in the year. Loki was pleased that this community was far from anywhere either of his supposed fathers had visited when they once walked Midgard while Sigyn was pleased to have a fictional home near the sea. She immediately began to inquire what types of fish were available to eat there only for Loki to wince when JARVIS answered. However, Loki was more pleased when the A.I. offered to have those various fish shipped to the tower so Sigyn could try them and speak intelligently about them if asked. Tony wanted to groan, but watching Sigyn lead Loki around the room in what seemed to be Sigyn’s version of a happy dance was more than worth the cost of importing fish from Norway. He just hoped he didn’t have to eat any of it.

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Tony hadn’t even left the doors of Stark Tower before he determined the all-guy’s shopping trip had to be Pepper taking revenge for something. He found the others - save Barton - waiting for him in the communal living area. Clint had informed him he would follow along with his eyes on Loki, but he
wanted to remain in stealth mode so no one would know when or where his arrows were coming from. Tony had acquiesced, not wanting any more arguments. Thor and Loki were both holding coffee-filled travel mugs and donning Midgardian gear, but the resemblance ended there. Thor was lounging about in his surfer wear with a grin on his face, talking to Steve, while Loki - who Tony had to admit exuded boardroom-style power in his bespoke suit - was looking as bitter as the coffee he was sipping on. Steve was wearing what Tony had secretly nicknamed the “Dad uniform” of a button-down and khakis with sensible shoes. Only when Tony actually started paying attention to the conversation did he realize Steve was excitedly reminiscing to Thor about his memories of Fifth Avenue. Cap looked like an overexcited golden retriever puppy.

“They had this great art gallery at the Plaza,” Steve went on. “I wonder if it’s still there. Buck and I used to go there all the time to see the shop windows. Christmas was the best. My Ma couldn’t always afford stuff, but sometimes we’d catch a ride into the city and go look at all the Christmas shop windows. She’d get us some penny candy and maybe a hot chocolate while we walked around. It was the best.”

“Cap, you realize Fifth Avenue probably looks nothing like you remember,” Tony pointed out.

“I know, I know,” Steve rolled his eyes. “So, where are we headed?”

“I was thinking Pikachu here should probably get some suites first,” Tony said. “Then I was thinking about hitting up Saks and Lord and Taylor. Maybe Bergdorf’s.”

“Whoa, man, I don’t know if I can afford those places,” Steve frowned. “And isn’t Bergdorf’s a women’s clothing store?”

“Hasn’t the army gotten around to giving you all the backpay it owes from when you were frozen?” Tony grimaced. “Anyway, I’m buying.”

“Sir Stark, I insist we repay you for what we have spent,” Thor said, reaching into the literal duffel bag of Asgardian silver and gold Tony just realized Thor had brought up.

“Thanks, bud, but until we can locate an Asgardian to U.S. currency exchange machines, you can hold off,” Tony snorted.

“Why can’t we hit up Constables or Woolworth’s?” Steve frowned. “Jensen’s usually had some good deals. Whenever Buck and I had extra money, we’d always spend it at Bond’s, too. Of course, at Woolworth’s you could get a new shirt, your shoe shined and a sandwich at the lunch counter.”

“All for twenty-five cents, too, huh?” Tony snorted. “Look, Steve, I’ve got some bad news about Woolworth’s. They kind of went out of business on this side of the pond. Actually, I think Foot Locker bought out some of them… that’s a shoe store.”

“What about Constable’s?” Steve asked, horrified.

“Went out of business when I was a kid,” Tony shook his head. “I remember my mom crying over a hat box. Bond’s, too. Never heard of Jensen’s.”

“Do all Midgardian merchants have such idiotic names?” Loki huffed. Tony groaned and then looked up at the ceiling.

“Clint, if you’re up there, we’re heading out,” Tony said.

Tony had planned for the first trip on the shopping trip to be Armani since he figured getting Thor into a suite would be easier than getting Loki into a t-shirt. What Tony hadn’t counted on was the
fact that Armani was right across the street from St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the site of which suddenly reminded Steve he hadn’t been to confession since the 1940s. Tony begrudgingly found himself on an architectural tour of the building with Loki and Thor while Steve played the Good Little Catholic Boy in the confessional booth. Tony found it hard to believe that Steve already had garnered thirty minutes worth of confession material, but he figured teasing America’s Golden Boy wasn’t a smart idea in the presence of all the priests they found Steve chatting with at the end of the tour.

They finally arrived at their appointment at Armani only thirty minutes late and with five annoyed texts from Pepper asking where they had wandered off to. After responding, Tony got a text back expressing surprise he hadn’t burst into flames entering the cathedral doors. Tony rolled his eyes and sent Pepper back a few emojis expressing his opinion on the subject. Besides, Loki took an entire tour of the place and even had a brief and rather insightful discussion with one of the priests about stone carving without so much as sending up a whiff of smoke. Tony doubted very seriously any Catholic god was taking particular interest in New York City if Reindeer Games could walk in and out of a church unscathed.

It took nearly an hour to get both Thor and Steve fitted for bespoke suites - mainly because Steve kept protesting cost and Thor had somehow gotten ahold of food. They then headed into H&M in the hopes of buying something for Loki. When, after an hour of shopping, Loki had only agreed to purchase one white t-shirt, one pair of gray jogging pants and six hooded jackets and sweatshirts, Tony decided to take matters into his own hands. Loki soon found himself the resentful new owner of t-shirts and sweaters in every color, pants, underwear, socks, shorts and the tightest skinny jeans Tony could find to fit on the lanky Asgardian. Tony considered the pain the jeans would probably create in Loki’s crotch area painful enough for payback. Steve even managed to pick out some nice jeans and shirts that actually fit him, though Tony really questioned how many plaid button ups the man really needed.

The group stopped for an obligatory selfie at 30 Rock - which they later noticed a stealthy Clint making a photo bomb in the background of - and then headed to Banana Republic. While Tony had the luxury of sending their previous bags back via car so they didn’t have to lug them around, Loki and Thor were already showing wear and tear from being forced out to shop. Thor could smell every individual piece of food being cooked in the area - a talent Tony was sure could only be rivaled by Scooby-Doo - and it was obvious Thor would have to be fed soon or he might start seizing falafel carts in the name of Asgard. Loki, in contrast, was a taller, older version of the same pouty, grumpy kid Tony had been when his mother dragged him out on shopping trips. If she were there, Tony knew Maria Stark would be kicking her heels up in laughter at seeing the tables turned on her son.

“I just bought a shirt,” Loki muttered. “Several in fact. Why do we have to go to a different place and buy different shirts?”

“Because I don’t trust you to not set the shirts I already bought you on fire in some kind of protest,” Tony said before wincing. “Great. Now you’re making my mother’s voice come out of my body. Happy now?”

“Delighted,” Loki huffed sarcastically.

“Friend Stark, what kind of juice does a Jamba produce?” Thor asked, eyeing up the food section of the building guide in the store.

“Chinos!” Steve shouted excited, heading for a display. “These things are so much more comfortable than jeans!” Tony groaned and held his face in his hands.

“Alright,” Tony said, commanding the attention of the three other men, “this shopping trip is about to go disaster if we don’t regroup.”
“What do you suggest?” Steve asked, going from what Tony could only consider caressing some khaki pants to full-on Captain America Command Mode™.

“Steve, since you seem to know better than any of us what apparel Loki will need to blend in, I want you to pick out some things for him here. And some things for yourself as payment for taking on the personal shopper mantle,” Tony said. “When you finish up, take Thor here to get a snack here at 30 Rock to tide him over until lunch. I had plans to take us out to a steakhouse to eat some manly man food, but we might have to find something closer before Randy Moss here brings out his hammer.”

“Uh… who?” Steve asked embarrassedly.

“Wide receiver for the Minnesota Vikings?” Tony began. “They’re a…”


“Anyway,” Tony said, “I will take Rudolph over here on a walk to see if there are any stores I can get him to go in willingly. If I don’t return or call you in 30 minutes, assume either he’s killed me or I’ve killed him.”

“Well, if you do get the urge to kill him, remember his wife still has magic and seems to like him,” Steve replied.

“Good point,” Tony nodded. He turned to Loki who was muttering something about the positioning of the mannequins that made Thor laugh. “Alright loser,” Tony said to Loki. “We’re going shopping.”

With a roll of his eyes, Loki followed Tony out of the store and back onto Fifth Avenue. On a whim, Tony decided to head north instead of south back toward the library. Tony rambled on about the various shops while Loki kept quiet, seeming to stick up his nose at the amount of people mingling around them. Tony wondered briefly if Loki actually walked around Asgard’s shopping district or if he was carried around in some kind of liter. They were almost to Bergdorf’s and the Plaza when Tony’s ability to ramble nearly got the best of him.

“I personally don’t understand the allure of malls or department stores,” Tony said. “It just creeps me out to think someone might have tried on the same shirt or underwear that I’m now trying on. I mean, I don’t know their life. They could be a serial killer or something, and I’m wearing the same pants they wore. Bespoke stuff all the way. I’m actually surprised that you, Mr. Get Your Midgardian Germs Away From Me, is on board with this whole thing. Are you sure the personal shopper didn’t get stuff to your liking, because I can always ask Pepper to find you another. I understand that our taste is a bit different, so maybe going with my guy wasn’t the best option. Going to chime in there, Pouty McPoutface?”

Tony looked to where Loki had been walking beside him only to find his charge had disappeared in the middle of Tony’s rant.

“Well, shit,” Tony groaned, “I am in so much trouble if he’s unleashing destruction on Fifth Avenue.”

Tony briefly debated calling around for Loki like he was a lost dog, but decided that might draw unwanted attention. Shouting out the name “Loki” across the streets of Midtown might also cause a panic this soon after the attack. After retracing his steps slightly, Tony spied Loki through the window of the Tiffany’s flagship store. Tony groaned - mainly because this required walking across the street and directly below the other famous New York tower named after his least favorite real
estate developer - and headed on in after his charge, really hoping that he wouldn’t get bombarded as soon as he walked in. This incognito thing was not working out at all. Maybe he should have had Sigyn change his face around too. He found Loki patiently waiting in line behind several other people already being helped by the various sales associates.

“What are you doing here?” Tony hissed at Loki.

“I am acquiring something for Sigyn,” Loki replied smoothly.

“I don’t think she needs anything from here,” Tony said.

“Perhaps not,” Loki said, a bit annoyed, “but I do like picking her up a present from time to time. She deserves to be spoiled, after all, and I have been remiss as of late in doing so.”

“Well, you were missing in action and then incarcerated,” Tony pointed out. Loki glared at him. “Not that that’s any excuse.”

“Sigyn has put up with much from me lately,” Loki said. “The least I can do is give her something to show I appreciate her. Do you not provide gifts and tokens of your affection for Lady Pepper to show her thanks for running your household and keeping your keys?”

Tony wasn’t sure what Loki meant by key keeping, but he was pretty embarrassed to admit it had been awhile since he had purchased Pepper something “just because.” He didn’t like that Loki was turning out to be a better significant other than he was. That was completely unacceptable. He would have to step up his game.

“You do this often?” Tony said, a bit surprised.

“Sigyn deserves it,” Loki shrugged.

“No, I mean just randomly pop into jewelry stores and buy things,” Tony said. “Aren’t you… like famous in Asgard or something?”

“It is good for the Asgardian economy,” Loki shrugged. “I come to a merchant’s store, make a few purchases for Sigyn and suddenly everyone is clamoring for that merchant’s wares, wanting to see what the prince purchased… even if it is the less desirable prince. There are straight out riots at some of the places Thor went shopping for his lady Jane, and I know for a fact most Asgardians have no use of astrolabes or orreries. I doubt very much that Lady Jane has a need for them either...”

“Mr. Stark!” a voice suddenly shouted, causing Tony to wince. The head of the sales floor rushed over with two personal shoppers behind him. “We weren’t expecting you, otherwise we would have the private viewing room set up.”

“Uh, me and my friend… Loren here… just popped by unexpectedly,” Tony said. “He’s here visiting from Norway. Wanted to pick up something nice for his wife while we were out.”

“Right this way, gentlemen!” the clerk beamed as camera flashes started going off, documenting Tony and his “unknown male friend” - as the press would later dub Loki - shopping at Tiffany’s.

Loki seemed rather pleased at the private sales pitch they were given. Loki hovered over a snake bracelet made almost entirely out of diamonds for the bulk of their private showing, but at the end chose what Tony thought was actually rather subdued diamond bracelet with yellow diamonds, tanzanites and tanzorites mimicking a garden growing under the sun. Loki reached into his pockets, perhaps to pull out the same pieces of silver Thor had tried to use earlier, but Tony stopped him. While Tony wasn’t sure if Tiffany’s would accept pure Asgardian silver coins in exchange for the
bracelet, he didn’t want to chance it. Instead insisted things could be put on his card and Loki could pay him back. Maybe there was an Asgardian to American currency exchange machine somewhere on Wall Street.

For his part, Tony picked out an expensive but understated butterfly brooch for Pepper. It was far from the outlandish gifts he usually got for her, but Tony didn’t want to get something showy if Loki was going subdued. Besides, the brooch was classy like Pepper and she could wear it both with her business suits and to fancy gala functions. Pretty and practical, much like Pepper herself. Purchases complete, Tony called Steve to ask if he could remember enough about Midtown to get himself to a certain address. Steve made a sarcastic comment about how he could still read street signs, and soon the group were gathered back together at a steakhouse not far from the tower. Oddly enough, Clint was the first one to meet them all there, garbed in dark sunglasses and Kevlar. As Thor finished off his third twelve-ounce steak complete with sides - to the amazement of the wait staff - and Steve mentioned something about using the “the Internets” to track down an old steak joint from Brooklyn, Tony decided it was time to call it a day.

When they arrived back at the tower, the group parted ways with Steve going up to iron his new clothes and Clint heading to his room for a nap. The first stop for Tony, Thor and Loki was the labs to check in on the women. Jane was knee deep in some sort of wormhole experiment while Sigyn and Darcy appeared to be racing each other around the room on rolling chairs. Natasha was sitting in a corner of the room, seeming to blend into the furniture as she watched the scene around her. Tony had to admit it was pretty adorable. While Sigyn immediately stopped her chair and bounded over to her husband, Thor had to wait patiently for about ten minutes before Jane noticed him standing near her. In the meantime, Darcy politely engaged the golden goliath in conversation.

“And how was the outing?” Sigyn asked, seeming to address both her husband and Tony at the same time.

“We got what we came for,” Tony replied.

“Good,” Sigyn smiled brightly, turning her attention back to her husband. “Lady Jane and Lady Darcy have conducted their readings in our rooms. Lady Jane is interpreting them now. Thor has given her a brief introduction to the cosmos of Yggdrasil, but he hasn’t imparted anything about constellations or the impact on runology.”

“I doubt Thor knows anything about runology,” Loki snorted. “As for the constellations, he only knows enough to tell which way is north when he is out wandering at night.”

“That is why I have offered to help her,” Sigyn said happily. Loki opened his mouth to protest but then closed it with a sigh. He wasn’t keen on Sigyn spending time with his brother’s paramour, but he knew it would do Sigyn good to make female friends. She no doubt missed the companionship for her sisters, who were always around for her whenever Loki himself couldn’t be.

“Well, I suppose a Vanir would be preferable for astronomy to an Aesir,” Loki admitted. “Especially one like Thor would couldn’t navigate his way out of a wool sack.”

“I will be using some books from the library,” Sigyn mentioned, not exactly wanting to sound as though she was asking permission.

“The ones your grandfather gave you?” Loki nodded. “Alright, but don’t be surprised if she can’t wrap her head around Vanir cosmology. It takes most centuries to learn, which is why Mother started us in childhood with it.”
“Thank you,” Sigyn smiled, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Now, let’s find somewhere private,” Loki grinned at her. “I have something for you.”

“Loki!” Sigyn said in delighted surprise. “You shouldn’t have!”

“Now, now, it is has been a while since I’ve gotten you a present,” Loki said as he guided her off. “It would be more accurate to accuse me of being overdue.” Tony felt a slight twinge as he watched the two of them go off into a corner of the lab so Loki could produce the tiny blue package. Sigyn gingerly untied the box and squealed when she opened it, throwing her arms around her husband and peppering his face with kisses instead of actually trying on her new bauble.

“Miss Potts is finishing up a conference call in her office,” Natasha mentioned, having silently sidled up to Tony. “I’m sure she could squeeze in a couple of minutes to see you.”

“Thanks, Natalie,” Tony snorted. “Or is your name Natasha today? Nancy? Nora?” Natasha rolled her eyes at him and sauntered back to her previous seat.

On the elevator ride down to Pepper’s office, Tony couldn’t help but fiddle with the little blue box of his own he had hiding in his pocket. He felt something like a sixteen-year-old kid hoping his date liked the corsage he had picked out for prom. Naturally, Tony hadn’t been to prom himself because he attended a ritzy boarding school where they had “formals” with a partnering all-girls school. He vaguely remembered skipping his senior formal to get blitzed on some Jamaican “herbs” in the headmaster’s private bathroom with the heiress to a publishing empire, but that was really as close to a prom experience as he had. The elevator doors opened and Tony walked into the executive lounge like he had a million times before. One of the perks to having your name on a company was that they let you walk anywhere without being questioned.

He headed into Pepper’s office to find her finishing up what sounded to be like a rather irritating business call. Tony sat on the corner of her desk, earning a brief smile and eye roll from Pepper as she listened to the person on the other end of the phone. With a clipped response, she hung up and then directed her attention to her boss-cum-boyfriend.

“So, how was shopping?” Pepper asked.

“Not that bad,” Tony said. “Thor set a new steak-eating record at a steakhouse that considers itself too classy to keep steak-eating records, Steve now owns enough plaid flannel to fulfill his secret dream of becoming Captain Canada, Barton probably clogged up the ‘see something, say something’ hotline, and Loki managed to not kill anyone.”

“And what about you?” Pepper asked pointedly.

“Not only did I manage not to kill anyone, I managed not to maim anyone,” Tony said.

“I still might head over to St. Pat’s after to work to make sure you didn’t leave any scorch marks,” Pepper snorted.

“I’m sure the overall goodness of eternal altar boy Steve Rogers was able to cancel out whatever devilishness is inside me,” Tony replied. “Also,” he said, reaching into his pocket and putting the box on Pepper’s desk. “I got you something.”

“Tony,” Pepper said, seemingly frozen. “This is a little blue box.”

“Yes,” Tony nodded. “You might be the most observant CEO I’ve ever met.”
“No, I mean this is a very particular shade of blue,” Pepper said. “The type of blue on this box only gets put on boxes from one store in particular.”

“If you want,” Tony smirked, “we could have breakfast there some time.”

“What did you do?” Pepper asked, skeptically.

“Why do you assume that I’m giving you a gift because I did something wrong?” Tony asked. Pepper continued to look at him skeptically. “So, I’m not allowed to give you gifts just because I think you’re special and amazing? Of course, if Tony Stark gives a gift he has to be trying to weasel out of something or asking for a favor in return.”

“I never know with you,” Pepper insisted, hoping to calm him down.

“Look, Pep, you’ve put up with a lot recently,” Tony said. “Besides having to deal with me you are running a Fortune 500 company. You deal with misogynist trolls who don’t understand that a woman is fully capable of running said company. And then the tower you just put your heart and soul into was damaged by alien super beings and is now being rebuilt…”

“Technically, I only put twelve percent of my heart and soul into it,” Pepper snorted. Tony rolled his eyes.

“That is never going to die, is it?” Tony sighed. “Look, you deserve nice things and I happen to be fortunate enough to be able to afford them for you. See the double meaning there?”

“Okay, Tony,” Pepper sighed, finally reaching for the little blue box and untying the ribbon. Tony waited to see her reaction, wondering if she was expecting something tasteless. As she lifted the lid, Pepper let out a gasp and put her hand over her heart as if she couldn’t believe Tony had actually picked out something classy. “Oh, Tony, it’s beautiful.”

“Kind of reminded me of you,” Tony shrugged. “Pretty and classy, but it also has a hidden pin that can stab people if they aren’t careful.” Pepper wiped a few tears out of her eyes and then stood up from her desk, wrapping her arms around Tony and giving him a long kiss. “So, I did good?” Tony asked as they both pulled back.

“You did very good,” Pepper smiled before kissing him again.
The afternoon of the Fifth Avenue shopping spree, Tony received a call from the mayor’s office inviting him and Steve down to a meeting the next morning. The search and rescue part of the recovery phase was officially over, and so the mayor was calling a meeting together of all the city departments, state and federal officials to get everyone on the same page about the whole clean-up process. As the Avengers had expressed interest in helping out before, the mayor hoped they would help draw attention to the efforts - and perhaps that Iron Man had a few cleaning robots lying around he wasn’t using.

With Cap and Tony gone to the mayor’s breakfast meeting, Pepper heading out to Europe for a conference, and Clint still nesting in the ventilation ducts to promote his own sense of security and to keep an eye on Loki, breakfast in the Tower that morning was a rather subdued affair. Bruce shoveled down some granola and yogurt while using his new StarkPad to read a paper a colleague had just published before heading back down to the labs. Natasha peeled and at various pieces of fruit with a large knife, side-eyeing everyone at the table. Thor drank copious amounts of coffee and ate most of an entire box of blueberry Pop Tarts - though he perhaps left behind enough crumbs to equal after of an entire pastry. Jane was too busy going over the readings she had taken in Sigyn and Loki’s library the day before, and Darcy had given up on trying to coax her boss into eating when Sigyn arrived. Glad to have someone who wasn’t absorbed in research, solving the games on the back of the Pop-Tart box or murder, Darcy bounded up to the alien princess.

“Where’s the hubs?” Darcy asked by way of greeting.

“When will the midday meal be served?” Sigyn replied.

“Usually about noon,” Darcy replied.

“He’ll most likely be up half an hour past that,” Sigyn smirked conspiratorially.

“Where you the one keeping him up late?” Darcy asked with a wink.

“Not entirely,” Sigyn giggled. “My husband tends to do his best work at night. He was up late with some research in the library about elemental seiðr. I suppose I should be glad that the fact he doesn’t have any seiðr to use right now isn’t impeding him from continuing his study of it.”

“Tell me about it,” Darcy groaned. “I had to wrestle both Banner and Jane out of the lab and into bed at eleven last night so they could get some shut eye. For a guy who turns into a giant green monster, Banner is actually pretty nice about being made to leave his research. Jane however... She’s almost like a dog getting her bone taken away. I’m afraid one day she’s going to actually bite me for telling her to put down her equipment.”

“I had to put a spell on the alchemy laboratory in our chambers in Asgard that makes everything in the room turn invisible if my husband has been working in there for more than twelve hours in a single day,” Sigyn empathized. “It’s a very good one. He is yet to undo it, though I know he will one
day just to spite me.”

“I might ask you to teach me that,” Darcy laughed.

“Sigyn!” Thor said happily, noticing his sister-in-law now that the maze he had been working on was finished. “Come break your fast with us!”

Sigyn smiled at Thor, patting him on the shoulder as she passed him and walked into the kitchen. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, Sigyn frowned when she saw the carafe was empty but her cup was not full. Darcy offered to teach Sigyn how to use the coffee machine and soon found herself educating her new friend the space princess on how to use the various equipment needed to prepare breakfast. Once Sigyn got the hang of what each appliance was used for, she quickly made herself an omelet, toast and jam along with some balled melon pieces. It was still a mystery why Tony thought the community kitchen needed a melon-balling machine. The assembled humanoids - save Natasha - seemed mildly impressed with Sigyn’s ability to easily learn how to use Midgardian appliances, especially Bruce since he had almost lost his finger to the melon baller when he first tried to figure out what it was.

“These readings are unreal,” Jane mentioned to Sigyn as she sat down with her plate of breakfast food. “It’s like you actually shifted around the universe to create that room.”

“I suppose,” Sigyn shrugged. “I never studied much on the theory behind seiðr, just the practical application of it. Loki might know more on the subject.”

“I don’t know if he would be too keen to talk with me about it,” Jane admitted.

“He is quite fond of showing off his intelligence,” Sigyn mused, “and once someone defers to him on such a matter he does tend to ramble. I might be able to bring up such a subject when he is around, and once he gets started, it would probably stroke his ego to have you ask him more specific questions.”

“I might hold you to that,” Jane smiled.

“Let me know if you have that conversation,” Bruce mentioned. “I might like to be part of it, even if that’s not really my area of expertise.”

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded.

“Well, I have to get back to the lab,” Bruce said.

“And I have to go find whatever vent Clint has shoved himself in and wake him up,” Natasha said as she rose up from the table. “He promised me a sparring session, so naturally he’ll sleep through it if I don’t wake him up.”

“When I finish my breakfast,” Sigyn said to Jane as Bruce and Natasha left the room, “I will have to bring up those books I promised to let you look at. I think the table here is large enough to handle having all of them spread out.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t bring books into the lab unless you’re okay with scientific experiments gone-wrong giving them legs or something,” Darcy agreed.

“Thor brought me back this neat orrery depicting Yggdrasil,” Jane mentioned. “Do you think that might help with the discussion?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Sigyn said before turning to her brother-in-law. “You had it commissioned by
Gjordsons like I told you?"


“Good,” Sigyn said before turning to Jane. “They are Vanir makers of such instruments. Asgard is capable of producing similar goods, but, if I do say so myself, Vanir instruments are superior. Vanaheim has a much better reputation for cosmology, and have been studying the skies for much longer than Asgard.”

“She will remind us of that frequently,” Thor whispered to Jane.

“Well,” Jane said to Sigyn with a smile. “I am eager to learn.”

After finishing her breakfast, Sigyn jaunted down to her chambers, stopping first to check in on her thankfully peacefully sleeping husband and then to gather up the various tomes she would need to help Jane. JARVIS proved truly helpful in locating all of the texts, which was sometimes hard to do with the system of organization and cross-referencing Loki had done when he initially began putting together the couple’s library. With a stack of books in her hands and an even larger stack of books, maps and other materials levitating behind her, Sigyn returned back up to the communal living area, which Darcy, Jane and Thor had cleaned up. With a heavy thump, Sigyn laid down the stack of books she had in her hands and then began using her seiðr to direct the various maps, books and machines to begin arranging themselves on the table in the most useful positions for Jane to peruse.

“I know it seems like a lot,” Sigyn admitted, noticing the gaping looks Jane and Darcy were giving the forty-odd books, maps and pieces of parchment Sigyn had retrieved. “The Vanir have always been a seafaring people, and charting the stars has long been a passion of my people. Children on Vanaheim typically begin learning how to work an astrolabe and a compass around the same time Asgardians begin teaching their children to ride horses.”

“Which is?” Jane asked curiously.

“Usually as soon as they can walk and talk in sentences,” Thor explained from where he was making more coffee.

Loki chose that moment to bungle into the room, plopping in the seat at the communal table next to his wife. Sigyn frowned as she had hoped he would get a little bit more sleep. Darcy and Jane both seemed a little nervous about him sitting at the table with them, despite Sigyn’s weak smile in their direction. Jane distracted herself by flipping through one of Sigyn’s massive tomes, trying to quash all the Harry Potter jokes she could make about the moving pictures in the books.

Darcy, meanwhile, was finding it particularly interesting how both Loki and Clint began each morning with what she had dubbed a “murder stare” into nothingness until they got their coffee. Sigyn levitated a plate of breakfast foods and then used her powers to steal the carafe straight out of Thor’s hand to pour her husband a cup, which was then hovered toward him. Loki ceased staring into nothing as he began sipping the drink, but still seemed rather annoyed at being awake. Darcy began to wonder if Loki was really all that evil or just not a morning person.

“I recognize this,” Jane said, happily. “It’s a star chart!” She reached out to touch the page and noticed that the rounded chart moved clockwise or counterclockwise with her fingers. She let out a squeal, which made Thor grin brightly as he sat down beside her.

“Perhaps that would be a good place to begin,” Sigyn nodded. “This is what the sky looks like over
Asgard and Vanaheim at night. Well, Vanaheim is off by a little bit. But they are essentially the same.”

“Some of these constellations look like the ones on earth,” Jane frowned, “but most of these are unfamiliar.”

“I can explain them to you,” Sigyn said. “Which one would you like to know more about?” Jane seemed conflicted. Honestly, she wanted to know about all of them right then. Seeing that Jane was having a science crisis, Darcy decided to earn her assistant pay and jumped in.

“Which one is your favorite constellation?” Darcy asked. “We could start there.”

“Hmm, that is a good question,” Sigyn nodded. “Well, I am particularly fond of Brenna.”

“Brenna?” Darcy said, confused. “Is she like, a friend of yours?”

“Brenna… the torch,” Sigyn said, using her fingers to expand the star chart on the page and then highlight how the stars formed the torch. “See. It forms a torch.”

“Brenna is the Asgardian word for torch?” Darcy said, a bit pleased with her new knowledge.

“Wait, I recognize this,” Jane said excitedly. “We call it Canis Major...It literally means the Big Dog. And this is Sirius, the dog star. It shines bright in the summer. That’s why they call them the dog days of summer.”

“Why’s this one your favorite?” Darcy asked.

“Because Loki was born under the Torch,” Thor replied. Loki perked up a little at the sound of his name and then examined the page.

“Ah, the torch,” Loki nodded. “I was born under that one.”

“So we’ve heard,” Darcy snorted before turning back to Sigyn. “Any others?”

“Well, not so much as a constellation as a star,” Sigyn said, using her fingers to zoom out of the books picture and then identify a star.

“Polaris, the North Star,” Jane said excitedly.

“The Vanir call it the Ship’s Beacon,” Sigyn explained. “My grandfather, being the king of seafarers, liked to quiz us on our stars and constellations. I remember him coming to visit Asgard once when I was little. A rare thing. I was very proud to have answered all of his questions correctly. I asked him if I could go back to Vanaheim with him to see my mother, to live with her. Of course, I didn’t realize the political implications of him taking me with him... but he knelt down beside me, pointed out this star. He told me that all Vanir knew the Ship’s Beacon and as long as I could find it in the sky, I could find my way home.”

“That’s… so sweet… and sad,” Jane frowned.

“You didn’t live with your parents growing up?” Darcy asked curiously.

“My sisters and I lived with my father in his realm until I was about school age,” Sigyn explained. “When our mother’s identity was revealed, there were hostilities between Vanaheim and our father’s realm of Niðavellir. To cease them, it was thought we should be given to a neutral party. My sisters and I were fostered by the Allfather and Allmother.” Sensing that Sigyn was starting to feel sad,
Darcy decided to change the subject.

“What’s your favorite constellation, Thor?” Darcy asked.

“Heiðrún,” Thor responded.

“Heiðrún?” Jane repeated, testing out the word.

“You would love a goat whose job is to produce mead for a perpetually drunken Frost Giant’s drinking horn,” Loki hissed, annoyed.

“Um, what?” Darcy asked.

“Heiðrún the goat, Auðumbla the cow and Himinbrjoter the black ox all graze on Auriga, a field where a great battle once took place,” Sigyn explained, highlighting each constellation as she went along. “Instead of milk, the goat and the cow create mead that is put into Mimirshorn, the constellation of a drinking horn here. Mimir is a Frost Giant who was bent on destruction until he was given the drinking horn. Now, he lays at the foot of the World Tree drinking rather than causing mayhem.”

“Yes, of course,” Loki snorted. “A drunken frost giant. Why don’t we next tell them about the heart of Hrugnir, the Frost Giant hung for his treachery whose heart was ripped out of his body and then placed in the sky as a warning, or perhaps the Eyes of Thjazi, plucked out of his dead body and put into the sky because, despite the fact that he was a Frost Giant, he had beautiful eyes that merited preservation.” Sigyn chewed her lip nervously.

“You guys sure do have a lot of violent stories about Frost Giants,” Darcy mentioned. Loki growled and Thor seemed to hang his head in shame a little bit.

“I don’t recognize any of these,” Jane frowned, chewing on her lip. “Wait, the drinking horn thing might be part of Centaurus!”

“The bull?” Darcy asked.

“No, the centaur,” Jane shook her head.

“Center?” Sigyn asked, confused. “The center of what?”

“It’s a mythological creature,” Jane explained. “Half horse, half man."

“Which half?” Sigyn asked.

“Man top, horse bottom,” Jane said. “Four legs, usually…” Sigyn still looked confused until Darcy whipped out of her phone and showed her a picture. As Jane continued to write down some research and Sigyn looked at centaur pictures, Darcy couldn’t help but notice the obvious tension between the two Odinson brothers.

“So,” Darcy said, sliding the book slightly toward herself, “what is this constellation?”

“It looks like Pisces, but different…” Jane mentioned.

“That is Lax - the Salmon,” Sigyn explained.

“No it is not,” Loki huffed.

“Yes it is,” Sigyn said, drawing a line between the stars, “see, here is his tail and here is his fin and
“On Vanaheim, perhaps that is a fish, but on Asgard it is an autumn leaf,” Loki insisted.

“No, it is Lax the Salmon leaping out of Frananangursfoss the Waterfall,” Sigyn said, continuing to highlight different stars.

“Fra-na-na-what?” Darcy said.

“That is not a fish. It is a leaf,” Loki insisted. “And that is not a waterfall. It is an urn. And the two have nothing to do with each other.”

“It’s a fish on Earth,” Jane informed Loki. “Not a leaf.”

“Oh, Midgard sees a skyfish,” Loki snorted. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Vanaheim has long studied the skies,” Sigyn insisted. “It’s a fish.”

“Not to be controversial, but I don’t see a fish,” Darcy admitted. “I see that urn you were talking about, but no fish.” Loki smirked at his wife triumphantly. Jane then pushed the book toward Thor.

“Thor, what are these? A fish jumping out of a waterfall or a leaf and a pot?” Jane asked.

“An urn,” Loki insisted.

“I am not... skilled enough in celestial studies to partake in this conversation,” Thor admitted.

“It is a fish jumping out of a waterfall,” Sigyn said. “And I can prove it!”

“And how?” Loki snorted.

“What is this?” Sigyn asked, pointing out another constellation to her husband. Loki rolled his eyes.

“Everyone knows that is Skipstorskorinn, the great sailing ship that navigates through the stars,” Loki snorted.

“And why would the Great Sailing Ship be sailing on an urn?” Sigyn smirked triumphantly, “especially when it makes so much more sense for it to be sailing on a river toward a waterfall which the salmon is leaping out of!”

“That is some pretty solid logic,” Darcy nodded at Loki.

“Besides, the Sailing Knot is right here,” Sigyn said.

“Yeah... I recognize none of these stars,” Jane frowned.

“Fine,” Loki said. “Perhaps it does look like a ship sailing on a waterfall a fish is jumping out of...”

“Thank you,” Sigyn smiled at her husband.

“...at least to the untrained eyes of a couple Midgardians,” Loki finished.

“I take it the fish and waterfall versus the urn and leaf thing is a point of contention?” Darcy asked.

“He also insists that Dagstjarna, the Morning Star, is actually the toe of a frost-bitten warrior,” Sigyn huffed.
“It is!” Thor insisted, happy to contribute to the conversation for once. “Mother told us! Aurvandil the Valiant fought a battle on Jotunheim. While his compatriots fled back to Asgard because they could not stand the cold, Aurvandil managed to stay in the cold for a very long time - until all his enemies were defeated. When he returned, however, he found his toe was frostbitten and his wife, who was a sorceress, used her magic to amputate it and then cast it into the sky where it became a star!”

“Um… what?” Darcy said.

“Okay, the morning star…” Jane began jotting down. “On earth, we call that Venus, but this star looks either like Rigel or one of the stars in Corona Borealis.”

“Your mother told you bedtime stories about frostbite amputations?” Darcy asked skeptically.

“What were your bedtime stories about?” Loki asked, trying to hide his actual curiosity. Darcy thought about a variety of sleeping princesses being woken up by kisses from strangers, goblins secretly making shoes and a girl in a red hood and a talking wolf in a story that was a veiled warning against getting raped. She really didn’t want to explain any of those to the Asgardians.

“Nevermind. Children’s stories are just weird in general, I guess,” Darcy shrugged. “So, Lokes, you got a favorite constellation?” Loki seemed a little surprised at being asked, but quickly gathered himself.

“Yes,” Loki said. “In fact, it is from another story mother told us as children.”

“Is it…” Thor began before Sigyn shot him a look that silenced him.

“This here,” Loki said, highlighting some stars in the book, “is Fjölsviður the Watchman. And he is guarding Skjaldborg, the fortress wall that protects a castle. You see, once a long time ago…”

“On Midgard we say ‘Once upon a time,’” Darcy interjected. Loki eyed her up, seeming ready to chastise her for interrupting, but instead went on with his tale.

“Once upon a time,” Loki began again, “there was a boy named Svipdagr. His mother Groa, a powerful sorceress, had died and his father had remarried a cruel woman. His stepmother wanted nothing more than to do away with Svipdagr so her own sons could one day rule their father’s hall. Svipdagr was always a good and obedient boy, despite his stepmother virtually turning him into a servant. When he became a man, his stepmother set him out on a task she deemed impossible. That was to find Menglöð the Wanderer.”

“Menglöð was a famous shieldmaiden and Valkyrie known to traverse the worlds to heal warriors fallen in battle,” Thor interrupted.

“I was getting to that,” Loki snapped at his brother. “Now, Menglöð traveled the worlds extensively - because she was a shieldmaiden and a healer who roamed the worlds looking for warriors in need - and so Svipdagr had no idea where to find her. He used the last bit of magic he had inherited from his mother Groa to summon her spirit and ask his dearly departed mother for advice…”

“Your mother told you a bedtime story about summoning the dead?” Darcy asked incredulously. Loki glared at her. “I’m not saying I don’t like it. I wish more of my bedtime stories had involved dark summoning rituals and necromancy… Nevermind. Carry on.”

“Groa appeared before her son, and he explained his plight,” Loki continued. "She then cast nine charms of protection on her son that would help guard him in each of the nine worlds. For the sake of brevity, I will not detail all of the trials Svipdagr endured on his travels.”
“But I like the one about how he hid in the barrel of mead to sneak into the Fire Giant wedding or how he turned into a sea dragon who guided the Vanir fleet through the magic mist!” Thor bellowed. “Or his skiing contest on Jotunheim!”

“You guys ski?” Jane asked, surprised.

“Mother always told those parts!” Thor insisted.

“Because she hoped that if she talked long enough you would become sleepy and quit jumping up and down on the bed,” Loki rolled his eyes. “And because she spent all that time trying to calm you down, I had to struggle to stay awake for the last part of the story, which was my favorite.”

“Finish the story, dear,” Sigyn prompted her husband. Loki groused but continued on.

“At any rate, Svipdagr arrived at the gates of Skjaldborg, Mengløð’s castle, and there he met Fjölsviður the Gatekeeper,” Loki explained. “Groa had warned her son not to reveal his true name to the Gatekeeper as the Gatekeeper was only allowed to let two people through: his mistress and her betrothed. If Svipdagr gave him the wrong name, he would never be allowed through the gate. Svipdagr refused to give his name, which put Fjölsviður in a difficult predicament. He could not risk turning Svipdagr away if this was his mistress’ intended, but he could not let him in without knowing his name. Svipdagr decided to engage Fjölsviður in a battle of wits. They would each tell riddles and the first one to be stumped would lose. If Svipdagr won, Fjölsviður would have to let him through the gate and if he lost, he would take Fjölsviður position as the gatekeeper.”

“I’m starting to see why you like this story,” Darcy smirked.

“He would always try to answer the riddles before Frigga could when she was reading the stories,” Sigyn grinned. Loki’s face remained expressionless, but even Jane caught the red blush on his cheeks and tops of his ears.

“At any rate, Fjölsviður tells a riddle where the answer is the name of Mengløð’s betrothed,” Loki said. “Svipdagr takes the clues to mean himself and in his eager to win the contest, reveals his own name. He realizes his error and worries that he has lost any chance of passing through the gate. Only Fjölsviður surprises him and informs Svipdagr that he is in fact Mengløð’s betrothed and therefore the only person who is allowed through the gate.”

“So, he could have saved time by just giving his name in the first place?” Darcy laughed.

“Well, yes,” Loki agreed, “but he didn’t know that at the time. At any rate, he is allowed through the gate where he meets Mengløð, and she is the most beautiful woman he has ever met. The pair are married, and Svipdagr’s stepmother becomes a laughingstock when she finds out her husband’s hall is far inferior to the one Svipdagr has achieved through his marriage.”

“And they lived happily ever after?” Darcy supplied.

“At least until Svipdagr angered a powerful sorcerer and was sent to Midgard as a giant dragon where he stumbled upon a bathing king,” Loki shrugged. “The king and his army then killed Svipdagr before he could explain he was actually a person disguised as a dragon.”

“I take it there aren’t very many happily ever afters in Asgardian stories,” Darcy frowned.

“A happy ending to an Asgardian bed-time tale is typically a warrior standing atop the skulls of several Frost Giants,” Loki said. Thor looked abashed, but didn’t say anything.

“It is unfortunate how our cultures sometimes ingrain prejudice from a young age,” Sigyn
contributed. “Why, many of the Vanir tales blame the dwarves for everything or make them into
minstrel-type characters of little worth. And you will be hard pressed to find a Dwarven tale that does
not cast a Fire Giant as the villain.”

“Well, now that we are finished comparing children’s stories,” Loki said, rising up from the table, “I
have some actual work to get to.” He pressed a kiss to Sigyn’s forehead and then strode from the
room.

“I’m guessing it might be a while before you can coax him into a conversation about theoretics,”
Jane frowned.

“I will work on him,” Sigyn promised. “For now, let me tell you of the twin chariots…”

Loki was deep in the middle of a theoretical text analyzing connections between water and ice
magics when a slight tone in the library announced that JARVIS had something to say. In response
to Loki and the Captain’s critiques of how startling the disembodied voice could be, Tony had
created an option for his guests to have JARVIS “announce” himself with a slight chime before just
talking. While Tony was used to JARVIS himself, he realized that his other friends - particularly
those who probably suffered with undiagnosed PTSD - might feel more comfortable with a warning
before a voice from nowhere suddenly started talking to him. He swore it was mainly for Cap’s
benefit, but Tony knew deep down he would feel like a total ass if he brought back all of Loki’s
memories of being tortured by the disembodied voices of his former captors.

“Your Highness,” JARVIS announced. “Sir and Captain Rogers are in the communal living area.
They wish to speak with you on a matter of importance.”

“Inform them I will be ready in ten minutes,” Loki responded. A few seconds later, JARVIS dinged
back into the room.

“Sir is very insistent,” JARVIS replied.

“I must finish taking my notes on this chapter,” Loki said irritably. “If I lose my place, I may not be
able to return to my train of thought.”

“I will inform Sir,” JARVIS nodded.

A few moments passed before JARVIS dinged in again, but Loki interjected before the A.I could
speak with him.

“Tell them I shall be ready when I am ready!” Loki growled.

“Sir has used his override and is in your chambers,” JARVIS informed Loki. “He will be heading
through the library door in…”

“Now,” Tony grinned, a sheepish Steve behind him. “It’s a wonder your wife didn’t put a magical
lock on this door.”

“If you don’t mind, I am in the middle of some very sensitive research,” Loki hissed from over the
top of the desk where he was working. “I would have met you when I was finished.”

“Didn’t you mean: ‘A wizard is never late, nor is he early, he arrives precisely when he means to’?”
Tony asked with a grin.
“Pardon?” Loki said with a raised eyebrow.

“Nevermind,” Tony shook his head. “Spangles and I can wait until you’re finished.”

Steve continued standing awkwardly in the doorway of the library. He had wanted to let Loki finish up whatever he was doing and then report in. However, Tony had been of the opinion that if they gave Loki an inch he would take a mile. Best not to let him think he had the upper hand so earlier on in the game, especially not with the guy who was the king of mind games. Tony, meanwhile, used this as an opportunity to explore the new library Sigyn had created in his tower. Most of the books were written in languages he couldn’t read using letters and characters he had never seen before. While he was normally a man of clean spaces, modernist furniture and science, Tony had to admit the smell of musty old books and what he assumed were herbs and spices was comforting.

Turning a corner, he walked over to a strange table in part of the library. It had podiums with books on either end and in the center of the table was a sort of lazy susan book stand that allowed for twelve books at once to be placed on it and then spun around so the reader could pick which book he or she wanted. It reminded Tony of a similar contraption he had seen as a boy at Monticello, a trip he and his mother had taken with the nannies while his father lobbied for something in D.C. Little Tony had been fascinated with all the things Jefferson had invented or worked on. He returned home and used some spare parts to make his own polygraph, only for Howard to inform him copying letters were for secretaries.

“Do not touch that,” Loki said without looking up as Tony reached for one of the books.

“I wasn’t going to…” Tony began.

“Those books have been arranged in a very specific order,” Loki said, still writing down some notes. “It would not be wise to disturb them.”

“Fine, fine,” Tony said, throwing up his hands.

He continued to wander about until he spied a strange display case with all sorts of weird instruments. Tony really wanted to know what these things were and maybe take them apart. Gazing over the case, he noticed one object in particular seemed to be missing from the velvet cushion where it normally sat. Tony started to reach toward the display case door only to find his feet very suddenly kicked out from beneath him. He looked up from the floor to find Loki angrily towering over him and Steve standing behind Loki, grasping onto the god’s shoulder in case he needed to diffuse a fight.

“Has no one ever told you not to touch things which do not belong to you?” Loki hissed.

“I was just curious…” Tony began.

“Do you go around anyone else’s quarters and disturb their things?” Loki glowered, “or do you just assume your temporary enslavement of me allows you to handle my possessions?”

“I’m sure Tony didn’t mean anything,” Steve said, trying to defuse the situations.

“Is there anything in that case that is dangerous?” Tony asked quizzically. “If so, I think I’m entitled to know.”

“It would be very dangerous to you if you had broken one of those objects,” Loki replied.

“What are they then?” Tony asked, getting up off the floor. “I promise, I won’t touch them.” Loki seemed to relax slightly but was still furious with Tony.
“That is Sigyn’s collection of navigational equipment,” Loki responded.

“Her what?” Tony asked.

“The Vanir are a seafaring culture,” Loki said. “Over the year they have perfected the art of creating unique and beautiful things like orreries, astrolabes, compasses, thermometers, barometers and the like. Many of those are antique, even for Asgard’s standards. Some were made for her great-grandmother. Others were commissioned by the royal metallurgists. Several of them were presents from her grandfather, the king of Vanaheim. All of them are irreplaceable.”

“Oh,” Tony said, feeling bad. “I had no idea…”

“No, and had you broken one in your clumsiness, my wife would have been inconsolable,” Loki hissed. “I understand that you perhaps have no respect for me, but do try to remember all the things Sigyn and I possess we share with each other. Disrespecting something of mine is disrespecting something of hers, and vice versa.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “I sometimes tend to act before I think.”

“I’m familiar with that type of character,” Loki grumbled.

“We should have waited upstairs,” Steve said to Tony pointedly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony groaned. “Lessons learned. Alright, are you ready for our confab?”

“Out of the library,” Loki ordered. “I will not have you setting fire to ancient texts or spilling possibly toxic materials from the potions cabinet.”

“As your landlord and a sort of guardian of peace around the world, I kind of feel like I should know why you have dangerous materials in your library,” Tony said.

“You mean to tell me there are no materials considered dangerous in any of the laboratories in this tower?” Loki snorted.

“Fair point,” Tony nodded.

The three men took seats in the living area. Loki reclined himself on a chaise and Steve did his best to sit upright on another. Tony found it nearly impossible to get comfortable on the furniture. Each piece was either too stiff for him or so soft he would instantly fall asleep if he sat on it for any prolonged period of time. He finally opted for one of the stiffer couches because at least then he would be able to focus.

“So, Cap and I spoke with the mayor today,” Tony said. “Official clean-up efforts for the city are beginning Monday. Two days from now.”

“Allspeak does help me understand basic Midgardian concepts such as time and days of the week,” Loki harrumphed.

“We’ve got you included in the Avengers/Stark Tower team who will be helping with cleanup,” Steve continued. “There will be at least two people with you at all times just as a security measure.”

“Of course,” Loki snorted.

“Work begins early and runs late,” Steve continued. “We have to report at zero-five hundred, which means you should be awake at zero-four hundred if you plan on taking time to dress and eat. Your
civilian clothes should be good enough. I would recommend short sleeves, but long pants and those work boots you were issued. I can probably also get you some work gloves if you would like.”

“Yes, it would be a tragedy if I developed calluses like a peasant,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Are you being sarcastic or not?” Tony asked pointedly. Loki glared at him, but did not answer the question.

“Well, if you have no further need of me, I was working on something before I was rudely interrupted and I would like to get back to my research,” Loki said, rising from where he had been flopped on the chaise. “I trust you are both able to see yourselves out as easily as you were able to see yourselves in?”

“But…” Tony began as Steve stood up. With a warning glance and a guiding hand, Steve began pushing Tony out of the room toward the door.

“We’ll let you know if anything else comes up that pertains to your work,” Steve said as the two men began exiting the room.

“I await such news with bated breath,” Loki snorted.
Sometime Saturday - he wasn’t actually sure when - Tony got the idea into his head to have one small celebration before the official clean-up project began. Knowing that this wasn’t the time for a lavish affair, he decided something nice, more subdued and perhaps with a familial atmosphere was appropriate. So, early Sunday morning the Avengers plus Jane, Darcy, Loki, Sigyn and Pepper found themselves dragged out to Central Park for a picnic. True to form, Tony had planned everything on little sleep and with even less regard to cost.

Despite assurances to everyone the entire thing would be totally under the radar, the Avengers were corralled into a picnic spot selected by Gapstow Bridge overlooking the Pond. Waiting for them were three waiters, a caterer and various expensive and pre-packaged picnic baskets that included everything from strawberries and hand-whipped cream to honest-to-Odin champagne. While both Steve, Pepper and even Bruce went on about it being the most extravagantly unnecessary picnic meal ever assembled, Darcy at least was excited about the fanciness of the meal. Tony noted the Asgardians settled onto the provided picnic blankets and began distributing food from their basket as if deluxe-style sub sandwiches on baguettes, arugula salads with feta cheese, poached pears with apple-saffron chutney and imported cheese and meat platters were regular picnic food for them.

“I know this is how you were raised, Tony,” Pepper groaned, “but I have never been served pate on a picnic in my life.”

“What is edamame anyway?” Steve frowned.

“You realize we could have made this basket ourselves back at the Tower,” Bruce chimed in.

“And for less money, I’m sure,” Steve agreed.

“I can’t believe how much I’m about to sound like Howard,” Tony groaned before turning to the three and yelling. “Just sit down and enjoy your damn pate and goat cheese before I ground you for the rest of the month. Now I feel like I should ignore everyone for the rest of this picnic so I can take a semi-important business call with a client I high-key hate.”

“Okay, Tony,” Pepper said, giving him a slight squeeze. “But I’d rather have the turkey than the pate.”

“More pate and champagne for me,” Clint muttered from where he and Natasha were relaxing under the dark shade of a tree behind all-black clothing and sunglasses.

“You do realize we smuggled Sigyn and Loki out here in their Asgardian garb?” Natasha pointed out. Tony looked over and saw the two of them canoodling on a picnic blanket together, Loki
wearing something more suited to a medieval boar hunt and Sigyn dressed like she was auditioning for the part of Guinevere in _Camelot_. Tony let out a groan.

“How long before SHIELD swoops in and gives me a lecture?” he asked.

“People will probably just think they’re LARPers or something,” Clint shrugged.

“What’s that?” Steve asked curiously.

“One day, your curiosity is going to net you some information you really could have gone without knowing,” Clint replied.

Bruce, instead, then began explaining LARPing to Steve, who actually seemed pretty interested in the idea. Tony filed this away for part of his plan to get Captain America roped into the Dungeons and Dragons game he had started with Bruce, Darcy, Jane and Thor. He knew most people had Cap pinned as a Lawful Good type, but Tony was pretty sure the guy walked a thin line between Chaotic Good and Lawful Neutral. He also had a bet with Bruce over whether or not Steve would choose a cleric for his character.

“So,” Pepper said as Tony settled beside her with his own sandwich and plate of weirdly grilled vegetables and seasoned fruits, “I’m sorry for the outburst. I should have realized you were trying to do something nice for all of us. And that the only type of gestures you were taught to make growing up were grand ones.”

“The clean-up probably isn’t going to be easy, and tensions are already pretty high about everything,” Tony sighed.

“Keeping an eye on Loki?” Pepper asked quietly.

“I’m more worried about things we might find when we clean-up,” Tony sighed. “They ended rescue operations, but body recovery is still going on. I’m not to keen on being involved with that part. Steve and Clint… I mean, I know it’s been part of the job they’ve had before, but I’m sure neither of them want to do it. And with things tense between the brothers… I mean, I know Thor realizes what Loki did cost lives, even if the guy was brainwashed or whatever, but to see it face-to-face… I’d have a hard time forgiving someone for that.”

“Your family has been making weapons for military use since the 1930s,” Pepper pointed out.

“Okay, right,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I mean, it’s one thing to know in the abstract that something you’ve done has killed someone or a bunch of people. It’s quite another to be confronted with the evidence of that death.”

“They come from a warrior culture,” Pepper pointed out. “It might be different.”

“I guess,” Tony shrugged. “Thor seems to really want to patch things up, but Loki… holy shit…”

Pepper followed Tony’s line of gaze to the picnic blanket Sigyn and Loki had commandeered. Loki was lying flat on his back, seemingly asleep, while Sigyn had her arms outstretched with small songbirds resting on both of her hands and her left wrist. Sigyn seemed to actually be talking to the birds, who were chirping back at her. Darcy was videoing the entire thing while Jane sat next to her, slack jawed. Thor was continuing to eat a watercress sandwich as if this was the most normal thing that had ever happened.

“Actually singing… with the birds.”
“Are you… are you seeing this?” Bruce asked Tony, having taken off his glasses, cleaned them and put them back on.

“She’s like Snow White,” Steve said, wide-eyed.

Tony looked over at the super spies to gage their reaction. Clint was taking a nap despite lying on a crooked tree root. Natasha was observing the entire interaction with her usual resting bitch face. As Sigyn continued to chat with the songbirds, a group of ducks had wandered up from the Pool to sit on the dirt beside Sigyn, watching her like small children at story hour. Sigyn continued to speak to them as well. It was only then that Tony really heard her speaking and realized she wasn’t talking in English or any language he realized.

“Bruce…” Tony began.

“Yeah?” Bruce replied.

“What language is she speaking?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know,” Bruce admitted.

“If I had to take a gander, I’d say duck,” Steve piped in.

“Did you just…” Tony began before a loud screech started everyone.

A giant great horned owl swooped in and landed on Loki’s knee, which was propped up as he slept. The sleeping chaos bringer momentarily opened his eyes, looked at the bird, rolled his eyes and then fell back a sleep, an almost Clint-like reaction. The other birds and ducks tittered and skittered until Sigyn said something calming to them. She then pet the owl, who hooted softly and hunkered down, seeming more eager to bask in her presence than prey upon his fellow creatures.

“Do you think she’s going to invite them back to the Tower to clean up?” Bruce asked Tony as a pair of turtles swam out of the water and joined the ducks on the ground.

“They might do a better job than the bots,” Tony said. “Oh, what is this now?”

Out from the tree trotted a large raccoon, who sat next to Sigyn like a well-trained dog. She began talking to it in her own weird language and feeding it some of the leftover meats from the picnic basket. Darcy and Jane began backing away at this point, a little alarmed to see such a creature out in the daytime. It was only when the mother opossum with babies strapped to her back arrived did Sigyn notice her Midgardian friends had begun giving her a wide berth.

“What is wrong?” Sigyn asked, in English this time. Thor looked up, seeing that their friends had left as well.

“Some of these animals… could be rabid…” Darcy pointed out.

“I assure you, all my new friends are well,” Sigyn smiled before seeming to answer a question clicked out by one of the turtles. “Though they do seem to be concerned with how much waste is thrown into their water.”

“Are you… speaking to them?” Bruce asked.

“The Allspeak allows communication with a wide variety of creatures,” Thor explained. “Though personally, I find the languages of fish to be most difficult. It usually sounds heavily accented.” Tony immediately turned to Pepper.
“We are not taking her to the Central Park Zoo to see if that monkey really stole your ice cream cone when you were five,” Pepper informed him before Tony could even open his mouth completely. “And odds are that monkey died several years ago.”

“You can talk to animals?” Jane said to Thor, nearly gushing.

“How else do you think Odin communicates with those odious ravens of his,” Loki snorted, finally contributing to the conversation. He leaned up, slightly startling the owl on his knee, and then looked around before addressing his wife. “I see you have garnered quite the congregation of devotees, lykyng.”

“They are most friendly,” Sigyn agreed.

“Okay, about now is when I wake up and realize I’m in the lab, right?” Tony asked.

“No,” Bruce shook his head. “I’ve been pinching myself since the ducks showed up. We’re awake.”

“Or having a mass hallucination,” Tony grumbled. “This sounds like something that Hammer Tech would do.”

“Hammer’s in jail,” Pepper reminded him.

“You can’t stop stupid,” Tony shook his head.

“Oh,” Pepper snorted at him, “I’m aware.”

A small gust of wind blew and then suddenly, one by one, Sigyn’s menagerie of wild creatures began to depart. They seemed to say farewell to her as they left and then Sigyn responded in kind. When the raccoon last departed carrying off a sandwich Sigyn insisted was to help feed his family, Tony decided it was probably time to call the group picnic quits. As the picnic preparers began cleaning up, Tony suggested a walk around the park, which was quickly shot down by Clint and Natasha. Apparently, the SHIELD agents monitoring them were getting restless and Fury had sent several text messages already demanding that Stark be given a briefing on the meaning of “under the radar.”

“So,” Tony said when they were all finally back in his armored limo, “you guys talk to animals.”

“We have the ability to talk to animals,” Loki snorted. “Not all of us actually partake in them.”

“What, get cussed out by a bear too many times?” Tony snorted.

“Thor is the one who has trouble communicating with creatures,” Loki replied. “If it isn’t a horse or a goat or a dog, he has little interest in speaking to it.”

“I find animals are rarely interested in what I have to say,” Thor countered, annoyed that Loki would bring such a thing up in front of Jane.

“And surely that is the fault of the creatures, not the one addressing them,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“So you talk to animals a lot?” Steve asked Loki conversationally. Loki looked Steve up and down for a moment, as if deciding to answer.

“With the amount of pets Sigyn collects, it would be more difficult if I didn’t,” Loki replied. “Jor responds best to his own language. As does Fenrir.”

“The big dog?” Steve said, thinking back to the conversation he had with Tony about his Asgardian
“He is a wolf,” Sigyn corrected.

“I thought we agreed he was a hellhound,” Clint pointed out.

“That too,” Sigyn grinned.

“Besides, when one transforms oneself into a creature, it is very helpful to speak the language,” Loki said. “Helps you to blend in.”

“Most of the time,” Sigyn shrugged. “There are some who are clever enough to still deduce when it is you and when it is an actual creature.”

“Thor isn’t that clever,” Loki snorted, looking over at his brother who was now regaling Jane and Darcy with a tale of how Odin had tamed his ravens.

“What about the time you transformed yourself into a pigeon,” Sigyn pointed out, “and Thor deduced which pigeon you were because you were the only one not interested in pecking at the bread crumbs he was throwing?”

“I thought we agreed to never speak of that again,” Loki gritted out.

“That is the best thing I have ever heard,” Clint grinned. “I am officially telling everyone at SHIELD about that.” Loki glared at Clint, then Sigyn and then huffed into his seat, refusing to speak to anyone else for the rest of the drive.

Loki was still making a show of not talking to his wife when they arrived at their rooms in the tower. Sigyn had opted to ignore her husband in turn, knowing that his need for her attention usually trumped his righteous indignation over something she had done. While her husband sprawled out in the living area to sulk, Sigyn began making herself some tea. She debated whether or not to pour her husband a cup and stealthily slide it over toward him when Thor burst into their rooms without knocking. Loki sat up at Thor’s intrusion and Sigyn found herself nearly dropping the ancient tea cup in her hands.

“Brother…” Thor began.

“Why, hello, Thor,” Loki interrupted. “We weren’t expecting you. No, Sigyn and I aren’t up to anything right now. Would you like to come in and chat?” Thor seemed momentarily confused by his brother’s interjection, but quickly snapped back to his original purpose.

“Brother,” Thor attempted again. “I would speak with you.”

“It seemed to me as if you were already doing so,” Loki snorted.

“I meant at length,” Thor said, before turning to look where Sigyn was standing in the kitchen, “and perhaps in private?” Sigyn raised her eyebrows at her brother-in-law.

“Not that you understand the difference between shared and personal space,” Loki replied with a huff, “but do you not find it highly presumptuous to come into the rooms I share with my wife and demand privacy? Sigyn has more right than you to be in our common areas, and I daresay anything you have to say to me you can say in front of her. Had you wanted to have a ‘private chat’ it would have been better to invite me into your chambers.”
“I am sorry,” Thor began, nervously, “I did not mean offense…”

“You always maintain that you never meant to offend,” Loki snorted, “and yet you spend so little time thinking upon whether or not your words and deeds are offensive.”

“Yes, well, that is something I have been trying to work on,” Thor admitted. “Though, to be terribly honest, I’m not sure the best way to go about such a task.”

“Actually thinking might be a good start,” Loki snorted.

“I was thinking before I came here,” Thor insisted, a bit annoyed. “I thought you might be more willing to converse with me in a setting you found comfortable, such as your own rooms.”

“That was thoughtful of you, Thor,” Sigyn interjected before her husband could vocalize the cutting remark on the tip of his tongue. Loki glared at his wife who leveled him with an equally threatening stare. “I do believe a talk is long overdue between the two of you. Perhaps in the library? I will make you both something to drink.”

“Thank you, Sister,” Thor smiled brightly, getting up and heading toward the library door.

“Wife…” Loki hissed.

“No,” Sigyn cut him off. “This is something you need to do. Prolonging this conversation will only hurt you both. Besides, he is your brother…”

“He is NOT my brother,” Loki thundered.

“Family is more than blood,” Sigyn insisted. “He still thinks of himself as your brother, whether you are willing to accept it as such or not. Now, go in there and let Thor say what he needs to say. You are in no obligation to agree with him or forgive him, but at least allow him to get whatever this is off his chest.”

“I doubt very much he will allow me the same courtesy,” Loki snorted.

“If I have to arrange for him to, I shall,” Sigyn replied.

Loki eyed his wife skeptically. It was true that Thor looked to her as if she was his own little sister by blood, and Loki knew Thor had always taken on a role as a brotherly protector in Sigyn’s life. She was one of the few people the head-strong thunder god listened to - when he stopped to listen to advice, at least - and Sigyn did have a way of making people do whatever she wanted. Loki doubted very much Thor would say anything earth-shattering or that made up for the years of pain Loki had endured both on Asgard and beyond, but perhaps letting his oafish ex-brother feel like he had done something would be enough to get Thor off his back for a while. And at least appearing to make nice with Thor would probably please Sigyn, which usually had side benefits he found very pleasing himself.

“If anything in the library is broken during the course of our ‘discussion,’ I will be swift to remind you that this meeting was your idea,” Loki informed his wife.

“Of course, dear,” Sigyn smirked in return.

Loki allowed his wife to give him a comforting kiss on the cheek before he strode into the library after Thor. He half expected to find Thor had already broken something by accidentally knocking into it or crushing something under his unruly strength. Most of Thor’s Midgardian friends probably had no idea, but Thor had always been a rather clumsy child, leaving a path of destruction
everywhere he went. It was only his warriors training that helped him get something of a handle on his ox-like strength and work with it rather than against it. Still, that had been too late for the string of young Loki’s toys, broken in his brother’s wake. It was a petty grievance to still hold onto - this much Loki knew - but it seemed that so often whenever Thor got involved with anything in Loki’s life it ended up shattered in some way. Loki found his brother looking at a shelf with a collection of children’s books, favorite childhood stories of Sigyn and Loki’s the pair kept both for nostalgia and as a hope for the future.

“It is good to see you and Sigyn together again,” Thor mentioned as Loki closed the door behind himself. “It warms my heart to see you both laughing again.”

“Midgard has made you sentimental,” Loki snorted.

“Perhaps,” Thor shrugged. “Perhaps I have become more sentimental because I have seen what it means to lose things, to lose people I care for…. It brings a sort of weakness…”

“And you have never been one for being weak,” Loki scoffed.

“I have always thought of Sigyn in the same way as Mother…” Thor continued, “as having that quiet, inner strength that some so easily dismiss until they find it turned on them. When we told her… after you fell… I expected Sigyn to unleash some of that subdued rage. Instead, I have never seen her so weak…more weak than I ever thought possible…”

“Why do you tell me this?” Loki asked harshly.

“It frightened me,” Thor admitted. “To be perfectly honest… and please do not fault me for this Brother… but I had always believed that, in a way, Sigyn had a strength that would allow her to survive without you but that if something - Norn’s forbid - happened to her, you would not be able to carry on.”

“I do not care to test such a theory,” Loki said. “But what makes you think Sigyn was not surviving? I have heard the tales of her strange behavior after my disappearance. She had barely a year to mourn and we live thousands. What makes you think that she would not have carried on?”

“Mother told me the same thing,” Thor smiled in spite of himself. “I am beginning to believe Lady Sif is correct and that women are far stronger than men in ways I do not realize.”

“What you don’t know could fill this library thricefold,” Loki snorted.

“Brother…” Thor began.

“Don’t…” Loki interrupted.

“Loki, then,” Thor attempted again, “you told me that you had lived your life in my shadow…”

“I was under the influence of mind control,” Loki reminded him.

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean there was not a grain of truth to what you told me,” Thor said. “All this time… all this time, and I saw you beside me but you saw a shadow.”

“We see what we want to see,” Loki said airily. “One does not need to master illusions to know that.”

“It grieves me that I could not see your pain,” Thor shook his head. “I prided myself in being close to you, as being your brother in not just blood but also in friendship, and yet I failed to notice that I
myself was causing harm.”

“We were never as close as you seem to believe,” Loki snorted.

“We were in childhood,” Thor said.

“Ah, yes, until you met your friends,” Loki replied. “Fandral and then Hogun. Sif. Volstagg. The more room you made in your life for others the less you had for your annoying, little brother, isn’t that right?”

“It wasn’t my intention to slight you,” Thor said. “And I think it unfair to slight me for befriending others. After all, I never slighted you for how close you became to Sigyn, for the fact that your duties as a husband came before your duties as a brother.”

“Never slighted me for Sigyn?” Loki said, furiously. “I seem to recall you rather went into a rage when I confessed by ardor for her!”

“Initially,” Thor said, “but that was more because I saw her as my own sister and it confused me you did not see her the same way. It wasn’t that I thought her unworthy of you or you unworthy of her. I just had a hard time thinking of her as your paramour and not one of the little sisters our mother had adopted. Besides, you would not have been able to pull off your scheme to marry her without my aid. I think that speaks more about my support for your marriage than any initial reaction I had against it.”

“One could argue that decision came more out of your desire to protect Sigyn than help in my happiness,” Loki scoffed.

“You have said you doubt our love for you, brother,” Thor said. “Mine. Father’s. Even Mother’s… but never her’s. I wish I knew what I could do or say to show you that you will always be my brother, and I will always love you as such. I wish I knew how to make amends for what I have done to cause you pain.”

“You once swore you would destroy all of Jotunheim,” Loki said quietly, “and all of its people.”

“Once, when I was a child…” Thor began.

“And again barely a year ago,” Loki pointed out.

“I did not know any different, and neither did you at that point,” Thor reminded him. “And when we were children you made the same claims, not knowing you spoke of those from whence you came.”

“I said those things to please Odin,” Loki spat, “not that it ever worked.”

“I fear we have both said and done foolish things in the hopes of gaining our Father’s praise,” Thor admitted. “I had I known then that you were a Frost Giant, I could not have hated them. Not entirely, at least. I could not have believed all the things Father told us about them had I known you were one, because you are my brother, and I could never believe you were as evil as his stories made things seem. A part of me… a part of me wonders if he told us those tales in the hopes it would scare us away from Jotunheim so you would never find out your true heritage.”

“Sometimes,” Loki said quietly, having never considered such a thing, “you are smarter than you look.”

“I can understand if you hate Father for what he did, for taking you,” Thor said. “But I don’t regret his actions, for then I would not have you as a brother. I know you may not believe me, but watching
you fall… All I could think of was all the mistakes I had made, all the times I could have been a better brother, a better friend to you. Oddly enough, it was a relief to see you again in chains for at least, I thought, I had a second chance to prove to you I could be a better brother. Perhaps not a perfect one, but at least better than I have been.”

“And what if that is not what I want?” Loki asked. “What if I have no desire to have a brother or a family such as it was on Asgard?”

Thor was silent for a moment.

“I suppose I will have to respect your wishes,” Thor said finally, “though it is not what I want myself. But if that is what you decide, know that if you are ever in need of me I will not hesitate to offer you aid.”

“Between Thanos, the Other, and… other things that have happened to me recently,” Loki said, “I do not know if it would be wise at this time for me to take on any more family or friends. It is hard enough worrying about how to protect Sigyn from whatever unnatural forces could be sent my way. I don’t think I could handle another such burden.”

“You would not be handling it alone,” Thor said.

“If I am to call you Brother again,” Loki said, beginning to pace, “in the purely hypothetical, of course, it would perhaps take time. A great deal of time. I have found such relationships do not fall from a single blow but are rather chipped away at over time until they are weakened and break. And it takes time to fix those things that are broken, especially if one wants to do a proper job.”

“I suppose that is a fair assessment,” Thor agreed. The two brothers stood in an awkward silence for a few moments, neither sure what to say or do at that point.

“Mother said they brought Sigyn in for questioning after my… disappearance,” Loki said finally. “Sigyn would tell me nothing of it, save that you put an end to it.”

“Father bent to the pressure of the nobles… and I believe a bit of his own curiosity,” Thor said. “She faced them bravely. Not that I would have expected any less. She knew nothing, of course, and I have to admit, I was a bit furious that they did not believe her. Sigyn is not one for telling lies.”

“She has me to do that for her,” Loki smirked.

“They did not hurt her at all, if that is what you wish to know,” Thor said. “They just took her into the torture chamber and sat her down among the instruments there, as if that would have been enough to intimidate her. Father put her under house arrest, but I believe that was more for her protection than anything. We all thought her insane from grief, but I am starting to believe that was a mask so she could conduct her search for you uninterrupted.”

“My wife has always been a clever one,” Loki said proudly.

“More clever than even you, I am starting to realize,” Thor smirked.

“You are probably correct, though I would be loathe to admit it,” Loki said.

“Well, I have promised an evening meal with Jane,” Thor said, “and apparently the women of Midgard are not as attracted to the musk of battle or physical exertion, so I should perhaps wash first.”

Loki followed his brother out of the library where Thor bade farewell to Sigyn, kissing his sister-in-
law on the cheek and informing her that Jane and Darcy both looked forward to her aid in the labs tomorrow. It was only then Loki realized Sigyn had not delivered the tea she had promised the brothers, nor had she even brewed a pot as she promised. Loki smirked as he approached his wife, knowing full well she had left them alone on purpose, probably using the tea as an excuse to butt in if she felt they were not addressing their problems in a civil matter. His wife was very clever, indeed.

“How was your discussion?” Sigyn asked as they wrapped their arms around each other.

“I am surprised you were not listening at the door,” Loki snorted.

“As if I would resort to such a common form of eavesdropping,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. Loki grinned and kissed his wife.

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Despite the fact that Tony needed to be up at four in the next morning to prepare for clean-up duty, Pepper found him in the lab with Bruce around midnight. Pepper was certain they were about to begin an argument about Tony’s sleep patterns. He insisted that staying up all night was preferable to getting up early, but Pepper had a feeling not sleeping was not conducive to working on what was essentially a construction site. When she walked into the room, clad in her pajamas, she found Tony and Bruce mulling over a digital scan of a human brain JARVIS had on display. Tony also had various articles and research on language centers of the brain pulled up.

“Tony, it’s after midnight,” Pepper announced. “You need to get to bed.”

“In a second,” Tony promised. “Bruce and I are onto something. Maybe a major breakthrough.”

“On what?” Pepper asked.

Bruce muttered something, almost seeming ashamed of the answer. Pepper looked at Tony who then rolled his eyes and sighed.

“We are working on a device that can translate animal language into human language,” Tony said.

“Tony,” Pepper groaned.

“We already have devices that translate languages into other languages,” Tony argued. “If I can make an earpiece that can translate Mandarin into English as a person speaks and vice versa, why shouldn’t I be able to make a device that can translate bird-speak into English?”

“This is ridiculous,” Pepper shook her head.

“For the record, madam,” JARVIS announced, “I would like to state I argued against this line of research from the beginning.”

“Traitor,” Tony yelled at his A.I.

“It has practical applications,” Bruce insisted.

“Think about how much easier this would make things for biologists, zoologists… instead of your vet trying to figure out what is wrong with your pet, he can just ask your dog or your cat or your hamster what’s bugging them!” Tony continued. “Being able to actually understand animals might also help conservation movements.”

“And tomorrow you’re going to want to bring back dinosaurs based on DNA you’ve discovered
frozen in amber,” Pepper snorted. “This isn’t a breakthrough. This is a horror movie with a science-fiction basis. No, Tony. I am shutting this down.”

“But Pep!” Tony protested.

“Talking to animals is not science you need to be doing,” Pepper insisted. “Talking to animals is a premise for a beer commercial, and not a very good one.”

“We could make billions!” Tony said.

“You already have billions,” Pepper said before turning to Bruce. “And I’m surprised at you, Bruce. I really thought you had more common sense than to get on board with a project this ridiculous.”

“I always kind of wanted to talk to my dog when I was a kid,” Bruce said.

“Shutting down this project is a travesty, Pepper,” Tony said. “A travesty!”

“Just because Asgardians can talk to animals doesn’t mean they need to. Or that you need to,” Pepper said.

“Just one,” Tony tried to reason. “Just one device that I can install in the suit. We can use it on missions!”

“You’re coming to bed now,” Pepper ordered.

“Fine, I’m coming to bed now,” Tony grumbled, “but if you get kidnapped by an army of mutant honey badgers and the only way to talk them down is to speak their language, I hope you look back on this day and realize you sabotaged yourself.”

“I’m sure I will,” Pepper said, guiding Tony up the stairs and toward the elevator.

Chapter End Notes

The story of Loki as a pigeon hiding from Thor is actually Marvel canon. It appeared in Journey into Mystery #88 - “The Vengeance of Loki” (1963).
Working on the Chain Gang

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Loki learns to accept the things he cannot change. For the most part, anyway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When four a.m. on Monday rolled around, Loki was still deeply asleep, wrapped in the warm, comforting sheets and blankets of his bed with Sigyn tucked safely into his side. When, five minutes after he was supposed to have awoken, Loki had not stirred from the bed, JARVIS began sounding the beeping alarm that Tony had suggested if Loki was not awake on time. While Loki himself was not stirred by the noise, Sigyn awoke and found herself trying to gather her wits as the alarm continued to sound overhead. She groaned, realizing Loki had most likely overslept, and then donned her dressing robe as the alarm began to sound louder. With a sigh, Sigyn realized she was going to have to do this the hard way. With a flick of her wrist, the shower in the bathroom turned on. Loki let out a slight snore, indicating he was fully intending to sleep through the ever-louder alarm. With another gesture, Sigyn began levitating her husband’s body, pulling him up from his pillows as the blankets slid off of him and back onto the bed. Sometimes, this gesture was enough to wake him up, but Loki was either firmly asleep or pretending in the hopes Sigyn would take pity and let him sleep. Instead, Sigyn gently guided her husband’s body into the freezing cold shower.

As an anguished cry came from the room, Sigyn got up and headed into the kitchenette to begin preparing coffee for herself and her husband. While she had been instructed by Lady Darcy on the proper use of the coffee pot, Sigyn usually found herself using her seiðr to finish the process once she had measured out the appropriate amount of beans and water. The pot finished faster through that method. By the time her dripping wet husband had emerged from their bedroom, Sigyn had a steaming warm cup ready to pop into his hands.

“SIGYN!” Loki screeched as he emerged from their bedroom, dripping wet in his pajama pants and nothing else. His long hair was sticking all over his face and he looked like a drowned rat.

“Good morning, dearest,” Sigyn said, presenting her husband with a cup of coffee. “You best dry your hair and dress. You have to begin your work soon, and you are already ten minutes late.”

“You have soaked me!” Loki protested angrily.

“You would not awaken,” Sigyn shrugged. “Better for you to be cross with me for awakening you than everyone to be cross with you for being late.”

“There is no way my hair will dry in time,” Loki muttered. With a roll of her eyes, Sigyn again waved her hand and Loki found his hair magically dried. Unfortunately, Sigyn’s seiðr always seemed to bring out the curling cowlick he could never manage to tame.

“Now, go put on your clothes,” Sigyn instructed. “The Captain said there would be a large breakfast in the communal dining area this morning to start the day off right.”
“I don’t want to eat with them,” Loki muttered as he headed into the bedroom to find his clothing for the day.

“You will need your strength,” Sigyn called after him. “We’ll go together.”

“I will not make small talk!” Loki shouted back at her.

“I’m not sure I would want you to,” his wife replied.

When Loki emerged from their bedroom, Sigyn had to admit she rather liked the Midgardian wardrobe required for his work. While the t-shirt was a little loose, the trousers Darcy had explained to her were called “blue jeans” fit his form rather nicely. The boots with steel toes also gave him the look of perhaps a woodsman or another type of man who often worked long hours outdoors with his hands. To distract herself from any potential fantasies, Sigyn made a mental note to acquire some of these boots for her brothers, who would no doubt be interested in their craftsmanship and practical application.

“Are you not dressing for the morning meal?” Loki scoffed at his wife. With a smirk, Sigyn twirled slightly, allowing her seiðr to do the change for her. Loki rolled his eyes, wondering slightly if his wife was toying with him over his lack of seiðr.

“Now,” Sigyn said, beginning to lead her husband out of their rooms and to the elevator, “please at least try to be on your best behavior today. I am not saying you have to make any new friends, but at least don’t completely alienate everyone.”

“I promise not to turn anyone to ash, not that I have the ability,” Loki huffed. Sigyn glared at him. “Fine. I promise not to ruffle any feathers whatsoever. But if someone engages with me…”

“Then you will inform someone of it rather than trying to handle things yourself,” Sigyn instructed. “You are to avoid getting yourself in trouble.”

“I am not running to Stark or - Norn’s forbid - Thor if I get into a scrape,” Loki replied.

“You will if it prevents you from being sent back to Asgard in shackles,” Sigyn ordered. Loki sighed as the elevator opened and they both stepped in. “And remember…”

“I don’t need reminding that you foolishly agreed to take on punishment with me so that any minor infraction I commit now condemns us both to an eternity of imprisonment or worse. Honestly, Sigyn, you should have probably left me to rot,” Loki glowered.

“I was only going to say remember to take care of yourself, and wear your gloves” Sigyn said quietly, her husband’s angry tirade having sucked the joviality out of her. “I’d rather you not get hurt.” With a sigh, Loki pulled his wife toward him and placed a kiss on top of her head, another on her forehead and finally her lips.

“I will be on my best behavior and I will be safe,” Loki promised her. “Thor is the one you have to worry about. He will probably try to lift some rock to heavy for him and end up crushed underneath it.”

“Well, if that happens,” Sigyn said as the elevator doors opened, “at least try not to laugh too hard.”

While Odin’s sentence of hard labor on Midgard might have intended to torture his second son physically, Loki quickly found the physical labor part of the clean-up process was the least difficult.
Within the first thirty minutes of meeting the SHIELD-only crew he had been conveniently selected to work alongside, Loki realized he was in for one of the most mentally exhausting assignments of his life. The issue wasn’t that conversation was discouraged but rather that Loki learned that most of the men he was assigned to work with could basically pass as Midgardian Thor-prototypes. Most had military backgrounds, few seemed like they had cracked open a book in their entire lives, and all seemed eager to prove their physical prowess. 

Worse were the conversations Loki found himself forced to listen to. Topics seemed to revolve mainly around some kind of sporting event they had all watched while intoxicated, predictions about the outcomes of future sporting events, the physical attributes and sexual prowess of certain women in their lives, workout regimes, and the best locations to acquire certain foodstuffs. Loki was almost positive he had heard more asinine and inane conversations between Thor, Volstagg and Fandral but he couldn’t quite remember when. Perhaps the worst thing about it was the lead crew member had taken to calling Loki “Bub,” a nickname soon picked up by the rest of the group. 

The garb he was made to don as part of this work made everything even more humiliating. While the tough boots and work gloves he had been provided weren’t terrible, the atrocious neon yellow hard hat, matching vest, and goggle-glasses required on the jobsite were annoying - even if they were allegedly for protection. He had also been made to wear an itchy and uncomfortable facial mask that was supposed to prevent the wearer from breathing in anything hazardous. Loki scoffed at the thought his superior physiology could be affected by Midgardian concerns like dust and mold, but the unflattering costume seemed to be the required work uniform for everyone on the site. 

Well, save for his erstwhile brother and the Man of Iron. While the Captain had donned the same gear - as Stark said “to set a good example like the Boy Scout he is” - Stark himself wore his suite, insisting it was far safer than anything anyone else had. The fact that he could lift abnormal amounts of concrete and other large debris was just a “side bonus.” Thor donned his Asgardian armor and had brought Mjolnir for aid. However, the hammer hung limply from his side as Thor instead picked up large blocks of stone and metal, either tossing them into the provided dumpsters and dump trucks or putting them back in place. The Captain, as well, was doing quite a bit of heavy lifting and a contest seemed to develop between him, Stark and Thor as to who was doing the most work. 

Loki, however, was not able to participate in this way. As he was supposed to be an “average Joe,” he was not allowed to demonstrate his godly abilities such as super strength. Instead, Loki had been put with other simple Midgardians tasked with cleaning up small pieces of debris, working to lift furniture, pieces of carpet, and small pieces of debris out of the area. With him at all times were the Son of Coul and Barton. While Coulson at least worked somewhat in the cleanup, Barton followed behind Loki every step of the way, glaring at his former captor and making a show of sharpening a knife whenever he got a chance to sit for more than a moment or two. 

While many of the other SHIELD volunteers, hired cleaning, professionals and Stark Industries employees seemed most put out by the heaviness of the objects they were hauling, Loki found the worst part of the entire endeavor was its dreary repetitiveness. Pick something up, carry it out, put it in a dumpster, and repeat. He couldn’t help but feel it would have been more of a service to Midgard if Odin had let him keep his seiðr. It would have been a few movements of his hand and all of the city would have been returned to its former state - more or less. It probably would have cost the inhabitants a lot less both in terms of time and money. But then again, no one seemed interested in hearing what he had to say about the matter. 

When it came time for the midday meal, he found himself corralled with the others to eat food prepared by some other volunteers. While Stark could have easily provided them with more lavish sustenance, the desire to be “one of the guys” meant everyone ate the same bland offerings. Loki found himself eating a sandwich filled with mustard, lettuce, cheese and a strange meat he was
informed by the Captain was called “bologna.” Loki did not appreciate the taste of it. Even stranger where the so-called “chips,” pieces of what the son of Coul explained were thinly cut and then fried potatoes. All of this was washed down with a bubbly “soda” drink. The sandwich was hardly enough to tide Loki over, though he didn’t exactly want another. Thor insisted he try the turkey or ham, but Loki was wary of a second gastronomic disappointment. While Thor and the Captain continued to eat a few more leftover sandwiches the rest of the group had not touched, Loki went back to work.

When mid-afternoon rolled around, even Loki was feeling some minor strains and pains from the day’s worth of work. Those around him were also visibly tired, their laughing and joking from the more and following the noon meal having disappeared into tired grunts, brief acknowledgements and the occasional reminder to stay hydrated or protect oneself from harm. Loki had not spoken really at all the entire time, feeling that not bonding with any of his coworkers was the best way to avoid getting into trouble. The Son of Coul had retired from the more backbreaking work, instead helping Barton guard and dispense water to the workers. Following the luncheon, Barton had decided Loki was somewhat trustworthy and allowed him to work without having someone stalking behind.

As much of the debris was now removed from the building they had been working on, other forms of cleanup had begun. Several workers were removing carpet while others were taking out broken windows. A broom had been shoved into Loki’s hands with the instruction to sweep up the remaining small pieces of debris on one particular floor into a pile. Thor most definitely would have protested such as a task as women’s work - unless Sif was about - but Loki didn’t mind an easier task, particularly one that left him alone with his thoughts. Of course, he wasn’t alone with them for long before Stark’s voice interrupted.

“Looking good,” Stark said from behind him. “It’s nice we’ve been able to tackle a whole building in one day. Not that there aren’t like a hundred more out there.”

Loki didn’t respond, instead focusing on his sweeping.

“A bunch of us are thinking about grabbing something to eat when this thing finishes up before we head back to the Tower,” Tony said. “Not sure if we’re going to end up with burgers or pizza. There’s a pretty decent Vietnamese joint around the corner too…”

“Wouldn’t it be counterproductive to my attempts to - as you say - ‘blend in’ if I accompanied you for supper?” Loki asked.

“Well, maybe… but I mean, Agent’s coming,” Tony began. “And some of the other agents might tag along…”

“I would much rather prefer to return home to my wife when this is completed for the day,” Loki replied, trying to keep any harshness out of his voice.

“No, I get it,” Tony nodded. “But if you want us to bring anything back… just let JARVIS know.” Loki nodded, focusing back on his work until Stark awkwardly walked away.

Loki managed to avoid contact with anyone else until the head of the job site decided it was getting dark and they should call it a day. Loki was instructed to keep his awful hat and goggles for the next day, but he would receive a new face mask. Dismissed, he intended to head back to the Tower on foot as Stark seemed to be taking the crew going out for supper in his limo. However, he found himself handled into the limo and informed they would drop him off at the Tower first. As Stark cracked jokes and Steve received praise from the other SHIELD agents, Loki found himself crushed between Thor and the side of the car.
“A hard day’s work well done brother,” Thor boomed, causing Loki to wince as Thor clapped him on the back.

“I do not believe calling me ‘brother’ is a wise method of keeping my identity secure,” Loki huffed.

“Come now, be of good cheer!” Thor said happily. “We are to dine upon the Midgardian delicacy of hamburgers. Cheeseburgers if one puts cheese upon them. Lady Darcy insists that the pizza is the best fare Midgard has to offer, but I find hamburgers just as delectable.”

“I am not going to dine with you,” Loki muttered, annoyed. “I am going home to my wife.” Thor’s face fell slightly, but perked up again quickly.

“Well, I could not begrudge you the company of your comely bride,” Thor said. He added with a lascivious wink. “I am sure she is eager to tend you after a long day of hard labor.”

“I am surprised you are not as eager to return to your Lady Jane,” Loki said, wanting to change the subject before Thor made a crude remark they would both regret. “After all, you have seen her so sparingly since your… what was it… three day jaunt when you were last on Midgard?”

“Lady Jane as her research,” Thor admitted. “By the time we have eaten and returned to the Tower, she may still be engaged in her work. To tell the truth, I often feel ashamed to disturb her since it is her life’s work, but Lady Darcy insists she needs distractions upon occasion. And before you say anything, yes, I see the hilarity that I have fallen for a scholar when I myself could barely keep my eyes open during my own schooling. But Jane does not mind that I am a warrior and not a scholar on Asgard.”

“Well, you are from Asgard,” Loki shrugged. “I am sure that foreignness provides some sort of alluring mystique for you. I doubt very much that she would find you so attractive if you were both from Midgard, and I doubt very much you would have developed an interest in her if she was from Asgard since you pay so much attention to those of her profession who are employed by the Allfather. I suppose your differing planes of existence is what brought you together.”

“Yes,” Thor said, frowning.

Apparently, it had not occurred to Thor that he would have completely overlooked his lady love had she been an Asgardian cosmologist rather than one from Midgard. Thankfully, Thor was silent the rest of the ride allowing Loki to sit in peace - though it was hard to not laugh at Thor’s contemplative face, which was so much like his constipated one. The conveyance stopped in the Tower garage and Loki found himself met with guards to escort him upstairs while the rest headed out for their meal. Annoyed, he found himself chaperoned until he got into the elevator leading into the private chambers of the Avengers.

Dirty, exhausted and with his patience wearing thin, Loki returned to his chambers at the Tower eager to take a warm bath, eat a good meal and then perhaps sleep for the next week. When he opened the door, he found Sigyn in one of the simpler dresses she usually donned for gardening or walks in the woods, humming and dancing around the kitchenette. When her beaming smile met his own gaze, Loki felt almost instantly reinvigorated by his wife’s presence. He then caught a whiff of the comforting smells coming from the kitchen, smells that reminded him of the kitchens in the Asgardian palace.

“There’s a hot bath waiting for you,” Sigyn informed her husband. “I also laid out some comfortable clothing for you. When you are finished, I should have the evening meal prepared.”

Too tired to thank his wife or point out how he felt cooking was far beneath the duties expected of a
princess, Loki merely nodded and headed into the bathroom. The warm water had been scented with soiling and healing oils, relaxing and refreshing his body. Had it not been for the meager lunch that was now causing his stomach to growl, Loki was certain he could have easily fallen asleep in the bathwater. He dressed in the comfortable Midgardian nightwear Sigyn had provided and then ambled back into the main chamber where Sigyn was placing various dishes at the dining room table. Taking his seat, Loki surveyed some of his favorite foods - albeit modified with Midgardian ingredients - including roasted lamb with carrots and potatoes, freshly baked bread with jam and butter, creamed cabbage, and hazelnut cake for dessert. Sigyn finished up with bringing Loki a few bottles of ale and a cup of tea for herself.

“You hate lamb,” Loki mentioned finally as his wife took her own seat at the table.

“But it’s your favorite,” Sigyn shrugged. “I thought it might be nice after…”

“How did you put all this together?” Loki said, surprised.

“I’m not that terrible of a cook, am I?” Sigyn smirked. Loki looked a little chastened.

“What I meant was…” Loki began.

“Lady Darcy and Lady Pepper helped,” Sigyn explained, beginning to spoon out the various vegetable dishes onto her own plate. “Lady Jane became very focused on her research, and while she worked, Lady Darcy showed me how to use the oven and the other cooking devices. Did you know Midgard has a machine strictly for making bread? At any rate, we were able to scrounge up most of the food from the tower, but Lady Pepper was able to get a lamb delivery from a butcher shop nearby. She also showed me how to use the grocery ordering service so we may acquire some foods that remind of us home. Lady Darcy is eager to learn about our cuisine, and she wants to help me cook a meal for the team so they can sample it. I was thinking about waiting until the fish order JARVIS placed for me arrives from Norway.” Loki frowned slightly, and Sigyn knew he wasn’t keen on the idea of his wife serving as a personal cook to the Avengers.

“Well,” Loki said finally, “if it does not cause you stress and is something you would like to do, then that might be nice. And I suppose preparing such a meal would be more manageable if Lady Darcy helped.”

“She wants to learn all of the dessert recipes, though I warned her Idunn is the better cook,” Sigyn said happily. “I made her a small hazelnut cake with the leftover ingredients from this one. She was very pleased… But enough about my day. How was yours?”

“I would much rather hear about your day,” Loki said before taking a few bites of his meal.

“Everything went well, didn’t it?” Sigyn asked hopefully. Loki sighed.

“I picked up debris and put it in waste receptacles,” Loki said. “Then I ate a mediocre midday meal, followed by putting more debris in waste receptacles. Then I swept up debris. Then they allowed me to depart for the evening. That is the summation of it.”

“If you would like, I am sure I could find a way to pack you a meal for tomorrow,” Sigyn suggested. “I wouldn’t want you to fall victim to hunger.”

“They would probably tear the meal apart inspecting it for some evidence of nefariousness,” Loki snorted.

“Maybe I could prepare you some hot beverage for the morning,” Sigyn suggested. “I noticed Thor, Sir Stark and Captain Rogers were all carrying hot beverages.”
“I do not need a hot beverage,” Loki sighed, continuing to slice into his lamb.

“Well then, what if I…” Sigyn began before Loki slamming down his silverware cut her off.

“Damn it, Sigyn, I don’t need anything from you,” Loki said furiously. He looked up to see his wife trying to instantly school her features, obviously not wanting to show him how upset she truly was about this. He let out a sigh. “I know you are trying to make things easier on me, but truthfully, all I want is to come home and not dwell on the day’s work.’

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded quietly.

“You are my one respite from what happens in the outside world. You are and always have been my refuge,” Loki continued. “Please do not make me relinquish that.”

“As long as you do not keep anything important from me,” Sigyn replied.

“Never again,” Loki agreed.

The second day of clean-up passed much like the first as did the third. The SHIELD Agents and various other volunteer employees assigned to work alongside him had all taken to calling him “Bub,” and he had done his best not to sneer every time the term was used in his direction. Barton’s eyes were constantly upon him - which was a bit unsettling - whereas the Son of Coul seemed to be constantly focused on whatever the Captain was up to. However, the Son of Coul had brought him a spare soda, a second one he had gotten for the price of one at a nearby vending machine. Loki had learned to enjoy the brief bubbliness of the drinks and the little pep of energy they seemed to provide was nice. However, he was not pleased with the midday meal provided. So far, he had learned that the “ham and cheese” sandwich was not as bad as the “bologna” one, but still awful by his standards. The turkey sandwiches were not terrible, but he felt the meat was sliced too thin.

For the most part, Loki had learned to work silently, offering no arguments and making no eye contact with his fellow employees. Instead of intimidating the Midgardian grunt-workers, however, his lack of openness seemed to make them more curious about the silent man who arrived with the Avengers and was officially listed in SHIELD’s secret files as the scion of some European millionaire - possibly distantly related to the Norwegian royal family. While most of those working alongside Loki were not exactly field agents, all SHIELD employees seemed to have an innate sense of when something was off, when to ask questions and when to keep their mouths shut. Apparently, the origins of their mysterious clean-up crew grunt was not a time to be silent.

Honestly, Loki quite enjoyed hearing the rumors about himself. Some believed he was an undercover INTERPOL agent working with SHIELD regarding some super secret project in the city. Others theorized that he had either been saved by the Avengers or that they had saved someone important to them, and he was working with them as repayment. Another theory surmised that he was a Stark Industries employee being punished for something or - the theory that made Loki cringe the most - that he was actually the result of one of Stark’s love affairs with some European supermodel in town in the hopes of getting closer to his estranged father.

Less cringeworthy was the theory that he was some long-lost Roger’s relative who had been brought into the fold to help the Captain catch up. Loki had to admit the strange guise his wife had chosen for him did have a certain resemblance to the Captain. After some research, Sigyn had mentioned the ancient Irish were invaded often by the ancient Norse and that perhaps the Captain was distantly descended from an Asgardian who had dallied with a human while visiting Midgard. Loki had not shared any of these theories with his brother or Thor’s comrades, though he had been tempted to
gauge the Iron Man’s reaction to their supposed relationship.

When the world began to darken for the evening and they were dismissed for the evening, Loki typically headed back to the Tower to spend time with his wife. The other Avengers had gone out to grab something to eat or to a bar to celebrate a hard day’s work with the other SHIELD employees. Secretly, Loki felt a bit superior to Thor and Stark. While he spent the evening with his wife, the other two men went out to drink and eat with their comrades rather than their ladyloves. Of course, it often seemed that the Lady Jane and the Lady Pepper were much too busy to notice the absence of the men in their lives.

Loki knew that much from his conversations with his wife about her day. Sigyn spent much of her time down in the labs, mainly working with Jane and Darcy. She had also spent a few hours with Dr. Banner, talking about Midgardian physiology compared to Asgardian as well as healing practices from both spheres. Loki had not been pleased that his wife had been alone with the man capable of turning into a green behemoth, but was placated by the fact that the Hulk creature at least seemed to appreciate Sigyn. Of course, the bulk of her time in the labs wasn’t actually contributing to Midgardian science but rather being educated on Midgardian popular culture by Lady Darcy. Once Sigyn had given Jane enough basic information to start researching Darcy would pull out her standard-issue SI employee StarkPad so the two women could watch videos. Sigyn had compiled a playlist of her favorite animal videos - mainly kittens - to show her husband one evening. The next, she was educating Loki on the saga of a group of Midgardian comrades who spent much of their time in a coffeeshop. Loki didn’t understand the allure exactly, but it kept Sigyn happy.

All in all, Loki felt he had settled into a nice enough routine by the fourth day. He was certain the cleanup wouldn’t take a full Midgardian year. In fact, the current estimates he heard being thrown around indicated it would be no more than five months to finish the work. If he could continue doing such work for two dozen weeks or more, it might mean the rest of his time on Midgard might be spent in pleasant relaxation. After all, he doubted very much that SHIELD would put him up to any work seeing how little they seemed to trust him. Loki was musing about what tasks he could do during his leisure time on Midgard when Sigyn placed before him an apple strudel pastry covered in cream cheese frosting she had just concocted in the device known as a “toaster.” He had been too busy to learn how to wield the appliances himself, but perhaps Sigyn could teach him this weekend. Taking a bite out of his meal, Loki looked up to see his wife standing over him with concern.

“Is everything alright, my love?” Loki asked her curiously, mixing a bit of cream into his coffee.

“I am to go to dine with Lady Pepper, Lady Jane, Lady Darcy and the Lady Widow this evening,” Sigyn informed her husband. “It is a Midgardian tradition referred to as a ‘Girls Night.’ Darcy said we eat, drink wine and there is also some sort of ritual she referred to as ‘sharing the hot goss’ - whatever that may be.”

“And where shall we be dining?” Loki asked.

“You will not be attending,” Sigyn replied. “It is ladies only.”

“This isn’t some sort of Valkyrie ceremony is it?” Loki grumbled. “Insufferable wenches the lot of them. At least they have the wisdom to see Odin’s true nature.”

“The Valkyrie are noble and friendly,” Sigyn replied, annoyed.

“To you, of course,” Loki rolled his eyes. “You’re a woman.”

“At any rate,” Sigyn said, deciding to ignore her husband, “I thought, perhaps, since I am spending an evening with the ladies it might behoove you to spend time with your compatriots. I understand
they go out for meals following clean-up duties. I think you would really benefit from it.”

“You believe it would benefit me to dine with simpletons and Midgardian peasants upon the common slop they consider cuisine and the piss poor excuse for mead that even Thor sometimes has to choke down in order to seem polite?” Loki scoffed. “Do you know what these men discuss during the day, Sigyn? They only want to talk about their ridiculous Midgardian sporting events, smothering foodstuffs with bacon, how supposedly large their muscles are and the various inappropriate, offensive and I daresay ridiculous manners in which caricaturish and possibly non-existent women have given them sexual release. Fandral has told more believable tales about such exploits.”

“If… if you truly want me to stay here so we may dine together, I suppose I can,” Sigyn said, a mournful expression across her face. “I was so looking forward to getting to know the other ladies of the Tower outside of a work setting, but I suppose I can wait until next month for their next Girls Night. Only Jane and Darcy will have left on their lecture tour by then, and Natasha and Pepper are so busy with their work they may not have time…”

“Alright, Sigyn,” Loki groaned. “Go, and have fun, but not too much fun. If these women cause mayhem, you will more than likely be blamed as you are the wife of the trickster. I will make an attempt to be cordial to these men I work with for your sake. But I will not enjoy it.”

“Oh, thank you, husband,” Sigyn said, throwing her arms around him before pressing kisses all over his face.

Deep down, Loki knew Sigyn had intended to trick him into doing what she wanted, and he decided to let her think he hadn’t seen through her efforts. Sometimes, it was nice to see his sweet little bride use her wiles to try and convince him of something. It was somewhat like watching a kitten playing with a ribbon. Besides, there was rarely a downside to making Sigyn happy. He could put up with a few drunken, rowdy ingrates for an hour or so if it meant Sigyn was happy. After all, he managed to put up with Thor and his drinking buddies after hunts or sparring matches or tournaments.

He decided not to broach the topic of dining with the other workers until it was time for the noon meal. This time, he had selected a sandwich based on the Man of Iron’s suggestion, a novelty known as peanut butter and jelly. While the grape jelly mixed with the nut butter was delicious, Stark assured him strawberry jelly was preferable to him. At any rate, Loki ate three such sandwiches, the most he had ever consumed during one of the work lunches. This seemed to indicate to Stark that Loki was coming around to the idea of his Midgardian enslavement, and Stark happily chatted with him about the current building they were working on.

“So,” Loki began when Stark to a brief respite from talking to eat, “I understand the ladies are spending the evening together.”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “They eat, drink and talk about us menfolk and shoes and stuff. Pep never tells me exactly what they talk about, but she always comes back in a good mood, so I try not to pry.”

“Sigyn suggested - as she will not be there this evening - that perhaps I should dine with the result of you,” Loki mentioned.

“Cool,” Stark nodded. “We’re going to this Vietnamese place one of the other SHIELD squads finished putting back together yesterday. I’m partial to the cao lâu, but I have a feeling your brother will be totally down for the bún bò huế. My goal is to get Cap to try something weird, but considering he’s a dirty old man, pho might be strange enough for him. We might have to take your girl back some time. They’ve got a lot of fish and vegetarian dishes I think she’d like.”
“The Lady Darcy has apparently coaxed Sigyn into teaching her to cook some Asgardian dishes soon,” Loki nodded. “Of course, I am sure it will end up more Vanir cuisine what with the massive amounts of fish Sigyn ordered.”

“Thor mentioned she was a good cook,” Tony smirked. “I don’t blame you for choosing a home-cooked meal over us every night. And from what I’ve heard, she’s a smart cookie. Bruce said she mastered most of the appliances in a few days. Your brother still only knows how to work the toaster, mainly because he doesn’t care how to learn anything besides cooking his Pop-Tarts.”

“Keeping Thor out of the kitchen is probably best,” Loki admitted.

The rest of the day Loki spent in anxiousness over his supper with the others. In truth, he had not felt as nervous since his youth, the same anxiety twisting his stomach that he usually felt on the rare occasion when he was invited to tag along with Thor and his older friends. Sometimes, the pure excitement of being invited was instantly dulled by hearing Thor complain about how his parents had forced him to take his little brother out since Loki had such a hard time making friends of his own. When such a pronouncement had made Loki angry, Thor had once tried to assure him he was just showing off for his friends, but Loki couldn’t help but feel slighted. He seldom got along with Thor’s friends in their childhood, and even now that Thor had developed the close-knit group of Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg and Sif, Loki still often felt like the odd man out. He was certain this outing with the Avengers would be just another case where Thor took the spotlight and he was brought along on the premise of fairness.

Grimey and covered with dust, Loki found himself sandwiched at a table with Hawkeye, Stark, and oddly enough Banner who had been coaxed down the restaurant since there was no one to sup with in the tower. Thor was at a table with the Captain, a random SHIELD agent, and the Son of Coul, who seemed to revel in the tales of battle the two men told. Loki tried to swallow a sneer as the menu was placed before him. He doubted very much that Thor’s tales were truly accurate. While Loki was known as the palace liar, Thor was a rather talented exaggerator when it came to his battlefield glories. A bilgesnipe the size of a cart easily became the size of Asgard’s armory in Thor’s retellings.

“So, did you see the womenfolk off?” Stark asked Banner conversationally.

“It was apparently a struggle to get Dr. Foster to put down her work,” Banner replied, “but Happy managed to corral all of them into the car on time. Pepper said to tell you they’d be back ‘whenever they feel like it,’ so I’m guessing that means late?”

“Not too late,” Stark shrugged. “Pep does have CEO duties in the morning, after all.”

“Your wife said hello and that she found that book on the theory behind cryokinetic constructs you were looking for,” Bruce said to Loki conversationally. “Said she put it on your bedside table?”

“Good,” Loki nodded, still perusing the menu.

“You’re researching ice manipulation?” Tony said, a little surprised.

“Yes,” Loki said, glaring at his host.

“Just don’t tell Cap,” Tony shrugged. “He’s still sensitive to things being frozen.”

“I won’t,” Loki nodded.

“So… cryokinesis…” Tony continued. “That’s something you can do with your mind or does it require physical energy?”

“My mistake,” Tony said, “but when you find out… curious minds and all that.”

“I doubt very much you will be able to put such knowledge into practice,” Loki warned him.

“I don’t see the harm in learning something new,” Tony reasoned.

“It isn’t the learning of knowledge that is dangerous but rather when one is overconfident in their knowledge and attempts to put it into practical application,” Loki replied, flipping a menu page.

“He’s got your number,” Banner smirked.

“I suppose you have taken apart all of the trinkets you purchased on Asgard and that is why you are now pressing me for more information,” Loki snorted.

“Not all of them,” Tony shook his head. “I’ve been working on suit maintenance.”

The waiter came and took their orders, Tony ordering the dish he had mentioned earlier, Banner selecting a vegetarian option Loki thought Sigyn might like and Hawkeye getting the traditional pho. Loki opted for something called a bún chả. It was rare he was able to indulge in pork around Sigyn, who usually flinched at pork dishes. Freyja had given her daughters a pet piglet as children and they had raised it until it became a mighty boar and angrily smashed into one of Odin’s chariots after being separated by a female swine in heat. Odin had initially wanted to filet the beast, but Frigga’s intervention had instead allowed the creature to be sent back to Freyja, a woman with an odd talent for soothing such savage beasts. To this day, pig meat still made Sigyn’s upper lip wobbly and Syn and Snotra about burst into tears anything suckling pig was served as the centerpiece of a feast.


“How did you know of that?” Loki asked, skeptically. He tried to think if he and Barton had any exchanges about Sigyn’s eating habits when the two were mentally linked.

“Tash said she looked ready to cry when Darcy tried to explain barbecue to her,” Barton shrugged. “They’ve been sticking to veggie options and the occasional fish when they order out for lunch.”

“Sigyn will eat some meats,” Loki explained. “Beef and most fowl are on her approved list - though she rarely indulges. Most other meats she can tolerate being eaten in her presence, but she and her sisters have an aversion to pork stemming from childhood.”

“Pig as a pet?” Tony inferred.

“Yes, their mother raises wild boars,” Loki nodded.

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“What I’d got your number,” Banner smirked.

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“Yes, their mother raises wild boars,” Loki nodded.

“To eat?” Bruce said, confused.

“To pull carts and occasionally perform housekeeping duties,” Loki rolled his eyes. “My mother-in-law is a strange creature. The less said about her the better.”

“Well, Sigyn seems to be adjusting well enough,” Bruce said. “She’s already proven invaluable to Jane’s research, and she and Darcy get along like white on rice.”

“Good,” Loki nodded “Sigyn doesn’t always have the easiest time making friends. She can be… shy…”
“What about you, Bub?” Hawkeye smirked, using the nickname he knew Loki detested. “Getting along with the crew?”

“I would think you stalked me often enough to make such a determination for yourself,” Loki snorted.

“Oh, yeah, Bub,” Hawkeye smirked. “I understand you’re pretty handy with the broom and dustpan.”

“Bub?” Banner asked, confused.

“Nickname the crew gave him,” Tony muttered. “Don’t think he’s too happy about it.”

“At least I am contributing,” Loki replied to Hawkeye. “I doubt very much the bottles of water need to be guarded so closely. And I doubt very much that napping is an effective way of guarding them.”

“You do sleep an awful lot on the job,” Stark agreed.

“At least I sleep,” Clint snorted back. Stark rolled his eyes and soon their food was being brought over.

All in all, it wasn’t a bad meal and the conversation was definitely more elevated than what Loki typically heard from the work crew. He understood many of the scientific concepts Banner and Stark debated, though Asgard often used different terminology. When the entire meal was over and everyone decided to head back, Loki knew he would have to confess to Sigyn that her idea of him sharing a meal with the others wasn’t half bad. Loki also took home a to-go order of gỏi cuốn for Sigyn as they were similar to vegetable rolls frequently served on Vanheim. Banner had suggested the banana flower salad, an eggplant dish cooked in a clay pot, and a tropical fruit dessert would all be good dishes for Sigyn to try and even offered to escort the couple back some time.

Perhaps, just perhaps, banishment to Midgard wouldn’t turn out so awful.

Chapter End Notes

The dishes Banner recommends for Sigyn are nỏm hoa chuối, hoa quả đầm, and vegetarian cà tím kho tô. 
The Curious Incident of the Platypus in the Night-Time

Chapter Summary

or, in which Tony is forced to establish a “no wild creatures” rule for the Avengers Tower

Loki was not in a happy mood when he marched into the suite he shared with Sigyn after a full week’s worth of backbreaking work. The fact that he, the man who should have been king of both Asgard and Midgard, was reduced to cleaning up rubble and debris without the use of his magic was humiliating enough. The fact that he had to watch Tony Stark use his metal-man armor and Thor use his super strength and hammer power to make their time cleaning up New York City easier made the task go from abysmal to downright torturous in Loki’s opinion. Of course, that was probably why Odin had agreed to this farce.

Stomping to his rooms, Loki gritted his teeth, wondering how he was supposed to get all of this dirt and refuse out from underneath his nails. He smelled like a common sewer and the awful Midgardian ensemble he had been forced into so he would “blend in” with the rest of the volunteers and SHIELD-provided cleanup crews was lined with muck and mire. Sweat had made his hair stick to the back of his neck, making it itchy. Muscles he didn’t even know he had were sore. He had tried to stay in a good mood, but the pressure was getting to him and, at any moment, it would spew out.

He looked at his wife, gently reclining on one of the emerald green chaise longues she had conjured in their rooms. She was dressed in another one of her flowy Asgardian gowns that ordinarily would have pleasantly distracted him. It was one of the more form-fitting ones and, even when Loki was in a cross mood, he had to admit his wife had a very attractive form. Instead of paying attention to him, however, she was using that strange stick to navigate through the various programs on the stupid talking box again. Thor and Tony came in through the door behind him, laughing at something. Loki gritted his teeth.

“I have returned,” Loki announced to his wife. Sigyn looked him over, scrunching her nose a bit. “Perhaps you should have a bath,” she pronounced.

“Have you not drawn me one?” Loki countered. Bemused, Thor and Tony both stopped what they were doing to watch the encounter.

“Really, husband,” Sigyn huffed. She had catered to his whims just about every night that week, and to tell the truth, Sigyn wasn’t feeling exactly appreciated for it. Besides, Loki had been in a cross mood the entire day, and she did not like that he was attempting to take his anger at his situation out on her. “I would think you were intelligent enough to know how to draw your own bath, even without magical aid.”

“Is it too much to ask that after a day spent torturously toiling like some sort of simpering serf that my wife is there for me?” Loki hissed, his patience wearing thin after a week’s culmination of hard labor. “Is it too much to ask for a little support and compassion?”
“Oh?” Sigyn said, her eyes narrowing at her husband. “You want support? You want compassion? You want someone to be there for you?”

Her tone turned so absolutely frigid that Tony felt the room’s temperature drop at least a couple degrees. Thor, meanwhile, was staring at his feet, biting his lip to keep from laughing at the verbal lashing his brother was about to receive. Sigyn’s ability to redress his brother was probably only second to his mother’s ability to do the same to his father.

“Sigyn,” Loki sighed, “do not…”

“And how should I support you, dear husband?” Sigyn sneered. “Should I support you with the same loving devotion you’ve shown your brother, or with the love you show me, hmm? The flitting in and out of my life while you go on your adventures, perhaps occasionally notifying me that you’re still alive? Should I show you the same compassion you’ve shown those on Midgard? The compassion you showed me when I tried to bring you back from your self-inflicted darkness? Should I be there for you like you were there for me? Not telling me that you were going to let your father’s enemies into his home? Keeping me completely in the dark as you tried to destroy your own family from the inside? Leaving me to comfort your poor, dear mother by telling her your brother would be home soon when all the while you were plotting his death? Leaving me without saying goodbye? Leaping to your own death? Nearly getting yourself actually killed because you fell in with those who tricked you into believing they would serve your ambitions? Leaving me to clean up your mess, beg your father on your behalf, and put my blood, sweat, and tears into efforts to keep by my side the husband I had just learned hours before was in fact still alive just ignoring me? Should I go on?”

Sigyn eyed her husband firmly, her gaze not wavering from his. Loki tried to hold her gaze just as unwaveringly, but even Tony could detect the slight uncomfortable swallow he made. Sigyn had him cornered like he was a novice playing a chess master. Momentarily, Tony had an errant thought about getting Thor to bring a camera crew back to Asgard with him. If this was what Sigyn and Loki were like in front of guests, Tony had no doubt Keeping Up With the Odinsons would be the most watched reality TV show in history.

“I just can’t talk to you when you’re like this, Sigyn,” Loki huffed finally. “You haven’t the slightest idea how difficult you’re being.”

“Fine, then,” Sigyn snorted, turning away from her husband and focusing on the television. “I won’t talk to you.”

Thor let out a wheeze that quickly morphed into a cough, but Tony was pretty sure it was a badly covered laugh.

“And I am very capable of drawing my own bath, thank you very much,” Loki said, annoyed. “You know, with all your complaining about us being separated, one might think that you would want to see me well and taken care of.”

Sigyn ignored him, pausing briefly to watch a news story about a goat that had apparently saved some child from a burning barn upstate.

“I don’t see why you have to behave so childishly,” Loki continued. “It’s not as if you’re the one being punished, anyway. I’m the one out there slaving away while you stay up here and watch that… talking box…”

“I would be careful brother,” Thor warned Loki from where he and Tony had been standing, watching the entire scene unfold. “Sigyn does still have her magic, after all. Not that I wouldn’t mind a repeat of that time she singed off your eyebrows…” Loki glowered at his brother briefly before
turning his attention back to his wife, who was still ignoring him.

“Fine,” Loki snorted. “I know when I’m not wanted. Perhaps I’ll go off and disappear again.” When Sigyn didn’t respond, Loki huffed and stomped away.

“So, what, you’re just going to ignore him?” Tony asked as Loki stormed into the bedroom.

“So, what, you’re just going to ignore him?” Tony asked as Loki stormed into the bedroom.

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded, flipping through the channels on the massive television until she came to a nature show.

“And he just comes around once you’ve ignored him?” Tony asked.

“Do you know how long it will take to get the dirt out from under my nails?” Loki fumed from the other room.

“Well, it usually takes a while,” Thor shrugged. “But after a few hours, he usually calms down enough you can have a rational conversation with him.”

“That is where you and I differ, brother,” Sigyn smirked at Thor.

“Oh?” Thor asked curiously.

“Is there any soap in this room that does not smell like flower petals or berries? You know that your scented soaps are too harsh on my hands!” Loki hissed from the other room. “I specifically asked you to pack plain ones for myself. Where are they?”

“You see, the only thing my husband likes to hear more than the sound of his own voice is that of someone agreeing with him,” Sigyn said. “After a while, he grows tired of talking into nothingness. Becomes quite compliant, actually. Even apologetic.”

“How long does that take?” Tony asked, wincing as the sounds of crashing emanated from the bathroom.

“I think the most I’ve ever had to go was about four days,” Sigyn said thoughtfully. “Of course, it’s easier the less people who are around. Just ignore him completely. He’ll come around eventually.”

“You must be extremely patient,” Tony muttered.

“You have no idea,” Sigyn smirked, turning up the television’s volume to block out the sound of her husband thrashing about in the bathroom.

As Loki continued to make noise - Tony hoped just to prove a point to his wife not because he was actually breaking things - Thor went into the kitchen to search for sustenance after his exertion that day. Tony edged himself into one of the chairs in the room, waiting to see Sigyn’s plot unfold. He momentarily thought about asking JARVIS to send down some popcorn. The chair was surprisingly comfortable, despite the fact that it looked like it had been made from the bones and fur of some kind of bison. He didn’t particularly like reclining on the many couches and chaise-longue style pieces Sigyn had conjured up for the place; they made him feel like he was in a psychiatrist’s office.

“Sigyn! I need a nail file!” Loki shouted from the bathroom. Sigyn ignored him, instead turning her head to the side to examine the furry creature on the screen.

“Some of these animals look like they are of Asgard or at least should be,” Sigyn commented. “Vanaheim perhaps. We have some very fearsome creatures in my homeworld as well.”
“Well, this is a nature documentary about Australia,” Tony shrugged. Thor emerged from the kitchen, box of cherry-flavored Pop Tarts in hand, and settled into one of the weird couches. Tony was a little surprised the slim looking piece of furniture didn’t snap under the thunder god’s weight.

“Sigyn!” Loki called again. “Sigyn!” When she didn’t respond after a few seconds, he emerged from the bedroom, leaning against the doorframe. “Have you heard anything I’ve been saying to you, Sigyn?”

“What kind of strange creature is that?” Thor asked, pointing to the screen, Pop Tart crumbs falling from his mouth.

“It’s a platypus,” Tony explained.

“It’s adorable,” Sigyn smiled.

“I guess,” Tony shrugged.

“Sigyn, do you know where the tweezers are? I believe I have a splinter,” Loki called.

“Where would one acquire this platypus?” Sigyn asked.

“Well… uh… they aren’t usually kept as pets,” Tony tried to explain.

“Why not?” Sigyn pouted.

“You realize how dangerous that could be on this gods forsaken plane, don’t you?” Loki continued. “If not removed properly, this could cause an infection. I could die.”

“They’re wild animals,” Tony continued. “You guys don’t keep… what were the things with antlers again?”

“You’d probably like that, wouldn’t you?” Loki hissed. “Probably have a good laugh that I died because you were ignoring me.”

“Bilgesnipe,” Thor offered.

“Yeah, you don’t keep bilgesnipe as pets do you?” Tony asked.

“Sigyn tried once,” Loki said from the sidelines, thinking perhaps contributing to the conversation would draw Sigyn’s attention.

“But these are cute and little,” Sigyn reasoned to Tony. “Bilgesnipe are larger. I tried to keep one once, but Odin wouldn’t let me have a big enough area for it…”

“I’m pretty sure that wasn’t the issue…” Loki snorted only to be interrupted by his brother.

“I think the fact that the bilgesnipe was angry about being in captivity was the problem,” Thor shook his head. He turned to Tony. “Knocked down a column or two at the palace before he was let go.”

“Why did you think that was a good pet?” Tony asked again.

“He was a baby. I found him wounded in the forest,” Sigyn pouted. “He seemed like he needed help.”

“I’m taking it that happens a lot?” Tony asked Thor.
“You have no idea,” Loki muttered under his breath.

“From time to time,” Thor smirked.

“Do any of you care that I’m wounded?” Loki growled. He paused for a minute, a slight look of horror on his face. “Sigyn, you better not have put a silencing charm on me! I will not be ignored! I can make life very difficult! You know this!”

“So, I suppose I couldn’t keep one of these platypuses as a pet?” Sigyn frowned slightly.

“I wouldn’t encourage it,” Tony nodded.

“Oh, well,” Sigyn shrugged as she stroked the serpentine piece of jewelry on her arm. “I suppose Jór is enough of a pet to keep me company anyway.”

“Don’t forget who gave that gift to you,” Loki huffed.

“How does that thing stay alive anyway?” Tony asked.

“Magic,” Sigyn smirked. Tony let out a frustrated groan. He hated that explanation.

Rolling his eyes, Loki headed back through the bedroom and into the bathroom. He still wasn’t sure if Sigyn had simply coaxed everyone into ignoring him or if she had put a silencing spell on him. Either way, he had a feeling if he destroyed the bathroom and made enough noise in the process she would have to pay attention to him. Sigyn did like her long, luxurious baths, after all, and she was be furious if he destroyed all of her carefully, magically placed decor. He started to pick up a large decorative tray when he picked up on Sigyn’s low tones.

“How was he today?” Sigyn whispered.

“He was a brat,” Tony snorted.

“No more than usual,” Thor reasoned, giving Tony a warning. “He complained a bit at first, but stepped up to do some work.”

“Especially after it was pointed out that mere Midgardians were doing better at the heavy lifting than he was,” Tony snorted.

“I think he’s on the right path to coming around,” Thor soothed his sister-in-law. Sigyn looked to Tony hopefully. As much as Loki pissed him off, he didn’t want to let down Sigyn. She’d been nothing but nice and her hopeful eyes made him want to rip his own arm off rather than upset her. Perhaps this was how she was able to coax her husband away from his destructive tendencies.

“And no one recognized him,” Tony said, trying in vain to think of something positive to say. “So, you know, that was a plus. I mean, he can’t help out if he’s being strung up at Times Square, right?” Sigyn frowned slightly and Thor shook his head at Tony, wondering why his friend couldn’t have just stopped at something that sounded quasi-positive.

“I know there are many both here and on Asgard who do not think my husband is worthy nor that he is capable of redemption,” Sigyn said. “I have long tried to get everyone around me to see my husband’s potential - my husband included. Please know how thankful I am - from the bottom of my heart - that he has been afforded this opportunity. I owe you so much, Thor, for intervening on his behalf and agreeing to help monitor him here…”

“He’s my brother,” Thor said simply.
“And Sir Stark, I know what he has done to your world can never be undone. I also know that you would probably rather never see my husband again,” Sigyn said quietly. “It means everything to me that you would open up your world, your home to us so that my husband and I might prove that there is goodness in him still. I will do all I can to make sure that you do not come to regret having us here, that you can one day see my husband as I see him.”

“I have to ask,” Tony said. “Do you ever get sick of defending him all the time? Of standing by him while he just… wrecks everything around him?” Loki strained to hear her answer, not letting in a breath.

“All I have ever wanted is to show those who refused to believe me what my husband was really capable of, the wonderful, sweet and loving man I know him to be,” Sigyn sighed, looking straight ahead at the television screen rather than at her two companions. “I realize now that perhaps I failed him… perhaps this is my fault for not recognizing the signs… for being so caught up in my hopes and dreams for the future that I never saw the darkness surrounding him…”

“You can’t honestly believe that you failed him,” Thor shook his head. “He’s responsible for his own actions… Besides, I am his brother and…”

“I am his wife,” Sigyn maintained. “No one is closer to him than I, and yet I didn’t notice him slipping. I didn’t notice that he needed reassurance, that he was delving deeper and deeper into depression. And when he brought his concerns to me… his hopes and fears… I waved them off. I thought they were his usual dramatics. I didn’t realize how deeply he felt these things… I refused to think these… these delusions of grandeur would actually manifest themselves. I thought he was just…”

“Letting off steam?” Tony offered.

“I promised him I would always listen to him, that I would always take on his concerns and worries as if they were my own,” Sigyn shook her head. “I promised that I would be the one support he could count on this world… and I failed.”

“I refuse to believe that,” Thor snorted. “I think Loki would too…”

The room was silent for a moment, and Loki tried not to dwell on what he had just heard. He knew he had caused Sigyn pain, and despite the fact that he continually seemed to disappoint her, she had always remained his biggest supporter. Even when she found out he was a Frost Giant - a literal monster - she had stood by him. It was his actions that had frightened her, not his appearance or his heritage. He pushed all the thoughts from his head, realizing how quiet he had been. It wouldn’t be long before one of them realized he had been eavesdropping, and he couldn’t have that. Loki quickly began clanging around the bathroom, using anything he could find that was metal to make a heavy sound. He heard Thor’s deep sigh from the other room.

“I don’t envy you cleaning up whatever he has done in there,” Thor said to his sister-in-law.

“I could send one of the bots…” Tony began.

“Seiðr, remember?” Sigyn smirked, sending a twinkling of her seiðr up into the air.

“Sigyn! Where is the lavender scented bath oil?” Loki demanded from the bathroom. “I need to relax! And don’t you dare tell me you only brought the cherry blossom kind!”

“How do you put up with that?” Tony said in disbelief. “Seriously, how have you not killed him?”

“He has his uses,” Sigyn smirked. Tony didn’t want to find out what she meant by that.
After a little while, Tony and Thor left to return to their own rooms. Tony had asked JARVIS to video any apologies that might come forth from Loki toward his wife but not any other physical interactions the pair might have in the more common areas of their suite. Sigyn continued to watch the television, but Loki had relegated himself to the bathroom and bedroom. He wasn’t prepared to confront his wife just yet, and Sigyn seemed bent on ignoring him for a while as well. Though neither one of them particularly liked to be the first one to attempt reconciliation after an argument, Sigyn was the more likely to broker the peace. Even when she was the clear victor or obviously right, she often put aside her anger and gently coaxed her husband into apologies so the two of them could move on from the incident.

To be perfectly honest, Loki didn’t exactly mind fighting with his wife. Sigyn had a razor sharp wit and intelligence that could clearly match his own, so debating her was often enjoyable. Arguing could often get the blood boiling, and quite often served as a thinly veiled guise for passion betwixt the two. Loki would sometimes just pick small fights with his bride to stir her up into a frenzy that would lead to fierce lovemaking - clawing at each other, the tearing of clothing, scratching and biting. Sigyn had done the same a few times over the course of their marriage, though it wasn’t typically her nature.

However, when the fight was real and neither was willing to work out their frustration in a more delightful fashion, arguments with his wife could become quite mentally and emotionally draining. While Loki did enjoy sparring with his wife, he had to admit that the tense silence and awkward dancing around one another afterwards was his least favorite thing. He hated for Sigyn to keep him at an arm’s length and the disquiet, the discomfort that now hung between them was even worse than the sting of words or of a slap from his wife in Loki’s opinion. Sigyn would not be backing down from this one, and Loki knew that sooner or later his love for her would force him to do one of the things he hated most of all: swallowing his pride and admitting his fault.

It was the smell of food that finally stirred Loki from his hiding spot. While Sigyn had learned some cooking skills and occasionally enjoyed putting together meals for fun, Loki thought it below his wife to cook when there were servants to do the job. While Tony employed a personal chef at Stark Tower, he preferred to take out himself and so the position of head chef for Stark Tower often meant only participating in catered events. Sigyn had expressed a desire to learn more about Midgardian food during her stay, and while her husband seemed to outwardly detest the plane, she knew deep down he was full of wanderlust. Loki enjoyed his travels to and from the various realms, collecting artifacts, sampling cuisine and taking in local landmarks. Had he not been sent to Midgard to destroy it or developed a distaste for all things Midgardian after Thor had been banished there, he might have had a good time touring its vast expanses and exploring its many cultures.

Tony had decided that it would be more than fine if the pair did not join the rest in the common dining area, at least until everyone was more comfortable with Loki’s presence. Wanting to ease them into Midgardian cuisine, Tony decided to start Sigyn and Loki off with something simple: Italian. He was technically half Italian himself. His maternal grandfather had changed the name from Carbonelli to Collins in the hopes of finding easier work, and it had worked. It didn’t hurt that there were dozens of good Italian places within walking distance of Stark Tower. While not all of them delivered, anyone and everyone in the city delivered to Tony Stark when he called. A few pics on his Instagram account of the food and hashtags with the restaurant names was all Tony needed to get local restaurants to go around their “no deliveries, no exceptions” rules.

When Loki finally broke out of the bedroom, he found Sigyn in the kitchen, directing at least four delivery boys on how to set up the various cartons they were bringing in. Once they had left, she began opening the boxes while her husband leaned against the doorframe. They both took in the
sights and smells of the various foods that had been delivered, ranging from salads and soups to desserts. Various pasta dishes were laid out with different types of sauces. Some had only vegetables while others had various meats. Loki wasn’t sure what all of them were, but he could tell they seemed to be divided into white meats, dark meats and sea creatures just from the appearance and smell. There were also flat breads with a layer of red sauce, layer of cheese and various toppings. Side dishes that appeared to be stuffed mushrooms, balls of beef, cured meats and cheeses, and something labelled “gnocchi” were also included.

The dishes had originally been delivered to the main area of Stark Tower where Tony helped separate the Avengers’ dinner from Loki and Sigyn’s. He had labeled the various dishes he sent down to them - more for Sigyn than Loki, he insisted. Inside one of the bags, Sigyn found a note from Tony asking her to write down any dishes she particularly enjoyed so that they could be provided for her at a later date. A post script had been hastily added to say that if Loki liked something that could be dealt with, too. Loki watched as his wife pulled out plates from one of the cabinets and then began loading it up with various foods that caught her interest. Tony had also apparently sent down a few bottles of wine from his own cellars he thought would go well with the meal, though he knew it wouldn’t do much to get Asgardians drunk.

“I know your Vanir heritage gives you certain predilections,” Loki said as Sigyn scooped up another spoonful of some shrimp dish, “but would you care to leave some seafood for others to try?”

Sigyn did not respond verbally, but rather took a third helping of the dish he had just commented on.

“How long are you going to drag this out, wife?” Loki asked. “This entire charade is growing tiresome rather quickly.

Sigyn used her magic to levitate her many dishes and guided them over to the long dining table beside the kitchen, sitting them down gently. She picked up utensils and the glass of wine she had poured, joining her food at the table.

“What do you want to make me apologize for anyway?” Loki huffed. “You know I’m no good at it. I always stick my foot in my mouth by saying the wrong thing. If anything, my apologies tend to make others more furious at me than anything they believe I did to wrong them in the first place.”

Sigyn began digging into a dish with oysters and clams.

“What is it you want me to say?” Loki asked, exasperated. “That I shouldn’t have left you? Well, I would think that would be obvious. Look how much I muck things up when you aren’t around to stop me.”

Sigyn didn’t respond, but she at least appeared to be listening. Loki supposed that was better than nothing.

“Alright, yes, I was a bit overdramatic when I decided to drop off into that portal,” Loki shrugged. “It wasn’t about hurting you, though. It never was. It was about Thor and my… Odin. And I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been practically sure that whatever that portal was it was going to pop me out somewhere. It was never my intention to kill myself, per se. Just to make a sort of dramatic exit… You know how I like those…”

Though she had stopped eating, Sigyn still made no response. Loki sighed.

“And, to be perfectly honest, perhaps I wasn’t exactly thinking of you when I did that; I was thinking about myself, I suppose. But you knew when we were married that I can be rather self-absorbed,” Loki continued. “The thing is… I had the entire thing planned out better in my head than it really
Sigyn rolled her eyes, taking a sip of her wine. That sentence could describe the vast majority of the schemes her husband undertook.

“I really honestly thought that the portal would take me here… to Midgard… or perhaps to Jotunheim” Loki admitted. “Thor had been the last person to use it, and this is where he had come from. I had aimed at Jotunheim I thought, logically, it would go the last place someone had traveled or the last place it had been directed once he destroyed it. I never imagined being spit out… where I was. And what happened there… At any rate, I expected to be shoved out here. I thought I could send you a message that I was alright and then perhaps putter around until Asgard realized how much they missed me… how much they needed me. And then they would beg me to come back…”

Sigyn gazed at him quizzically. Well, Loki reasoned, eye contact was better than nothing.

“Well, perhaps with the way they celebrated my demise I shouldn’t have expected for them to beg for me to come home,” Loki said. “But I at least wanted Odin to admit… something. That I meant something… that I’m not some afterthought like artifact one picks up from the palace they just ransacked during a battle. I mean, the man showed more emotion when he thought that bloody cask had been moved than when he thought I was dead!”

Loki swallowed and it took everything Sigyn had not to leave her seat and embrace him.

“Alright, well, perhaps with the way they celebrated my demise I shouldn’t have expected for them to beg for me to come home,” Loki said. “But I at least wanted Odin to admit… something. That I meant something… that I’m not some afterthought like artifact one picks up from the palace they just ransacked during a battle. I mean, the man showed more emotion when he thought that bloody cask had been moved than when he thought I was dead!”

Sigyn could sit aside no longer. Rising from her chair, she strode across the room and put her hands on her husband’s shoulders. Loki gripped at Sigyn’s elbows in turn, staring straight into her eyes with the most sincere sense of conviction he could muster. While he had never outwardly lied to his wife, Loki had omitted things over the years. However, he wanted it to be absolutely clear to Sigyn that nothing was more honest than what he was about to say to her.

“I may not be sorry for what harm or pain I have caused Thor or Odin,” Loki said. “But I will always regret anything I have done to upset you. You and my mother, I suppose. I didn’t tell you of my machinations on Asgard because I knew you wouldn’t agree, because I knew I couldn’t go through with them if I saw the fear and disappointment in your face beforehand. I also sought to protect you, that if everything went south that you would not have to lie about your involvement.”

Sigyn knew that he had done nothing to deserve her. Quite the opposite, in fact,” he confessed. “I have had drilled into my head my entire life how I will never be as worthy as my brother, and it seems that over these past few months all I have done again and again is prove exactly how unworthy I am. I knew from the beginning that I was unworthy of being your husband, but, if you will still have me, I will at least try to be a little less unworthy in the future.”

“‘You have always been worthy of my love. And never once in all the time we have known each other have I felt you unworthy of my love, of the title of my husband… of anything. Too long have you let Odin’s definition of worthiness define you, the definition he uses to so confine your brother. You are so used to envying the praise he gives Thor that you do not see how this concept of worth strangles your brother. I doubt being so worthy would make you happy in the end. Perhaps it is time we find our own definition of worth, and those who do not understand our happiness can go to Hel.”

Smiling in spite of himself, Loki curled a loose lock of Sigyn’s hair over her ears as she wrapped her arms more firmly around his neck. He cradled the side of her face in one hand and used the other to bring her body closer to his own. Sigyn’s piercing gaze remained connected with his own, a slight smile playing on her lips.

“Oh, my love,” Loki grinned wickedly. “You always know what to say.”
By the time the pair returned to their dinner, it had gotten very, very cold.

Three nights later, Tony found himself tossing and turning in bed - and not just because he was waiting for Pepper to arrive after a red eye flight from China. A light sleeper and chronic insomniac, Tony usually found it difficult to get to sleep. As a result, he easily registered the sound of Pepper opening up the bedroom door and stepping inside. He thought about getting up to ask her about how her trip had gone, but decided she was probably too tired to talk. The clock read sometime after one in the morning. As Pepper padded to the bathroom, Tony snuggled back down in the pillows, only to be reawakened by Pepper’s terrified scream. In an instant, he had the arm of his suit on and was standing between Pepper and the bathtub, his hand out and ready to blast whatever it was creeping about in their suite after hours. At first, Tony was puzzled but when he looked down, he saw the bathtub brimming to the top with water and two platypuses swimming about playfully, occasionally nuzzling each other in the water.

“What on earth…” Pepper began.

“I think I know who’s to blame for this,” Tony grumbled.

“Sir,” JARVIS intoned, “Prince Loki is here…”

“Send him in, but I might blast him to bits,” Tony muttered, exiting the bathroom with Pepper hot on his heels.

“Do you mind telling me why there are two platypuses in our bathtub?” Pepper asked with an eyebrow arched.

“I’ll let Reindeer Games do it for you,” Tony snorted as Loki strode into their room. “What the hell, man?”

“I see you have found them,” Loki said, not abashed at all.

“How did you… when… what…?” Tony said angrily, unable to finish any of the questions running through his head.

“I acquired them as a gift for Sigyn,” Loki explained. “After our… disagreement earlier. I thought they would cheer her up.”

“And you hid them here?” Pepper demanded.

“I couldn’t very well hide them in our rooms,” Loki snorted, as if it was obvious. “She might find them.”

“So you hid them here? In my room?” Tony snorted. “What about Cap’s rooms, huh? Or Widow’s? They’re out on that SHIELD mission…”

“I needed them to be where there was someone about, and not someone who might strike them with a hammer or that turns into… that foul green creature…” Loki replied. “In case they got into mischief or needed something…”

“But you didn’t bother to tell that ‘someone,’ i.e. me, that you were hiding these mistakes of evolution in my bathroom?” Tony snorted.

“I thought you’d say no,” Loki shrugged.
“How did you even get them? I’m pretty sure there isn’t a place in New York that sells ill-gotten Australian mammals,” Tony demanded. Loki was silent, not giving anything away.

“How he ordered them online, sir,” JARVIS finally said. “On the black market.”

“Damn you, invisible man,” Loki hissed.

“And you didn’t stop him, JARVIS?” Tony demanded.

“When he said he needed to order something for his wife, I figured flowers or chocolates…” JARVIS said. “Besides, sir, you have ordered some strange things in the past for…”

“Okay, JARVIS, I get it,” Tony groaned. Pepper gave him a side-eye, letting him know they’d be discussing this later. He turned back to Loki. “You know we can’t keep them right? Stark Tower isn’t exactly built for… wildlife. I mean, what was your plan when you go back to Asgard? Do you think they’d survive there?”

“Sigyn wanted them,” Loki shrugged, as if that was a good enough excuse for his badly thought out plan.

“I really don’t think…” Tony began as Sigyn emerged from behind the bedroom door.

“Husband, what are you doing up here? I really do not think Sir Tony and Lady Pepper want you traipsing about their rooms at night…” Sigyn began. There was a splash from the bathroom and soon one of the silky, wet platypuses waddled out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. Sigyn let out a squeal and ran for it as Pepper tried to stifle a giggle and Tony pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. Loki, for his part, didn’t bother to hide his smile as Sigyn picked up the soaking wet creature and cuddled it to herself.

“It’s adorable!” Sigyn proclaimed happily. There was another splash and Sigyn darted into the bathroom to investigate.

“See, there,” Loki said triumphantly. “She’s happy.”

“I see,” Tony snorted. “I see that you’re going to have to get those things out of my tower and tell your wife she can’t keep them. Really, I am not getting in trouble for illegally smuggling those beaver-duck-things past U.S. and Australian customs. And who knows what strange diseases they might be carrying.”

“Their feet are so cute!” Sigyn called.

“Be careful darling,” Loki called to her. “From what I’ve read, they can shoot poison from their paws.”

“WHAT?” Tony screamed.

“We’ll figure something out,” Pepper assured him as Sigyn emerged from the bathroom. Her dress had two large wet spots, but she didn’t seem to care. As if struck by the same Disney princess magic that seemed to make all creatures adore Sigyn, the two platypuses she held in her hands seemed to be nuzzling her.

“Oh, Loki, they’re wonderful!” Sigyn smiled.

“Hey, they were in my bathroom,” Tony snorted. “How do you know they aren’t mine?”
“Leave it alone,” Pepper urged him. “We’ll deal with this in the morning, okay?” Tony grumbled as Loki threw his arm around his wife’s shoulders and led her from the room, still cradling the two creatures.

The next day, Tony sat down with Loki and Sigyn and had a strict “no wild creatures as gifts” talk.

Steve Rogers had no idea how he had gotten roped into this. Probably because Tony had insisted Steve was better with dealing with small children and animals. Tony had also announced he was washing his hands of the platypus incident, and probably would break into some rant about Asgardian princes and their penchant of ruining his tower if forced to make this presentation at the zoo. The last thing anyone in the Avengers or SHIELD needed was a rant Tony made about Loki living in the tower going viral, especially since SHIELD’s official statement was still that Loki was being punished in an Asgardian dungeon.

So, here Steve Rogers stood at the Central Park Zoo, posing next to the platypuses in their new habitat. It would be the first time any zoo or animal sanctuary outside of Australia had managed to acquire these animals, so it was a big deal. When Pepper had called up the Central Park Zoo to see if they were interested in rehoming Sigyn’s pets the zoo officials were basically salivating. They’d apparently been trying to get the exotic creatures for years. Now, thanks to a generous donation from the Stark Foundation, the platypus exhibit was ready to go and the zoo was ready to break ground on a whole new segment devoted to the animals of Oceania.

Explaining to Sigyn the need to shelter the creatures in a proper habitat and the likelihood they wouldn’t survive life in Asgard - let alone a trip through the Bifrost - was much easier than anyone had anticipated. She had agreed readily that they should be taken care of properly though she did insist on a bothersome amount of input into their habitat before releasing them. Loki, in contrast, was livid that his carefully thought up present was being “carted off to be gawked at by miniature Midgardians with their ugly, fat faces and germs.” Sigyn’s insistence that it was the thought that counted seemed to placate him somewhat, though he sneered any time anyone brought up the animals being moved to their new home. Sigyn did make him promise not to attempt to kidnap the animals from the zoo and return them to her, though most of the Avengers were a bit skeptical he would keep the vow.

Now, the big day had arrived. For his part, Steve made a short speech about the importance of going to the zoo with his mom as a kid when she’d been able to scrape together enough money to take him. He had gone home and spent weeks drawing animals. He also talked about conservation and preserving endangered wildlife as well as the dangers of global warming. He had a feeling Fox News would cut that part out. Then, he posed for pictures with the creatures, the zookeepers and the kids who had come to either see the animals, Captain America or both.

While Sigyn had given the creatures unpronounceable Asgardian names, she agreed to let them be renamed something a little bit more easier to the ears of mini-Midgardians. As Steve was the one who would be the face of the presentation, Sigyn allowed him to name the creatures. With a smile, he dubbed the male Joe and the female Sarah after his parents. Stark quickly whipped up a plaque and the Joseph and Sarah Rogers Memorial Platypus Exhibit was officially born. Even if the platypuses weren’t exactly the most attractive creatures Steve had ever laid eyes on, he did have to wipe away a tear when he helped the head of the zoo unveil the plaque.

About six months later, Stark Tower received a phone call from the Central Park Zoo. Sarah the platypus had laid an egg in their burrow and it was expected to hatch within a week. Steve, Tony, and Pepper were invited to view the hatching. Despite Loki’s initial disapproval, Steve managed to
convince Sigyn to come as his plus one to the event without her husband in tow. Thor stayed behind to watch his brother in the meantime as the Avengers weren’t sure if Loki would attempt to don a disguise and crash the event anyway.

It was nice, for once, to have all the television cameras swarmed around the tiny, shaking egg rather than the Avengers themselves. The tiny, ratty creature that hatched from the egg wasn’t attractive in the least bit, though Sigyn cooed over it. She then asked the zookeepers very specific questions about its care, leading a few of them to question Tony and Steve if she was some sort of zoology consultant they had brought along. The next week, the Central Park Zoo announced the results of the online poll they had conducted to name the baby boy platypus.

The name Steve won in a landslide.

Though Tony teased him about it incessantly, Steve himself was rather pleased to see the tiny, weak, pale creature grow into a rather large and healthy platypus. He made it a point to take a selfie with the eponymous creature whenever he was at the zoo.
Top Chef Asgard

Chapter Summary

Or, in which Sigyn and some of the resident scientists introduce the Tower residents to Asgardian cuisine.

After a long day of research that turned into most of a night of research, Darcy decided to pull both Jane and Dr. Banner from the labs so they could get some much needed rest and relaxation. After the pair had been forced into napping for much of the morning, they attempted to return to the lab after lunch only to find Darcy and JARVIS has barred their entry. Darcy then informed the pair that they would be taking a day off from work to help with Darcy’s personal favorite type of science: cooking. The various Scandinavian fish that Sigyn had ordered finally arrived and, after a quick ordering spree thanks to JARVIS and a nearby Norwegian-run deli, Sigyn had all the ingredients she needed to make a proper Asgardian feast for the Tower’s inhabitants. While the rest of the crew were cleaning up Manhattan and Pepper was laying down the law via teleconference, Jane and Bruce found themselves corralled into the communal kitchen by Darcy only to meet face-to-face with Sigyn dressed in something akin to the salwar kameez Bruce had often seen during his time in India. The outfit seemed way too fancy for cooking, but Sigyn was happy to start.

“So, what are we doing?” Darcy clapped happily.

“Well, the appetizers we can do last since they are simple and most can be served as is,” Sigyn said. “Most of the desserts take some time, but not as much time as the meat courses or the soups. I think we should do the side dishes last since there are four of us and they do not take as much time. If we find ourselves lacking time, I can just use my seiðr to speed things up. Soups would probably be best first since we can begin them easily enough but then leave them to cook on their own. Fish courses second to last.”

“Cool,” Darcy grinned.

“How many courses does a typical Asgardian meal have?” Bruce asked. “I mean, not that it will be hard to eat all this between Thor, Loki and Steve...and Clint...and possibly Tony.”

“Six typically,” Sigyn said, “though I decided to combine the bread and cheese course with the appetizer course. Then there is soups, fish course with side, meat course with side, and then desserts. The after-dinner drinking games typically do not count as a course, but fruit, nuts, cheese and breads are often served then as well.”

“You guys sure know how to party,” Darcy laughed.

Bruce soon learned that it perhaps wasn’t the amount of the courses but the amount of food served with each course that should have him concerned. Sigyn divided them up into each making an individual soup. Jane - who Darcy admitted was not much help in the kitchen despite advanced science degrees - had been assigned a fish soup Sigyn said was called fiskesuppe, the easiest of the recipes with milk, carrots, onions, potatoes and various types of fish. Bruce himself was given the task of making the lapskaus, which was just like Irish stew but made with mincemeat. Bruce was
also pretty sure the mincemeat Sigyn had ordered was reindeer or elk rather than beef. Darcy had been assigned the more challenging färikål recipe, a soup with bone-in-lamb, cabbage, black pepper, potato, and wheat flour. Apparently, lapskaus and färikål were favorites of Asgardian warriors just returned from hunts in the colder months.

The most advanced soup Sigyn saved for herself, putting it together with her seiðr while helping oversee the others working. Sigyn said it was called finnbiff and was composed of reindeer meat shavings, bacon, mushrooms, crushed juniper berries, sour cream, thyme, milk and a goat cheese known as brunost. While Sigyn herself seemed a fairly devoted pestacarian, Bruce quickly deduced she didn’t exactly have a problem making meaty dishes for others. Sigyn’s soup with its supernatural aid was the first to be left to simmer, and she then began her full focus on helping Jane assure the fish soup was completed correctly. When all four soups were sitting pretty, Sigyn used her magic to produce the meat courses they would then be working on next. Darcy and Jane’s eyes both grew wide at the huge leg of reindeer Sigyn had procured and Bruce began to wonder if he could survive a trip to Asgard with all of its meat-laced dishes.

“Is that… an entire leg of reindeer?” Darcy asked, agape.

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded proudly. “Sir JARVIS thought we would only need two entire legs given the size of the party and the amounts of food most of us consume.”

“You have two entire legs of reindeer meat for us to cook,” Jane repeated.

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded. “I must admit, the Midgardian version of the reindeer are a bit different than our Asgardian kind. Smaller and a bit leaner too. Had I been able to acquire a proper Asgardian leg, we probably would have only needed one. I am also hopeful the seasonings still hold up.”

“I’m going out on a limb and assuming there isn’t a two-legged reindeer running around Norway right now,” Bruce frowned, looking green around the gills more because the meat made him uncomfortable than any underlying Hulk-induced range. Darcy suddenly let out a squeak of realization.

“We’re going to eat Rudolph!” Darcy moaned.

“Pardon?” Sigyn asked confused.

“He’s a reindeer from children’s stories,” Bruce explained to Sigyn. “He flies and has a red glowing nose.”

“I suppose Midgardian reindeer are more endearing if that is the case,” Sigyn said thoughtfully. “The ones on Asgard, however, are twice as big and seem to take pleasure in impaling other creatures with their massive horns. In fact, there are some who harvest horns from reindeer and then use them as weapons, much as a knife. Asgardian reindeer would be even more terrifying if they could fly. And I do not think I would eat anything with a red glowing body part.”

“I don’t know if I can eat Rudolph,” Darcy moaned. “He’s a cute animal!”

“Do not the other meat dishes of Midgard come from animals?” Sigyn asked, confused.

“Well, I mean…” Darcy frowned. “Crap. I guess I’m heartless enough to keep up with my carnivorous ways.”

The non-fish dishes proved the easiest for the group. Despite her limited culinary repertoire, Jane had learned and already excelled at making Swedish meatballs for Thor - which Sigyn referred to as kjøttboller - and it wasn’t hard for Darcy to braise the lamb or help Sigyn with the pinnekjøtt, a salted
lamb meat cooked with birch twigs. However, the salted tongue with horseradish and onion was too much for the mere Midgardians and so Sigyn cooked it all herself, regaling them with how it was one of Volstagg’s favorites and she had traded his wife the recipe for some of her sister’s apple cookies one year.

The only fish dishes that Sigyn allowed them to begin on as part of the main meal were the mussels and crab claws steamed with onions, garlic, butter, fennel and thyme as well as something called fiskegrateng. It was a macaroni and cheese casserole, though for some reason fish and peas were baked into the casserole type dish as well. Darcy decided that she liked lobster mac and cheese well enough so maybe this wouldn’t be that bad. Jane looked about as green as the snow peas when she watched Sigyn add them to the dish.

The dessert course came next, giving the earthlings a bit of a sigh of relief. Jane was put in charge of the tilslørte bondepiker, which as far as anyone else could tell was basically deconstructed apple pie in a glass. Bruce made the rosehip soup while Darcy made the fresh whipped cream to go in it. Sigyn and her seiðr quickly ripped up the other three desserts: a pastry with vanilla custard and glaze called solskinnskringle, an Asgardian-type crepe with cream known as a krumkake, and a plum cake.

Side dishes came next and Bruce breathed a sigh of relief that there was something he could eat without meat in it - except for the ham-wrapped asparagus Sigyn called suldalsskinka. However, Bruce was most drawn to the agurksalat, a cucumber salad with salt, pepper and vinegar. Sigyn promised to get him a copy of the recipe, and he hoped that she could find a way to do so in English rather than the Asgardian rune notes Thor sometimes left for people. Apparently, Allspeak did not translate into the written word. Darcy noted that Asgardians apparently liked roasted vegetables like brussel sprouts, rutabagas, and beets. Other familiar vegetable side dishes included cabbage rolls, a type of cornbread made with potatoes known as lefse and potato dumplings called komle.

As time for dinner drew nearer, Sigyn finally began working on the various fish she had ordered. The Midgardian group had heard of lutefisk before but had never actually seen it until Sigyn laid the package aside, explaining it would be one of the last fish cooked to assure it was served hot. The first fish dish was cod poached with boiled potatoes, melted butter, carrots and fried bacon. It was followed by rakfisk, a salted and fermented trout served with potatoes, raw onion, sour cream and mustard. The stektfisk was last, a flour dusted fish filet braised in butter and a creamy sauce. As the rest of the group began setting the table and getting out the appetizers, Sigyn pan fried the lutefisk in butter with before laying it over a white sauce.

What is all this?” Tony asked as he walked into the room, the first to come back from showering after a long day’s work.

“Cheese?” Jane offered.

“Jane’s cheese is gammelost or sour milk cheese,” Sigyn explained. “Darcy’s is brunost, caramelized goat cheese. It is best with jams and crispbread, especially early in the morning.”

“There is a lot of pickled fish,” Tony noted.

The sursild is herring and the gravlaks is what you call salmon,” Sigyn said proudly as she used her seiðr to levitate an actual barrel of honeymead she had purchased for drinking. Clint and Natasha came through the elevator next and though Natasha stepped out first, Clint was the first to reach the table.

“Pickled herring!” Clint exclaimed as he walked through the door, pushing past Natasha and starting to pile up herring on the rye bread Sigyn had baked earlier that day.
“He’s going to smell for a week,” Natasha grumbled before slicing herself pieces of cheese. When the elevator next opened, it revealed Thor and Steve in deep conversation with Loki standing behind them in annoyance. Thor’s train of thought was instantly derailed the second he sniffed the room.

“Fårikål!” Thor sniffed. “And kjøttboller! Suldalsskinka and solskinnskringle!”

“Not until dessert,” Sigyn warned her brother-in-law with a wooden spoon.

“Something smells like ma’s stew,” Steve said, sounding a little surprised.

“It’s might not be as close as you think,” Bruce said sheepishly.

“And Sigyn made you stektlam!” Thor said to Loki happily.

“She made me stektlam last week,” Loki huffed.

“I may not be married,” Tony mentioned, “but I’m pretty sure when your woman cooks for you the proper response is ‘thanks and let me do the dishes’ not ‘we had this last week.’”

“You’re perfectly correct, Tony,” Pepper smiled, walking into the room and kissing him on the cheek. She then turned and looked at the food before her. “Um… wow… do you think we can eat all this?”

“I’m pretty sure Thor alone could eat at least half of it,” Jane pointed out.

“Don’t say that too loud,” Darcy grinned, “he might take it as a challenge.”

The use of seiðr allowed Sigyn to begin enjoying appetizers with the rest of the group as the finishing touches were put on the rest of the food while Thor and Loki bickered over the best way to tap the barrel of mead. Tony, with his many years of kegmeister expertise, finally did it for them and the meal was declared officially open. Soups soon levitated from their pots onto the table as everyone took their seats in what Tony realized was the first formal sit-down dinner with everyone who lived in the Tower present. Sigyn and Jane opted for the fish soup - with Thor taking a few bites from Jane’s bowl after learning she had made it. Steve dug heartily into the lapskaus - even after learning the meat was probably reindeer - because it reminded him of his mom’s stew. Pepper and Darcy opted for this stew as well, mainly after seeing Steve’s eyes light up when he took a whiff of it. Thor and Clint eagerly split the fårikål while Tony, Loki and Natasha were drawn to the lavish and rich finnbiff Sigyn had made. The soup even elicited a string of Russian profanities from Natasha - though they sounded more like a prayer than a curse.

“That good, huh?” Clint asked. “Save me some!”

“You’ve had more than your fair share,” Natasha snorted. “I want this recipe. This could warm you in a walk through Siberia in a t-shirt.”

“It isn’t easy to make,” Loki warned her. “It is rarely served, even in Asgard.”

“Usually just special occasions,” Thor nodded.

“Well, I thought this was a special enough occasion,” Sigyn shrugged.

“What’s this meat?” Tony asked curiously.

“Shaved reindeer,” Sigyn said nonchalantly, nearly causing Tony to sputter with laughter. He looked over at Loki with a grin.
“Is that why you’re so scared of your wife?” Tony asked Loki with a grin. “Afraid she’ll take you out back and shave you?”

“Sigyn has shaven me plenty of times,” Loki said, confused. “It is a rather intimate experience, I think, and one that shows deep trust. Are there many women you would allow to take a blade to your throat?”

“No… I mean…” Tony frowned at his joke falling flat, “like the shaved meat…and your helmet”

“You did not do this by hand, did you, my dove?” Loki asked Sigyn with concern. “I would hate for you to hurt yourself…”

“It came that way,” Sigyn shrugged. “Sir JARVIS was most helpful in located exactly what types of ingredients I needed, many of them further along in the preparation process than I am used to.”

“My pleasure, Your Highness,” JARVIS interjected.

“So… you guys shave with knives?” Clint asked curiously.

“Yes?” Thor said, confused.

“When he shaves at all,” Loki snorted.

“We did it in the war. Pretty good shave, too,” Steve shrugged. “Though not as good as an old-fashioned straight razor. Those things are pretty hard to find nowadays. And apparently you can’t take them on the train now?”

“Pepper,” Tony said, addressing the woman to his right, “no one laughed at my joke.”

“Well, Tony,” Pepper said, patting him on the hand, “it wasn’t that funny.”

As Tony harrumphed, the rest of the group began finishing up their soup dishes and Sigyn’s seiðr brought the rest of the fish dishes to the table. It was a bit of surprise for those who weren’t from Asgard and hadn’t helped prepare the meal to find what they thought was mac and cheese actually had fish and peas in it. The initial surprised led Thor and Loki to instantly begin defending the Asgardian dish of fiskegrateng over concerns Sigyn might be upset her dish wasn’t well received. The guilt forced everyone - save Bruce and Jane - to take a sympathy piece in addition to the various other fish dishes that had been divided up. Steve and Clint, as it turned out, rather liked fiskegrateng though Natasha insisted Clint had no taste buds. Tony was pretty sure living through the Great Depression, being raised Catholic and having a Super Soldier’s metabolism meant Steve couldn’t turn down any type of food without developing a major guilt complex.

While the stektfisk was pronounced the crowd favorite, Natasha seemed pleased at just about all of the other salted fish creations. The food she had on her early Black Widow missions were some of her few good memories of Russia, and though they weren’t exactly identical, Asgardian cuisine did seem to have some basic ingredients and preparation methods similar to those she had grown up with. Bruce was given the lion’s share of the vegetable dishes since many of the main course dishes came with their own vegetables, and even he was concerned nothing more could fit in his stomach by the time meat course arrived.

The less adventurous types tore into the Asgardian version of Swedish meatballs - Asgardian meatballs as Darcy dubbed them since she pronounced kjøttboller about as well as Mjolnir - the more adventurous eaters tried the lamb dishes. Thor, Clint and Steve were the only ones who seemed brave enough to try the salted tongue, bringing back memories to Steve of Depression-era foods and war rationing. Of course, this memories were quickly shut down when he realized his descriptions of
period meals were grossing out most of the non-Asgardians. Clint, meanwhile, was preoccupied with another task.

“Loki isn’t sharing the braised lamb!” Clint protested.

"It is his favorite,” Thor pointed out, as if that were an excuse.

“You have tongue. And the stewed lamb. Why do you need braised lamb?” Natasha asked Clint pointedly as Loki discreetly stuck his tongue out at the archer.

“I’m sorry, but I’m pretty sure the brainwashed are more entitled to their choice of foods than the brainwasher,” Clint huffed.

“Does Clint have like two stomachs?” Darcy asked Natasha, who only shrugged in response.

“My last SHIELD physical came back absolutely normal, thank you very much,” Clint snorted, still trying to get the braised lamb dish back from Loki.

“Which would have come after I, as you say, washed your brain,” Loki pointed out, “which means that you are completely fine and cannot use that as an excuse for why I should share this lamb with you.” Switching tactics, Clint took a piece of tongue on his fork and then shoved it in Loki’s face.

“Give me the lamb or I’ll force you to eat this,” Clint said, a wicked glint in his eye. While Loki had seemed a bit disgusted at the dish of tongue, he now looked downright frightened that he might be forced to consume it.

“Sigyn!” Loki called, interrupting his wife’s conversation with Pepper.

“Give him some lamb,” Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“But…” Loki began, annoyed. Clint used Loki’s brief distraction by his wife’s seeming betrayal to swipe the lamb dish and begin putting it on his plate. “Sigyn!”

“I put away some extra for you,” Sigyn whispered to her husband while rolling her eyes. “It is downstairs in our chambers.” A smirk formed across Loki’s face as he realized his wife’s cleverness and he took hold of her hand in his own, raising it up so he might kiss the back of it in a gesture of thanks.

“So… I know we haven’t had dessert yet,” Clint said, continuing to plop lamb on his plate as he eyed Loki, “but what are we going to do with leftovers?”

"Well, we already sent down a plate for Happy earlier,” Bruce commented.

“If you slipped him some tongue I feel sorry for him,” Tony grinned cheekily.

“I thought we could divide up the remainder to consume later,” Sigyn shrugged. “There are certainly enough of us to do so.”

“I call the the crab,” Tony asserted.

“Sir Bruce gets any agurksalat,” Sigyn pronounced, causing Bruce to smile at her broadly.

“It really is delicious,” Bruce nodded. “Thanks for showing me how to make it.”

“Perhaps you will have to teach me how to make one of your… curries, was it?” Sigyn suggested.
“It’s a deal,” Bruce nodded.

“Don’t spend up too much time dividing up the food,” Darcy said after a bit of a fight broke out between Clint and Thor over the remaining färilkål. “We still have dessert.”

“How can you all eat this much?” Pepper said surprised.

“Bruce and Jane haven’t eaten since dinner yesterday,” Darcy supplied. “Despite my attempts at shoving muffins in their mouths earlier today.”

“I don’t think I have either,” Tony said, realizing it for the first time.

“And Steve and our Asgardian friends are… for lack of a better word basically bottomless pits?” Clint suggested.

“You are sometimes, too,” Natasha pointed out with a snort.

“Hey, get your meals where you can,” Clint shrugged.

By the time dessert was finished, everyone was too full to really fight about how the leftovers got divided up. Steve, Clint and Thor split most of the dishes that everyone else was hesitant to take, and Loki easily gave up the bulk of the lamb dishes to Clint in exchange for extra helpings of dessert. Tony, Steve, Clint and Thor offered to do the dishes as thanks for the hearty meal, though it didn’t escape any of their notice that Loki managed to finagle his way out of dish duty by claiming he had to help Sigyn carry leftover containers back to their room. It was Natasha who noted that she had never seen Loki and Sigyn go more than twelve hours without a period spent alone together and they were coming up on around thirteen without a moment alone. After a thoughtful moment, Thor agreed that his brother and sister-in-law rather did enjoy having peace and quiet together, especially when one of them had just returned from a long voyage without the other’s company.

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Loki was trying to keep his temper down, he honestly was. To tell the truth, he wasn’t even sure why he was angry. Loki had woken in a bad mood that morning with no explanation. He had been curt to Sigyn, though no more than usual for normal in the morning. To use the Midgardian phrase Loki thought was quite apt, he was “not a morning person,” but there was something about this day that seemed to grind on him for no reason. His day of work - while tiring, mundane and monotonous - had not passed terribly and he had even earned praise from the crew foreman. On the ride back to the Tower, JARVIS had informed the group that Sigyn, Jane, Darcy and the Hulk had cooked up an Asgardian feast for them. While everyone else had been excited, Loki had merely trudged to his room, showered, changed his clothes into something comfortable, and then found himself stuck with his brother and the Captain in an elevator on the way to supper.

When the doors open, Loki was hit by the overwhelming sensation of foods from his erstwhile homeland. The smells ordinarily would have provided him comfort and, despite his ill humor, he did feel a bit of pride that his wife had organized and prepared such a lavish feast. By Asgardian standards, Sigyn was no hearthkeeper as she preferred to spend her days perfecting her skills of seiðr and healing. It was one of the reasons she and her sisters had trouble fitting in. Most Asgardians felt that becoming a wife so she could make a home and babies was the ultimate goal of any woman. She could take on certain employment up until she married, but once she had taken a husband, keeping her home, putting meals on the table, and birthing babes were the only skills that showcased a woman’s worth. As a result, the independence of the Iwaldadottirs confounded most in Asgard. Idunn had married and birthed a child, but still spent much of her time working her orchards and serving as the official palace orchardist. Likewise, Sigyn continued to work and continue her
education even after she married. The rest of the sisters continued to remain gainfully employed as a healer, a jewelry smith, and handmaidens long after most Asgardian women would have been married. The fact that they seemed to be more concerned with having fulfilling careers than marriage was puzzling to most Asgardians.

Of course, Loki knew well that the fact Sigyn preferred to learn more about the arcane arts and working among the healers did not mean his wife was incapable of cooking a good meal, keeping a warm hearth or tending to her husband after he came home from his own pursuits. He had a feeling her sisters were just as skilled but rather than marrying young and quickly for fear of becoming old maids, they chose to wait until they found men worthy enough for them to marry. Loki did feel a sense of pride that Sigyn had practically chosen him - she had been given an opportunity to back out, after all - and when she tended to him he could never doubt it was out of love rather than wifely obligation and fear of being ridiculed by her peers. Still, when he saw his wife laughing and cavorting about with the Midgardians she had taught her recipes to, the scents that normally aroused him in a sense of pride and those twin hungers of the stomach and extremities a bit further south were overcome with a twinge of something a bit darker.

In a moment, Loki realized that he was a bit jealous his wife was sharing her talents with others. And perhaps that she was getting such praise for them. After all, when he attempted to show off his skills he was usually branded a braggart. The only time anyone seemed to care about his talents was when they were useful, and once his purpose was served, Loki rarely received any praise for a job well done. He sometimes felt like a useless tool, especially when a ridiculous hammer like Mjolnir earned more praise for its accomplishments than had ever been bestowed on him. But, he thought to himself, Sigyn’s accomplishments were often overlooked by others as well. She had healed many wounds, sores and ailments for palace guards, warriors and nobles only for them to act as if she were beneath them once they were well enough to leave the infirmary.

As the meal wore on, Loki decided he wasn’t jealous that Sigyn had cooked for everyone necessarily or that her skills were garnering praise from the others. Perhaps he was just jealous that she seemed to be fitting in and making friends easier than he was. Everyone always seemed to make friends easier and have an easier time of joining the group than Loki the Trickster. Then again, perhaps this was also one of the symptoms of his mysteriously bad day. From the time he had woken up, something had been off for him and his foul mood had continued. There was no source to this ill humor and he doubted very much that something nefarious was at work. It was just the usual, run-of-the-mill bad day and would probably be over as soon as he closed his eyes that night. As he watched Sigyn pile their leftover foodstuffs into the refrigerator, he made a mental note to take some of her sister’s apple cookies.

“You prepared a fine meal, lykyng,” Loki said, as Sigyn returned to him in their parlor. “You should be proud.”

“I had much help,” Sigyn shrugged, a telltale blush covering her face.

“Do not be modest,” Loki shook his head, beckoning for her to join him on the divan. “You deserve praise for your efforts.”

“And you for yours,” Sigyn said, sliding next to him. “Thor told me that you have greatly impressed the overseers during your work.”

“The Midgardians prefer the term ‘supervisor.’” Loki informed her. “Apparently, they like to think they are all equal, though I have not seen much of any true egalitarianism here.”

“Well, whomever, I am quite proud of you for earning such praise,” Sigyn smiled. “I have a feeling
Odin thought this punishment would be nigh on impossible for you to complete and here you are, not even a month into it and already making great strides. Of course, you always succeed at whatever you put your mind to.” Loki could not help but inwardly preen at his wife’s praise. Deep down, he knew Sigyn had sensed his foul mood and she knew that praise and flattery were a great way to coax him out of his bad tempers.

“Sigyn… are you happy here?” Loki asked his wife gently. Sigyn sat thoughtfully for a moment.

“Yes,” Sigyn said. “While I do miss my sisters and their companionship greatly, I must admit there are some things about Midgard I prefer to Asgard. Lady Jane and Lady Darcy are friendly, and I like that Sir Banner and Sir Stark think of Lady Jane as an intellectual equal - even their superior in some respects. I doubt such things would happen on Asgard. Darcy said Asgard sounds ‘misogynistic’ and she worries Jane might not fare well there because of it.”

“I wasn’t aware Jane had ever been invited to Asgard,” Loki snorted. “I should hope Thor has not been filling her with false hopes. After all, Odin would never allow him to have a permanent relationship with a Midgardian. He is already incensed by the fact that Thor is having a liaison with her.”

“I think he has suggested to her that one day she might visit Asgard, but he has never really made any firm commitments to that end,” Sigyn shrugged. “However, as they allowed Sir Stark, Sir Barton and the Son of Coul to come so recently, I think the Allfather might have a harder time preventing more Midgardian visitors.”

“Just what the Allfather wanted, I’m sure,” Loki smirked, “opening up Asgard to the Midgardian tourist trade. Even worse, when he finds out how much the creatures have advanced and that most seem to think of his status as a god ridiculous. Perhaps I should make a suggestion to Thor that more Midgardians be invited to visit as a sort of diplomatic cultural exchange. I know the Allfather would scoff if I made such a request, but if it came from the voice of his favored son… And it would be so priceless to see the Midgardians asking Odin to pose for those ridiculous ‘selfie’ image capturing illusions.”

“Perhaps you should atone for what mischief you’ve caused before planning more?” Sigyn pointed out.

“Ah, but where is the fun in that,” Loki smirked before touching his forehead to his wife’s. “I am glad you are happy here. It would make this imprisonment that much more unbearable if I knew being here made you miserable.”

“I think you are bearing this imprisonment much better than you think,” Sigyn snorted.

“Ah yes, being covered in grime and forced to wear such slovenly Midgardian attire day in and out is no burden at all,” Loki snorted.

“I believe it is easier to manage than the Asgardian torture chambers,” Sigyn mused. “And not all of your Midgardian attire is atrocious. There are some pieces that I wouldn’t mind if you adopted once we return to Asgard.”

“I must admit,” Loki smirked, running a hand over his wife’s shoulder, “Midgard’s artful underthings are rather inspired. I wouldn’t mind if they returned to Asgard with us.”

“I suspected as much,” Sigyn nodded. “When I expressed my fondness for swimming, Lady Darcy suggested that we shop for something referred to as bathing suites. She seemed to think they might please you as well as my undergarments.”
“It pleases me to see you in anything,” Loki said to his wife seductively. “And nothing,”

“Charmer.” Sigyn rolled her eyes before allowing her husband to kiss her breathless.
Sigyn’s Self Defense Classes

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which Loki’s desire to see that his wife is protected turns into his desire for something else completely*

Clint and Natasha were the first to notice something was amiss in the training room. There were only a few of the archery targets Clint used for practice still remaining despite the fact that Clint had received a bulk order of targets just two weeks before. Upon further examination of the room, Natasha noticed a strange throwing knife embedded in one of the walls. The pair had taken their concerns to Stark, Captain Rogers and Thor, leading Stark to pull up the surveillance footage of the room. It appeared that around ten in the evening an invisible force began launching knives and magical spray at the walls in the training room. Considering there were only two magic wielders in the building and only one with actual working magical capabilities, it was easy to deduce who had gained unauthorized use of the training room.

Clint and Stark had wanted to confront the couple outright about what they were doing, but Thor and Natasha insisted it might be better to catch them in the act. Steve offered the final vote, suggesting that maybe if they were quietly observed the true nature of Loki and Sigyn’s clandestine training sessions could be discovered. So, that was how the Avengers found themselves hidden up one of the rafter nests Clint had created in the training room at the time when most of the Tower’s residents were heading to bed.

It seemed Sigyn’s invisibility spell rendered the pair invisible only to the cameras, something both Clint and Natasha made a mental note of for SHIELD. Both were dressed in their Asgardian armor, though ridiculous helmets had been left behind. They had both tied up their hair, Sigyn’s in braids a bit more intricate than her husband’s. Sigyn used her magic to set up the remaining targets while Loki pulled his knives out of his armor. Loki then positioned himself flush behind his wife and guided her in throwing the knife, hitting the dead center of the target. He helped her toss two more knives and then stood back, allowing Sigyn to do so on her own.

While she hit very near to the center of the target, Sigyn didn’t quite manage the bullseye her husband hit each time. Her frown and the way she bit her lip seemed to indicate her frustration and Loki stepped forward again, correcting her form before stepping back to she could continue working. When all the knives had been thrown, Sigyn used her magic to retrieve them and then began again, this time hitting the target more accurately than before. With a whispered suggestion from her husband, Sigyn then enchanted the targets to move. Again, Loki guided her with the first three knives, hitting the target in the dead center as it moved, and then allowed her to practice on her own. She had managed to make a few hits to the dead center on her own before her husband returned to her side.

“Thou art the very essence of beauty,” Loki said breathily, sucking on the side of her neck.

“Pretty words, husband,” Sigyn smirked, “but your seduction shall have to wait until later.”

“Come now, sweetling.” Loki whispered against the shell of his wife’s ear, “don’t you think you
deserve a reward for a task so beautifully completed?”

“Please tell me they haven’t been using my training room for more than training,” Tony groaned. Loki began kissing up Sigyn’s arm in a way that reminded him of Gomez Addams.

“Husband,” Sigyn tittered, “can you not wait a few more minutes? I still have some practice I need to get in.”

“I have a suggestion for some things we could practice,” Loki said huskily against her ear, “though it may require both of our full concentration for such an… intricate task…”

“Okay, I think we need to break things up before this spying session turns voyeuristic,” Tony grumbled. Before any further debate could begin, Thor stood up, brandishing Mjolnir and revealing their hiding spot.

“Loki!” Thor called down to his brother, “What is the meaning of this?”

“What have you done, Thor?” Loki asked his brother angrily, stepping in front of Sigyn as if to protect her.

“It is forbidden for you to be in the training rooms alone!” Thor called back.

“I am not alone,” Loki snorted. “Sigyn and apparently you are with me.”

“You aren’t allowed to be in the training rooms,” Steve pointed out as he stood up. Tony stood up behind him with Natasha a few seconds behind. Only Clint remained physically hidden though the munching on the bag of chips he had just found soon revealed his presence. Loki glowered at them in annoyance and Sigyn herself seemed a bit perturbed.

“I am not allowed to be in the training rooms alone,” Loki said. “The Lady Pepper said that specifically.”

“Trust him to find a loophole,” Tony muttered, watching as Thor and Cap both jumped down from the rafters.

“I do not think Sigyn is considered appropriate company for monitoring you in the training room,” Thor pointed out.

“Sigyn is not on the list of people forbidden from using the training rooms,” Loki replied. “And no one specified who exactly was to accompany me here. Only that I must be accompanied.”

“Then why did you feel the need to sneak down here if you thought everything was on the up-and-up?” Cap questioned.

“I have not been sneaking down here,” Loki snorted.

“Really? Then why hide from the cameras?” Tony asked, finally using his thruster boots to land somewhat gracefully on the ground. As if to show off, Natasha backflipped off the rafters and landed in a perfect gymnastics pose. Tony rolled his eyes.

“It was my decision,” Sigyn said finally. “I asked my husband for training sessions, and I was afraid if you knew you would not allow it.”

“Why do you need training?” Clint asked, confused, finally lazily joining everyone else on the training room floor. “You blasted those Chitauri out of the sky by yourself. And you’ve got perfect
“natural instincts.”

“With seiðr, yes,” Sigyn replied. “And I am a competent archer.”

“More than competent,” Loki insisted, especially after Clint raised his eyebrows.

“And I can work with a sword, but I realized that I am woefully out of practice with hand-to-hand combat,” Sigyn shrugged, “and, if my seiðr were ever incapacitated… I’m not sure how well I would fair.”

“While the battle for your realm may be over, there is a greater war ahead,” Loki nodded. “My dealings with the Mad Titan and the Other have painted a target not only on my back, but on Sigyn’s as well. It would comfort me to know that she has multiple ways of defending herself if need be. Knives are something I excel at.”

“You could have told us,” Thor said, seeming a little disappointed. “We would have been more than willing to help.”

“Yes, because I am sure you would all have been so willing to help me in a task where weapons were involved,” Loki snorted, making Thor frown.

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be any major difficulty to work with you on the skills you already know and teach you some new things,” Steve offered to Sigyn.

“Everyone woman should know some defensive moves, particularly those suited to hand-to-hand combat,” Natasha agreed.

“If I can get some replacement targets, I’m sure I can offer my hand at some archery skills,” Clint nodded.

“That won’t be necessary,” Loki snorted.

“I’m working on some programming to help everyone out with training,” Tony said. “Digital targets to help improve strengths and strengthen weaknesses. I can add you to the project if you’re willing to do the right tests.”

“Thank you,” Sigyn said kindly. “I appreciate your help.”

Steve was the first one to volunteer his time to teaching Sigyn how to fight. Between the shield and all the fights he had gotten into over the years, Steve was a wealth of information when it came to target practice, using angles to your advantage in combat, and getting into and out of various scrapes. While he himself wasn’t an expert on throwing knives, he did give Sigyn good advice about breathing techniques and being able to focus despite what was happening around her. He also brought out the training dummies for Sigyn to beat up, teaching her moves he had learned at the hand of Peggy Carter. Sigyn was a fast learner, and her happiness when she accomplished a new skill was highly contagious. Steve never left a session with her without a huge grin on his face.

However, Steve learned the one obstacle to training Sigyn was her husband. Loki insisted on being present for all training sessions and, while he never had anything but praise or encouragement for Sigyn, he did sometimes pick apart Steve’s teaching skills or suggestions. Steve had known a few guys back in Brooklyn who never let their gals out on their own or gave them the third degree whenever they had gone anywhere, particularly if another man had been in the vicinity. Loki wasn’t exactly like that - he had the utmost trust in Sigyn - but he seemed wary of his wife’s safety if she
was alone with someone else.

Thor and Natasha agreed Loki was probably just nervous about Sigyn being left alone with someone he still perceived as an enemy rather than any fear that Steve and Sigyn were going to cuckold him. Tony just thought Loki was bat-shit crazy and Sigyn was one of the few things that still tethered him to reality. Steve, however, was starting to believe that Loki only wanted the absolute best for Sigyn and, when he thought Steve wasn’t providing the very best, went out of his way to make his opinions known. After all, the guy did seem to buy her some new trinket or bauble every couple of days and, according to Thor, Loki wrote his wife a new love poem at least once a month. If Steve hadn’t witnessed the entire incident in Germany himself, he would have a hard time believing that a guy like Loki, who followed his wife around like a lovesick puppy, could also be a megalomaniacal mass murderer.

In their third session, Steve left Sigyn to bash a dummy repeatedly in some of the more vulnerable parts of the human body. He had stood back to give her some pointers when he heard Loki muttering behind him. The entire session Loki had been talking under his breath after just about everything Steve said, but when asked if there was anything he wanted to contribute to Sigyn’s training, Loki just glared at the Captain for daring to speak to him. Annoyed and unable to contain his temper much longer, Steve angrily turned toward Loki, who was watching his wife with a clinical eye.

“Do you have a problem with my teaching methods?” Steve asked Loki.

“This all seems rather useless to me,” Loki said. “You’re assuming that Sigyn’s only physical encounters could be with creatures roughly her or our size. And that do not fight back other than occasionally toppling over. Thanos and the Other are quite massive, as you saw. What is she to do when taking on a creature larger than her? Or one without the same humanoid vulnerabilities you are so eager for her practice?”

“That’s what the target practice lessons are for,” Steve said.

“So, if she encounters some strange creature she best hope she has a weapon rather than rely on her physical skills?” Loki huffed.

“You gotta alien you’d like to volunteer for practice?” Steve snorted. “These may not be the most advanced skills, but they’re necessary skills. Ones that she can build upon. Did you just wake up one morning knowing how to throw those knives or did you practice a lot? Learn how to hold and balance them first?”

Loki huffed, not liking that the Captain had made a fair point.

“Sigyn knows some basic defensive tactics,” Loki replied. “I doubt anything you are teaching her is new.”

“Well, it never hurts to hone up your basic skills, since they are the foundation for everything else,” Steve reasoned. “And she hasn’t indicated a readiness to move on or that she thinks my training is beneath her. Perhaps you should trust your wife to know her own limits.”

Loki grumbled, but he knew the Captain was right. He often thought the Captain was as dull as Thor, but he realized he had underestimated him. Loki did not like being wrong in his estimations of people. Before he could respond, Sigyn knocked into the training dummy she was working on, sending its head flying to one corner of the room and its body toward another. She seemed a little sheepish at having broken it, only for Steve to give her a kind nod. Sigyn then quickly used her seiðr to reassemble the dummy and then work on it again.
“She packs a good punch,” Steve mentioned to Loki off hand.

“Always has,” Loki nodded.

“Just needs to focus on where to send it,” Steve said before turning to Loki. “Look, I’m not trying to be your enemy. In fact, I think it’s really admirable that you’re working to make sure Sigyn can defend herself rather than leaving her some damsel in distress on the homefront. I understand Asgard isn’t always open to the idea of women in combat.”

“No,” Loki shook his head. “But Sigyn is given some allowances from the norm because of her heritage.” Steve’s eyebrows shot up and Loki continued. “In Vanheim and the Dwarven realms, the amount of females who serve is warriors is about equal to that of men. Asgard is the outlier, yet it tends to make everyone conform.”

“I’ll tell you,” Steve said, turning back to Sigyn kicking the dummy in its crotch area, “Some of the best and most capable people I’ve ever fought alongside were women.” Loki nodded and watched as his wife beheaded another dummy.

“Yes,” Loki mused as Sigyn placed the dummy back together before karate-chopping its mid-section. “I think most men do not realize what they are missing out on.”

It wasn’t long after that, Steve noticed, that Loki made some strange and barely plausible excuse for why he and Sigyn needed to retreat to their rooms for the night. Sigyn didn’t seem tired in the least nor did she seem ready to quit, but one look from her husband and she seemed to melt into a pile of goo, suddenly agreeing that a good, long rest in their big bed was just what she needed to be refreshed for tomorrow’s session. When he realized the excuse Loki had made was a double entendre about ‘putting Sigyn to bed,’ Steve found himself blushing the entire way back to his own rooms. He supposed Loki had also learned how alluring it could be to see a woman defending herself. Steve pushed the thoughts down and tried not to think of Peggy.

When Steve decided Sigyn was ready for some more advanced lessons, Natasha took over training her during the day. When Sigyn wasn’t giving Jane tips and tricks for her research, she was up in the gym with the Black Widow, learning combat moves and various other techniques that could help her tease, trick and confuse her enemies. In addition to teaching Sigyn a wide variety of moves and abilities that were more suited to the female form, Natasha trained Sigyn in her patented snapping-a-man’s-neck-in-half-with-your-thighs maneuver - secretly nicknamed “The Black Widow” by the vast majority of SHIELD agents. The two women initially practiced on dummies and projections in the training room, but after a while, Natasha determined Sigyn was ready to test it out on a living, breathing human. Or whatever Asgardians considered themselves. Having seen this move in action, Tony, Steve and Clint all shied away from being the test dummy. Before anyone else could proclaim they were “not it,” Natasha ordered Loki forward.

“I can’t wait to see how this will end,” Tony grinned.

“I know this works on mere Midgardians,” Thor shrugged. “But I doubt it would take down Aesir.”

“I’m Jotnar,” Loki hissed at his brother as he headed toward his designated spot on the mat, “and don’t egg her on.”

“Alright,” Natasha ordered Loki, “walk toward her.”

Loki rolled his eyes but did as the Black Widow commanded. Sigyn got a running start, leapt up and within less than a second she had both her legs wrapped around her husband and had forced him down on his back on the mat. Loki found his face between his wife’s legs and realized suddenly he
was having trouble breathing. Rather than his wife rendering him metaphorically breathless, she was actually doing something with her thigh that was crushing his windpipe. He was rather impressed. And turned on.

“Good job,” Natasha praised as Tony let out a wolf whistle and Clint began a slow clap. Sigyn got up, but Loki remained flat on his back for a moment. Instead of looking terrified or defeated, Tony realized Loki looked like a teenage boy who had just gotten ahold of his first dirty magazine. Loki then pushed himself up and grabbed Sigyn by the hand, eyeing her up in a manner the others were beginning to recognize too well.

“I would prefer you only use that on me,” Loki whispered to his wife sensually, “and it would be even more preferable if you only used it when we are alone.” Sigyn giggled and found herself being dragged from the training rooms by her husband with a vigor he hadn’t displayed in decades.

“Hey! We still have some things to show you!” Natasha called after them angrily as Loki and his wife sped back toward their rooms. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I am sorry, Lady Widow,” Thor said, gingerly placing a comforting hand on Natasha’s shoulder. “I believe your remaining demonstrations will have to wait an hour, at least.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have led with that one,” Clint suggested.

“I can’t believe it,” Natasha grumbled.

“What, that a freak like Loki would be turned on by a woman trying to decapitate him with her thighs?” Tony snorted. “I find that hard not to believe.”

“No,” Natasha rolled her eyes. “It’s actually fairly common for a guy to pop a boner when you do that.” Steve, who had just figured out the modern use of the term, sputtered until Thor clapped him on the back. Natasha continued: “I can’t believe she was so into it. I guess we should have saved that one for last.”

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If Thor was upset that Loki and Sigyn came to him for training only after they had spent several sessions with Steve and Natasha - one of which involved Clint as a guest trainer - he didn’t show it. Mostly, Sigyn’s kindness to him had never faltered. She had fussed at Thor a few times since her husband’s fall and lectured him more than once, but Thor never had any reason to doubt that Sigyn no longer trusted him or no longer felt the sisterly affection she had for him since they were children. Loki was a different story completely. He no longer trusted Thor and he no longer thought of him as his brother. It caused Thor a sharp pain in his heart whenever Loki reminded him of this. Since they had been tiny, toddling children not even allowed outside their rooms without a nanny, Thor had promised Loki and their parents he would watch over and protect his little brother, that they would always have each other to depend on. While most saw Loki as the traitor, Thor couldn’t help but feel the lion’s share of the betrayal between them was his own fault.

Thor had spoken with Jane about these concerns. Frigga always said that voicing one’s worries to a loved one had a way of making them feel less worrisome. Jane had listened patiently and then told a story about her own girlhood. Jane once had a dear friend named Claire who lived in the same area. One year for the winter holidays, Jane’s father purchased for her a very elaborate telescope. Jane and Claire spent many hours looking at the stars together through it. One night, Claire’s family offered to take them on a camping trip, but when the day of the trip arrived, Jane was too ill to go. The girls had planned on taking the telescope and even though she was unwell, Jane allowed her friend to borrow the telescope.
In the week following the camping trip, Claire refused to talk to Jane, ignoring her completely. It was only when Claire and her father came over the following weekend with the broken telescope did Claire confess what had happened. She had accidentally broken the lens and had been too afraid to confess to Jane. Claire’s father announced she would be paying to repair it, but Jane had been incensed. She told Thor it was more that Claire had lied and tried to cover up the fact she had broken the telescope than anything else. The pair eventually became friends again, but they were never as close. Jane also recalled that she never quite trusted Claire with any of her special possessions ever again. Thor had thought heavily on this parable and what Jane had said next.

“I know you want things to go back to the way they were before,” Jane had told him, “but sometimes that’s just not possible. Things on earth can’t go back to the way they were before you arrived or before the Chitauri were unleashed. Sometimes, you can’t stuff the genie back into the bottle…”

“Maybe I do not want things as they were before,” Thor mused. “With what I know now about my brother, I doubt very much he would ever want anything to return to how they were before his eyes were opened. I could not ask him to do that. Perhaps what I want is for things to be better than they were before.”

“Easier said than done,” Jane pointed out. “If you want things to change for the better, you have to change for the better.”

“What if I do this? What if I become the brother Loki needs but he still does not want me as his brother?” Thor asked worriedly.

“You have to realize Loki has some things he has to work out for himself, too,” Jane pointed out. “This isn’t going to be easy for either of you. Trust is a two way street. It takes years to build and seconds to destroy. If you want Loki to trust you, you have to start by trusting him… which I admit sounds like terrible advice given his track record but… maybe what he needs is for you to believe in him. Sometimes, having someone believe that you have potential, believe in what you can accomplish, makes you rise to that occasion. I can honestly say it was a real confidence booster for me to find Erik. Everyone else dismissed me as a crackpot, but he saw potential in me and I began to see it in myself. And now I’m published in all the major periodicals, have a worldwide lecture tour coming up and there’s even talk of me writing a book!”

“Thank you, Jane,” Thor smiled at her, “for your wisdom.”

Putting his talk with Jane out of his mind, Thor refocused himself on his brother, who was helping Sigyn make last-minute adjustments to her battle armor. Thor had agreed to work on Sigyn with her swordplay, more as honing her somewhat rusty skills than actually teaching her anything. The group had agreed they didn’t trust Loki with a sword - even one pointed at his wife - and Loki admitted that he was probably less skilled in that department than his wife. Thor had then been the natural choice, though if Sigyn wanted any training on a glaive he would gladly defer to his brother, second only perhaps to Hogun in the art of the rarely used Asgardian weapon. Though his preferred weapon was his hammer, he and all Asgardian warriors had intense training in everything from swords to pikes to halberds to axes and even bows and crossbows.

Despite their considerable size difference, Sigyn quickly seemed to gain Thor’s measure and her defensive moves made Thor feel as though he was the one out of practice. She was less talented at offense, though Sigyn never was really the one to attack someone outright. She had always been more of a defensive fighter, and Thor found it hard to catch her by surprise with any of his moves. However, when he did manage to catch her unaware and knocked her down, Thor found himself tackled by his brother before Sigyn even hit the ground. Thor was too shocked by the sudden action
to respond as Loki seemed ready to throttle him.

“Loki! What are you doing?” Sigyn huffed. Clint decided it was the appropriate time to make himself known from the rafters, aiming his bow straight at Loki’s head. Loki grumbled at his former henchman and then rolled of his brother, allowing Thor to sit up.

“He struck you,” Loki said angrily.

“That is the point!” Sigyn said, even more furious than her husband. “How am I to improve my skills if you attack for me?”

“Are you hurt?” Thor asked worriedly.

“No, and thank you for asking,” she replied before returning her glare to her husband. “I am quite well and quite capable of getting back up on my feet. And, if you seem to recall the past fifteen minutes, I am also quite capable of knocking Thor down on my own.”

“Sigyn…” Loki began to protest.

“If you cannot handle watching me practice without unnecessary intervention, the door is there,” Sigyn said to him harshly. “Use it.” Clint had apparently put away his bow in time to start clapping for Sigyn’s speech, drawing him a brief glare from Loki before the demigod turned back to his wife.

“Do not be cross, Sigyn,” Thor said before Loki could open his mouth. “I am sure it was just an instinctive reaction for him to protect you. Why, my lady Jane has trained with the Lady Widow to learn some basic combat skills. It took all I had within me to stop from throwing Jane over my shoulder and taking her somewhere safe. You must admit the recent events have us all on edge.”

Sigyn frowned and then stood up, righting her armor as she thought on Thor’s words. Thor, for his part, also got up and then offered his hand to his brother. Loki eyed it skeptically before taking it and allowing Thor to help pull him to his feet. The second he was up, Loki relinquished Thor’s hand and began dusting himself off, as if he had not accepted Thor’s help at all. Clint really hoped Tony was recording this entire session. He wanted to play it back later for everyone at SHIELD HQ.

“Fine,” Sigyn pronounced to her husband. “I forgive you for your unwarranted intervention.” Loki opened his mouth to protest but Sigyn held up a finger to silence him. “It best not occur again.”

“It won’t,” Loki frowned before resuming his seat.

Sigyn readied her sword and, when Thor was in his own fighting form, lunged at her brother-in-law. Within a few minutes, Sigyn had Thor flat on his back again. By the second time she had bested his brother, Loki decided that perhaps his intervention wasn’t exactly needed. By the fifth, Clint had joined him on the ground and the two were sharing a bag of potato chips, watching as Thor groaned after Sigyn had sent her sword hilt into his groin. Apparently, her other lessons were giving her quite the advantage in her swordplay. Thor looked ready to accuse Sigyn of being a dirty fighter for the move, but the glare from Loki made him decide against it. He just hoped Sigyn didn’t teach Sif her new moves when they returned to Asgard.

Thanks to input from Steve and Natasha as well as work with 3-D models and a motion capture camera, Tony quickly produced a training simulation for Sigyn to try out. Tony had only developed one for himself so far as most of the other Avengers were too busy to work with him for the time it took to create the simulations. However, Sigyn had been patient and willing to work late nights with him - though Loki had stood a hair’s breadth behind during the entire process Tony and constantly
asked when the process would be complete - and so hers had been completed second. Sigyn was ready for her first run-through with Tony, Steve, Natasha, Clint, Thor and Loki in the observational booth of the training room. When given the signal, she set off through an obstacle course of projected foes and stumbling blocks, working to complete the entire thing in thirty minutes or less.

Sigyn had taken down the first two adversaries in less time than Tony had projected, earning cheers from the group watching her. Steve and Natasha both seemed proud of her work while Clint and Thor just looked impressed that the diminutive woman was having such an easy time taking down adversaries twice her size - even if they were computer generated. Still, Tony’s advanced technology made them look real enough. It was Tony who first noticed Loki looked nervous, watching his wife while his knuckles gripped the back of a chair until they were white.

“She’s doing good,” Tony mentioned to Loki.

“She excels at anything she works at,” Loki agreed.

“You know,” Tony said to Loki, “if that Thanos guy had recruited her instead of you, we all would have been dead in fifteen minutes.”

“Most likely,” Loki agreed.

“Dude would have probably gained control of the universe in an hour, tops,” Tony nodded.

“I wouldn’t give him ideas,” Loki snorted.

“He piggybacking off of the Fox News satellite or something?” Tony asked, causing Loki to look at him in confusion. “Nevermind.”

“She is fierce and mighty,” Loki said of his wife, “though her stature and her kindness often makes those around her forget how much of a force to be reckoned with she is.”

“I’d hate to be on her bad side,” Tony agreed.

“I believe you may have to increase the difficulty of your course, friend Stark,” Thor beamed proudly, putting a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “At this rate Sigyn will have beaten it in half the time allotted!”

“Well, this is a test-run through,” Tony snorted. “And I’m starting to think she was holding back when we did the motion capture for it.”

“It is pretty good tech,” Steve agreed, “though I’m not sure how it measures up to the unpredictability of a live opponent.”

“Now I feel like you’ve issued a challenge for when I do your simulation,” Tony snorted. “And where did you pick up the term ‘tech’?”

“You say it often enough,” Clint shrugged before loudly clapping and cheering as Sigyn took down what appeared to be a droid from Star Wars. Clint made a mental note to ask Tony to include tribbles in his personal simulation.

Briefly stalled by a virtual mountain troll - designed by Tony thanks in part to some colorful input from Sigyn and Thor as well as an illustration provided from one of Sigyn’s books - Sigyn managed to finish her obstacle course run through with seven minutes and a handful of seconds to spare. Returning to the observation room, loose locks of hair from her braid sticking to her forehead with sweat, Sigyn was greeted with cheers and claps on the back by the Avengers, but it was really her
husband she was making her way toward. She looked up at Loki expectantly and he could help but smile at her.

“You performed beautifully,” he said, managing to wrap his arms around her without causing her armor to dig into either of their bodies.

“Just so you know,” Tony said, not seeming to realize or care he was interrupting the marital moment, “I’m going to make this thing like five times more difficult and make you do it again. I think I went way too easy on you.”

“I believe I am up to the challenge,” Sigyn grinned as Loki pressed a kiss to her hair.

“A most splendid performance,” Thor agreed. “Perhaps you should enter next year’s tournament so Sif is not the only lady participating.”

“But then who will sit with Loki and make fun of the ridiculousness of it all?” Sigyn pouted.

“Making fun of the same people,” Clint pronounced, “that’s true love.”

“Well, I would like to get out of this armor and perhaps not smell like sweat,” Sigyn stated. With a smile, she pulled her husband out of the training area behind her and headed toward their rooms. It would be the next day before they were seen again.
Take Me Out to the Ball Game

Chapter Summary

Or, in which for once the bad idea to give bats to Asgardians did not come from Tony Stark, thank you very much.

No one was exactly sure who thought a great way to blow off steam one evening would be for Thor to teach the Avengers about Asgardian feats of strength. Tony had blamed Darcy, but just in case had JARVIS delete the training room footage if was the one who had made the suggestion. Instead of accusing Tony - probably because he was her boss - Darcy chose to suggest Steve had asked Thor to show off because of Steve’s general niceness and desire to make sure everyone was included. Steve didn’t blame anyone else, but insisted it wasn’t him. Natasha suggested that maybe Thor had just started showing off without being prompted, but secretly she was pretty sure Clint had started the entire thing.

The evening had begun simple enough with what was basically a tug of war game Thor referred to as toga hönk, a phrase Tony kept repeating because it was hilarious. The division of the teams left Thor, Tony, Bruce, Jane, and Clint on one side with Loki, Steve, Darcy, and Natasha on the other. Thor’s team won two out of three - mainly because Steve claimed Loki wasn’t trying at all. It looked like Team Steve was going to win the fourth game until Steve noticed Bruce was looking green and called things. After that, Thor decided to introduce a new game, heading out of the training room to get some materials.

“This is awful,” Loki pouted, retreating to the corner of the training room where his wife was munching on some of Clint’s hidden snacks with Pepper. “Why couldn’t we just play hnefatafl.”

“Gesundheit,” Tony replied.

“Why did you just wish me health?” Loki said to Tony, feeling suspicious.

“I forgot that Allspeak instantly translates everything, so the use of a different language is lost on you,” Tony snorted.

“Hnefatafl is a board game,” Sigyn replied. “You place it on a notched board with marbles.”

“Like Chinese checkers?” Clint suggested.

“I… don’t know what that is…” Sigyn admitted.

“Hornaskinnleikr!” Thor thundered, reappearing in the room and bearing a giant bear rug from Tony’s library over his head.

“Why do you have dad’s musty old bear rug?” Tony grimaced. “I’m pretty sure it’s got fleas. And I’m pretty sure Howard didn’t kill it either. Just bought it and told people he did.”

“Why did you even keep that thing?” Pepper asked Tony, with a frown.

“It’s for the library,” Tony said. “That’s what libraries are for, right? Antiques, fur rugs and weird knickknacks?”
“Books are also occasionally stored in them,” Loki harrumphed.

“But seriously, what’s with Smokey the Bear?” Tony asked.

“For hornaskinnleikr!” Thor thundered again.

“What?” Steve asked.

“It’s a painfully idiotic game,” Loki explained, “wherein one person - usually me as a small child - stands in the middle of a circle and everyone else - namely Thor and his much larger friends - toss an animal skin from one to each other. The person in the center of the circle attempts to grab the animal skin, though is usually unsuccessful. If the person in the center does manage to grab the skin, the last person who threw the skin must stand in the middle and attempt to catch it. And so it goes on. Usually ending up with me in the mud and several people standing over me, laughing.”

“So...it’s like Asgardian keep away?” Steve grimaced.

“You do not like hornaskinnleikr?” Thor frowned at Steve.

“When I was a kid it was usually played with my school books or my lunch pail,” Steve said. “And it wasn’t called Horna-whatever. It was called ‘keep Rogers’ stuff away from him.’ And it usually ended up with my books or lunch in the mud. Or me and Bucky in the principal’s office for fighting.”

“Oh yeah,” Clint said, vaguely recollecting some childhood trauma. “There’s nothing like five or six guys bigger than you tossing around your books or your backpack or your lunch box because they think it’s fun to torment you.”

“Monkey in the middle,” Darcy said. “That’s what we called it on the playground. But we played it with a rubber dodgeball instead of an animal skin. Of course, it was at least sanctioned by a gym coach.”

“I do not deign to participate in this farce,” Loki said, stretching out beside his wife and Pepper.

“Midgardians… do not like hornaskinnleikr?” Thor frowned.

“You have to admit,” Jane said to him, “it can be a spiteful game, especially if not everyone is in on it. When I was middle school, the eighth grade girls used to play it with my glasses.”

“I mean, if the participants are all willing, I’m sure it’s not that bad,” Tony said, also trying to cheer Thor up. Instead. Thor dropped the animal skin, seemingly burned that no one had asked Jane’s consent to play the Midgardian version of hornaskinnleikr. Loki grimaced, wondering why it had taken Jane’s involvement to make Thor see how cruel the game could be.

“We shall not play hornaskinnleikr,” Thor determined. “We shall play something else. Wrestling perhaps?”

“Yeah, no, I’m good without wrestling,” Bruce nodded.

“No offense man, but the only two people here with similar weight classes are you and Cap,” Clint pointed out.

“Let’s see what equipment we got in here,” Tony said, going over to one of the training room’s several equipment closets. The first thing he pulled out, surprisingly, was a bouncy rubber ball.
“Dodgeball!” Darcy crowed at the same time Thor said “Hnútukast!”

“Pardon?” Steve asked.

“Hnútukast,” Sigyn offered. “A game of at least six participants with three balls wherein the participants hurl balls at each other. If one is hit, they are out of the game while if one catches a ball, the person who threw it is out of the game.”

“Remind me again why proving one can dodge an object is fun?” Loki huffed before lying back and seeming to start napping on the floor.

“You would like to play if you were allowed your seiðr,” Sigyn snorted. “I remember distinctly how much you like to disappear as soon as a ball is lobbed at you.”

“Seiðr-wiedling during hnútukast is cheating!” Thor proclaimed. Still dramatically sprawled across the floor, Loki made some sort of hand gesture toward his adopted brother and then looked pointedly at his wife and Pepper as if to say ‘this is why I don’t play sports.’

“It’s dodgeball!” Darcy said, doing a happy dance. “Asgardians play dodgeball!”

“Oh yeah,” Tony grinned, digging around for a few more rubber balls. “You guys are going down. This was the day I lived for in middle school gym.”

“Sorry, man,” Clint grinned as Tony tossed him a ball, “but you’re the one going out first. I never miss.”

“I think I can handle this,” Steve grinned.

“You have to hit them directly,” Tony pointed out. “None of that bouncing things off walls and using geometry and physics to your advantage.”

“JARVIS, please film this and send it to my phone,” Pepper ordered the AI. “I think this will provide some comic relief on my next long flight.”

Surprisingly to everyone but Bruce, he was the first person out. Bruce adopted the same strategy for dodgeball he had since second grade, which was get hit by a ball quickly and then go sit on the bleachers for the rest of gym class. Jane was out next, having adopted a similar strategy as a child. Darcy managed to tag Thor and, mid-victory dance, managed to catch a ball from Tony, who thought her too distracted. Flabbergasted at being out so quickly, Tony went over to sit by Pepper and try to figure out what he had done that was so wrong. A few minutes later, Clint managed to tag Darcy leaving the field with just him, Natasha and Steve. Natasha was surviving mainly due to her sleath, but dove in front of a ball Clint had aimed for Steve mainly because she wanted to see how her archer friend fared against the guy who threw things for a living.

“Unfair!” Clint called out. “Sabotage!”

“There’s no rule against trying to get hit,” Natasha pointed out. “If there was, Bruce and Jane would still be in this.”

“Hey, it’s a good strategy for not having to participate in gym class!” Bruce said.

“Yeah, you can sit in the bleachers and do homework,” Jane nodded.

“I’m surrounded by nerds,” Tony rolled his eyes.
“You are a nerd,” Pepper pointed out.

“What, Clint?” Steve smirked at him. “You afraid to go mano a mano?”

“Nah, just don’t want to explain to Fury that you died from embarrassment after I bested you,” Clint snorted.

What resulted was forty-eight minutes of Clint and Steve chasing each other around the room with the single remaining ball allowed to be kept in play. The two of them were literally ducking and rolling, climbing up walls and even briefly had a face-off on one of the room’s rafters. The bout ultimately ended with Clint thinking he had Steve in a corner only for Steve to catch the dodgeball, winning the game. Clint groaned and flopped down on the floor in defeat while Steve just stood there for a minute, seemingly stunned he had won. It was technically the first time Steve Rogers had single-handedly won a playground game, after all.

“So, new game?” Tony said, standing up and patting Steve on the back in congratulations. Clint muttered something into the floor.

“Maybe we should try something where most of the players don’t end up sitting around for an hour with nothing to do,” Darcy suggested. “Asgard got anything like that?”

Thor proceeded to explain how to play knattleikr, which initially seemed like something of an Asgardian version of field hockey. Well, at first Clint had pointed out it was hockey but his explanation of playing the game on skates thoroughly confused the Asgardians. When Bruce offered up the type of street hockey he had occasionally played with the neighborhood kids as a team, it was easier to convince Thor that this was closer to the Midgardian version. However, when Thor explained the rules and equipment being used, Steve realized this was actually not an Asgardian game of field hockey but rather an Asgardian version of hurling, the Gaelic game that many of the Irish immigrants and their children of his neighborhood had brought over with them.

Steve cautioned the others that this game had actually been banned in some places because of the amount of deaths and injuries it was known to cause, but that seemed to only make Tony and Clint more eager to play. Thor explained that true knattleikr sticks - much like the camán Steve was used to - had little grooves to hold the ball as the ball could only be carried in the hand a short distance without a foul being called. The sticks could also be used to hit the ball, like in baseball. Since it was difficult to balance the ball Tony had produced on the end of the sticks, it was decided that coaxing the ball along the ground with the stick would be permitted.

Jane decided to sit out this game, leaving the teams uneven as Tony began handing out hockey sticks he just happened to have in one of the training room closets (Pepper muttered something under her breath about how Tony had gotten really into the Winter Olympics one year). Surprisingly to everyone, Sigyn then stood up and volunteered to play. Loki then sat up, eager to watch his wife’s prowess on the makeshift knattleikr field. Thor seemed pretty eager to see his sister-in-law ready to play - until Steve picked her for his team with a Cheshire cat grin across his face. Steve had clearly not forgotten seeing Sigyn run the training gauntlet Tony had set up for her, and the reason Thor’s face fell at seeing his sister-in-law on the opposing team became apparent as soon as referee Pepper blew the whistle and dropped the tennis ball being used instead of a the traditional knattleikr ball.

Instantly upon the game starting, Sigyn barrelled forward with her stick, knocking Tony completely over, sideswiping the tennis ball from Thor and heading straight toward Natasha with it, ready to mow the spy assassin down. Realizing she might not be able to weave around Natasha, Sigyn then tossed the ball up and hit it with her hockey stick, knocking it into the makeshift goal behind goalie Bruce. When the game was reset, Thor sent the ball hurdling toward Tony only for Sigyn to use her stick to knock Tony’s out of the way of receiving it.
“Foul!” Tony called.

“That is not a foul!” Sigyn protested.

“It was an acceptable play,” Thor agreed.

“What?” Tony said, annoyed. “She hit her stick with my stick!”

“It’s perfectly fine to hit someone else’s stick with your stick,” Steve explained. “You can also knock someone down with your body. You just can’t hit someone’s body with your stick.”

“What kind of stupid rules are those?” Tony huffed.

“Similar to football,” Bruce pointed out.

“Tripping other players is also forbidden,” Sigyn said. “As is wrestling them to the ground and yanking upon clothing. And though not officially, we usually say yanking upon hair is frowned upon too.”

“You seem to know a lot about making fouls,” Steve pointed out.

“You’ve not played this game with my sisters,” Sigyn smirked. Thor and Loki both seemed to involuntarily shiver, leaving the rest to wonder how vicious the Iwaldadottirs could be on the knattleikr field. Thor later told Jane and Darcy he still had a scar on the back of his head from where Var had cracked upon his skull during a particularly gruff game in their youth.

While the game had gotten close midway through with a tie that lasted several minutes, Steve’s team pulled ahead by the time Tony’s countdown watch indicated the game was over. The final dramatic play of the game wound up with Steve sliding the ball past Bruce. As he did so, Natasha tried to block Clint from stopping Steve, accidentally elbowing Clint in the face and giving him a bloody nose. The flow from Clint’s nose was tame, however, to the bruise twin hits from Sigyn and Steve had left on Tony’s ribs and the cauliflower ear Thor seemed to be getting from one of Sigyn’s dramatic jumps to take the ball out of his control in midair. Happily enough, Sigyn returned her stick to Tony to put away and then flounced back to her husband, nary a hair out of place from when the game began.

“That was… unnecessarily violent,” Jane pronounced.

“Welcome to Asgardian gaming,” Loki rolled his eyes as his wife arranged herself beside him. Quickly, the grin Loki had been sporting since his wife elbowed Thor in the ear returned and he gave his wife a chaste kiss, almost as if thanking her for the humiliating display.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded, coughing slightly. “Maybe we should play something that… doesn’t rearrange my vital organs?”

“I’m sorry if I hit too hard,” Sigyn said to Tony embarrassedly. “I sometimes… lose my head a bit on the knattleikr field.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony assured her. “Anything you knocked out of place I’m sure Steve knocked back in when he barrelled into me.”

“You could have moved,” Steve shrugged.

“I’m guessing Asgard doesn’t have too many games that avoid physical contact,” Darcy smirked.
“Perhaps you could teach us one of your Midgardian games instead?” Sigyn suggested.

“If we teach Thor football,” Clint wheezed from the floor where Natasha was helping him stuff his nose with tissues, “we are all gonna die.”

“Soccer?” Bruce suggested.

“We should teach them an American game,” Tony snorted.

“Baseball!” Steve said excitedly.

Before any of the other Avengers could respond, Steve was happily explaining to their Asgardian friends all about the rules of baseball, his favorite players and only going on a slight rant about the Dodgers being sold to Los Angeles, of all places. Steve was deep in some sort of philosophical lecture about baseball being an everyman’s game when Tony threw up his hands in defeat.

“Baseball it is, I guess,” Tony said.

Being a Brooklyn boy, Steve was sore about the Dodgers but he couldn’t bring himself to root for “those hoity-toity” Yankees. Bruce figured going to a Mets game would be a nice middle ground and even give Steve a new team to root for - even if they were based out of Queens. It didn’t hurt Steve’s conversion that the Mets’ team colors were the traditional Dodgers Blue and the Giants Orange - which Steve educated the rest was named after the original baseball team of that name not the football team. The fact that the Mets had the same loveable loser reputation as his beloved Dodgers seemed to endear them to Steve even more. It didn’t take much coaxing to convince Steve this was the team that could introduce the Asgardians to baseball, and Steve then turned to Tony to see if the process of attending a modern-day baseball game had changed. After explaining the designated hitter rule and watching Steve go into a twenty-minute rant about how it was against the spirit of the game, Tony finally agreed to hook everyone up with a baseball game.

The thing about Tony Stark was that he never did anything by halves. Go big or go home was probably the motto on the Stark family crest. So, when Steve suggested taking their Asgardian friends to see a live baseball game rather than just watching one on TV, Tony went all out. The group had front row seats over the Mets’ dugout, watching them face off against the Padres. Steve was so mesmerized by the JumboTron allowing him to see plays close up that it was the first half of the second inning before he got around to actually starting to explain the game to Thor, Sigyn and Loki. It was around this time that he also noticed that Bruce and Tony - who had been sitting behind them along with Clint and Natasha - had disappeared. Natasha explained it was presumably to get snacks while Clint woke up, rubbed his eyes, looked at the scoreboard, and then went back to sleep.

“I do not understand this game, friend Steven,” Thor frowned. “Where are the goals? How come only one man is given a stick?”

“It’s called a bat,” Steve explained for the third time that day.

“Why he is waiting to hit the ball?” Loki asked, confused. “If he wants to stand upon the base, he should just use his club to beat back the others. Look! They don’t even have weapons!”

“That’s not how you play the game,” Steve said for the thousandth time.

“I see,” Thor nodded. “The ball of bases is a game of honor! The man has the bat and may strike the others but instead he uses his skill to strike the ball! The others must scramble for the ball to return it to the base before he can stand upon it. Otherwise, he is… what did you call it?”
“Out,” Steve said.

“And then he returns to the dugout to be shamed by his comrades for his failures,” Loki nodded.

“Not exactly,” Steve began. Just then, the player on first base began to run from his base to second as the pitcher was readying to throw. The crowd was on their feet.

“What is happening?” Sigyn asked.

“You see, sometimes the players are sneaky and they do what is called ‘stealing a base,” Steve said. “He has to get to it before the pitcher notices. If the pitcher catches him, he can throw the ball to the second baseman who could tag the runner out. Or, if the runner tries to head back to first, he might find himself stuck between the two basemen until he gets tagged out or reaches a base.”

“So there is some cunning to this game,” Loki smirked. “I like it.”

“It’s mostly skill,” Steve said. “But there is a fair amount of anticipating what other players can do. You have to know how to use your own skills to your advantage and how to exploit your opponents weaknesses.”

“A game that requires both physical and mental prowess,” Sigyn surmised.

“Alright, I’m back with the food!” Tony grinned.

The group looked over to see Tony proudly holding three hot dogs in his hand, one of which he had already bitten out of. Behind him, an exasperated Bruce held onto an entire carrying case of hot dogs and supplies that Tony had most likely bought from a vendor outright. Behind Bruce stood a cheerful pretzel vendor, who began distributing the treats to Tony’s various guests. A pair of stadium employees with boxes holding various sodas and beers were coming down the steps just behind him.

“You know these things are ridiculously over-priced right?” Clint said, having woken up and accepted a pretzel.

“Yeah, well, you can’t go to the ball park and not have food,” Tony said, as Bruce handed the hot dog box off to Steve. Inside were both hot dogs and every topping available. Tony finished one of his three hot dogs and then turned back around. “Where did the nacho guy get off to?”

“You can’t put ketchup on a hot dog,” Clint grimaced at Thor.

“Yeah, man,” Tony agreed. “What are you, five?”

“There are age requirements for using ketchup?” Thor said, surprised.

“No… it’s just people tend to frown on ketchup-only hot dogs,” Clint explained, starting to load his own up with chili, cheese and onions.

“Midgardians have strange culinary rules,” Thor said conversationally. “Did you know bread cannot be baked in the device of small waves?”

“The microwave?” Natasha supplied.

“Actually, no I didn’t,” Steve admitted as Tony waved over the nacho guy. “Tony, you didn’t have to get us this much food.”

“I’m sorry, but you and our Asgardian friends down there in the front row eat a ton,” Tony snorted. “Besides, what’s a trip to the ballpark without some classic ballpark food?”
“We didn’t have nachos back in the day,” Steve pointed out.

“Yeah, but hot dogs,” Tony shrugged. “Besides, we had to get at least one Dr. Bruce-approved snack.”

“I wouldn’t say nachos are exactly Dr. Bruce-approved,” the doctor snorted. “The pretzels might be healthier than all this cheese…”

“What is in this hot dog?” Sigyn asked worriedly as Loki tentatively sniffed at the one he had loaded up with mustard, ketchup and sauerkraut. “Not actual dogs?”

“I’m pretty sure there aren’t actual dogs,” Clint shrugged, shoveling his into his mouth.

“We can stick to the pretzels and nachos,” Bruce said to Sigyn with a kind smile. “You can dip the pretzels in the nacho cheese. And if Clint hasn’t eaten them all, I think we can swipe some of the peppers and onions for nacho toppings.”

Clint stuck out his tongue at Bruce, handing off the hot dog supply box so Bruce could pick out his nacho toppings. Sigyn happily received her container of nachos. When the hot dog box had made all of its rounds, Loki pilfered the remaining sauerkraut for his wife to eat straight out of the container. With all the food boxes being handed around so the party could get what they wanted, Tony began tipping the stadium employees with stacks of hundreds and a few selfies. There would be a few subsequent JumboTron shots of the Avengers at the ballpark and around the end of the seventh inning, Tony got a series of texts from Pepper and Rhodey, wanting to know why there was a rumor Stark Industries was buying the Mets or at least their stadium and confused about his long-term status as a confirmed Yankees fan.

By the time the game was over and the group was heading back to the Tower, Steve had somewhat successfully explained how baseball was played to the Asguardians. Thor was definitely the most excited about having attended the sporting event, discussing how he would regale his friends back on Asgard with the tale of how the brave men of the Metropolitans had come back from the previous day’s loss to this time thrash the men of the Padres. Thor particularly liked the idea of the win-loss record so that a group of comrades would know how many of their battles they had been victorious in that year. Loki, for his part, grumbled that more bases were not stolen and that Thor had almost made him drop his pretzel during a particularly stunning play.

When they arrived back at the Tower, Thor went immediately to regale Jane and Darcy with the tales of the day alongside Bruce, who was heading off into the labs with him to check on the results of something he was working on. Clint branched off to go find a nest and sleep off all of the sleeping he had done at the game, and Natasha had disappeared completely before anyone realized she was missing. Loki and Sigyn disappeared into their rooms for alone time together. When the elevator finally reached the top floors, it was only Steve and Tony who exited in the communal living room. Tony headed over to grab himself a snack while Steve plopped himself on a stool in front of the kitchen counter, still flipping through the stack of baseball cards Tony had picked up for him at the stadium shop.

“What’s wrong, Cap?” Tony asked, eating out of the container of sliced watermelon in the fridge.

“The game just kind of brought back memories,” Steve sighed. “I loved baseball as a kid, but I never really got to play. Bucky and the other kids would play with sticks and rocks in the alleys and roads, but with my health… I always got to be the umpire just so I’d be included, but I always wanted to be the one running the bases or chasing after a pop fly. Buck and I’d spend all our spare change going to Dodgers games, and when we couldn’t, everyone in building would gather around Mr. O’Donovan’s radio to hear the game.”
“What about after you bulked up?” Tony asked.

“The Howlies did have a couple of games during the war,” Steve admitted. “Sometimes when we were in camp or we’d be visiting other camps and challenge them. Downtime during a war… it’s awful. Almost enough to make you go crazy anticipating when the next battle is going to break out. It was nice getting to actually play for once, though most of them didn’t think it was fair to let me run the bases. No one could catch up to me.”

“I bet I could get you in the suit,” Tony smirked. Suddenly, Steve’s eyes lit up in a way that reminded Tony of a golden retriever spying a tennis ball.

“We should have a baseball game,” Steve suggested.

“Me and you?” Tony asked.

“All of us,” Steve said. “I mean, Thor showed us all of his games. And we have enough people we could manage a decent game. I mean, not nine players on each team but enough that we could have bases covered…”

“I’m not sure the training room is big enough to play baseball in,” Tony frowned. He thought for a minute. “Although… I do own some property upstate…”

“We could make an afternoon out of it!” Steve grinned. “Maybe have a picnic first…”

“It would be a good way to get Pep out of the office,” Tony said. “And I’m sure she wouldn’t argue against getting the rest of us out of the labs for a little while…”

“It’ll be great!” Steve nodded.

Pepper had tried to argue against leaving the city for the afternoon to play baseball up until the point she saw Steve’s puppy-dog eyes. Jane and Darcy opted out of the game, citing some unfinished projects they needed to wrap up before leaving on Jane’s summer lecture tour. However, when SHIELD found out that Tony was taking his imprisoned Asgardian on a field trip upstate, they insisted on sending along back up to make sure Loki didn’t conveniently lose himself in the Adirondacks under the premise of searching for a runaway pop fly. When Coulson showed up the next morning to inform them of SHIELD’s conditions, Steve invited him along to play to even out the teams and he gladly accepted. So, after a picnic lunch on a hill near an old storage facility of Howard Stark’s, the ragtag group of Avengers, SHIELD agents, Asgardians and a Fortune 500 Company CEO found themselves ready to play ball.

“I think we should due normies versus enhanced,” Tony said, “and to make it fair, I won’t even wear a suite. Not that I have a suit designed to play baseball…”

“Wait? Who are you calling a normie?” Clint said, offended.

“Teams, you, me, Widow, Pepper and Agent,” Tony explained. “Cap can have the Asgardian squad and Bruce.”

“No,” Bruce shook his head. “Sports and anger issues… don’t mix.”

“I am not playing against people who throw knives and shoot arrows at each other for fun,” Pepper insisted. “Unlike the rest of you, I don’t seem to have the infinite luck to not get murdered.”
“Fine,” Tony conceded. “Bruce and Pep can be umpires. You guys are sticklers for the rules anyway, huh?”

“Why are you with him again?” Bruce asked.

“I’m asking myself that right now,” Pepper groaned.

“Loki doesn’t have his magic,” Steve said. “I mean, he’s practically mortal. I don’t know if it would be fair to have him on my team.” Coulson seemed to nod in agreement. Tony momentarily considered trading Loki for Coulson at that point. While Loki might try to murder everyone on his team, Coulson might try to throw the game so his hero, Captain Spangly Pants, would win.

“He’s still immortal,” Clint shook his head. “Shoved him down a flight of stairs that one time and he barely bruised. Besides, he’d have to be on Sigyn’s team, wouldn’t he? And that wouldn’t exactly make it normies versus enhanced.”

“I could be on a team without my husband,” Sigyn announced.

“What? And force me to hit you with a club?” Loki said, appalled.

“We’ve been over this,” Steve groaned, “you don’t hit the other players with bats.”

“Seems like a waste of a perfectly good club,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Okay, so Loki and Sigyn are on the same team no matter what,” Tony agreed.

“But still, it’s a little mismatched,” Steve insisted.

“That’s what you’d like to think,” Tony snorted, “but I’ll have a pair of super assassins and a secret agent on my team. You may be the physical embodiment of baseball and apple pie, but you and your enhanced body squad are going down.”

“Are you sure about that?” Steve smirked.

“Please,” Tony rolled his eyes. “Thor over there may be huge and good at swinging things at other things, but he’s got the attention span of a five year old after a box of Pixie Sticks. He’ll be off chasing butterflies through a field in no time. Loki will be too busy ogling Sigyn’s ass in those yoga pants to know going on. So we only have to watch out for you and her. That’s practically four against two.”

“Well, really four against four if you account for the supernatural strength and speed,” Coulson pointed out.

“See!” Tony said happily. “We’re even!”

“Alright,” Steve agreed. “Play ball!”

----------------------------------------------------------------------

By the bottom of the third inning, baseball with superheroes was proving to not be the best idea. Loki’s desire to steal bases was dampened when he was informed that he could not physically pick up and move the base to stand upon it to avoid being tagged out. He was also annoyed to learn he could not toss the base at someone attempting to tag him or use the base as a makeshift shield - though that attempt had entertained Steve. However, it was Thor who had a hard time understanding he couldn’t knock the ball out of someone’s hand if they were coming to tag him. At least Thor was
a one-man outfield for Steve’s team, delighting in chasing after pop flies like a dog after a tennis ball. While Steve served as a pitcher, Sigyn took her duty over first and second base seriously. Half the time, Loki just sat on the line between second and third base, plucking up strands of grass and weaving them into small creatures that he probably knew from Asgard. Each finished piece was put into his pocket, probably to give to his wife later.

When it came to batting, Steve’s group wasn’t much better better. After Thor and Steve each cracked a wood bat, a metal one was brought in. However, a second metal bat had to be found after Steve hit a spectacularly acrobatic pitch from Natasha, causing the bat to bend in the center and the ball to disappear into the woods. Tony made a mental note to install tracking devices on baseballs for any future games since for now they weren’t even bothering to find them. Steve had hit far too many grand slams in Tony’s opinion, but at least Steve’s preternatural abilities had helped him understand the need for designated hitters in some cases. While Thor was pretty good at hitting the ball, he usually hit fouls. Loki seemed to delight in sending the balls not out of the bounds of the playing field but rather into the bodies of his fellow players. Pepper instituted a rule that hitting another player with a ball when batting was an automatic out after the third time a member of Tony’s team was beaned in the head, causing Loki to sulk but at least shape up.

Steve’s team weren’t the only ones with weird habits at bat. Tony had an entire ritual he had to do before even approaching the plate. Natasha was a decent hitter and knocked them out of the park fairly often, but Clint proved to be the stand out batter on Tony’s team. The problem was whenever Clint hit a ball deep into the woods, he took his time rounding the bases. By the end of the second inning, a rule had to be established that moonwalking was not an acceptable way of rounding the bases, though Clint raised a protest that Natasha was still allowed to use her weird acrobatic talents to catch balls and pitch.

Tony’s team proved to be much better at paying attention when out on the field. Tony had set aside his ego and designated Natasha as the pitcher. Clint protested a bit, but Tony pointed out that they didn’t want someone who “never missed” when it came to throwing the ball where the opponent could hit it. Instead, Clint was assigned to the infield with Coulson, which Tony found actually worked out somewhat. While Clint seemed ready to lay his head against the makeshift bases and go to sleep, over-achiever Coulson seemed excited to impress his hero Captain America with his own baseball prowess. Coulson easily made up for Clint’s slacking. Tony to stuck to the outfield, though Pepper and Bruce both agreed that he couldn’t use the boots from the suite to chase after balls. He managed a few catches now and then, but Tony had to admit that when he got back to the Tower he was going to have to up his cardio regime.

All in all, things were going well until the bottom of the sixth. Thor had somehow skidded to second base with Loki ready to bat. Tony and Clint seemed to delight in the fact that taunting the batter really seemed to get Loki’s goat. The demi-god gritted his teeth after missing Natasha’s first pitch, sending an annoyed glare at the two men yelling taunts at him. Loki managed to clip her second throw, but it was a foul. Tony and Clint snickered. Bruce proclaimed the ball a strike and Loki gritted his teeth further. Thor, cupping his hands around his mouth, then yelled out:

“Brother! The objective is to strike the ball!”

It was then that Loki apparently had it. He bunted Natasha’s next pitch, sending it only a few feet forward and out of the range of most of his opponents. Rather than tossing the bat to the side, however, he began running with it in his hand like a weapon. Loki didn’t head for first base, instead going toward the area between third and second. Thor, not paying attention to anything but the next base, did not realize where Loki was until the metal bat struck his legs in motion. Reacting to being struck, Thor summoned Mjolnir and used it to hit his brother, sending Loki careening over the pitcher's mound and into a pile of freshly recruited SHIELD agents who had been tasked with
watching the snacks Tony had brought to indulge in post-game. The slide of Loki’s body across the grass had left something akin to a ditch in his wake.

“Oh, this is not good,” Pepper said, her mouth open as Loki stumbled out of the pile of agents and mini-chip bags he had fallen onto.

“They’re going to kill each other,” Natasha agreed as Bruce crouched down and began chanting something that sounded like “calm blue ocean.”

“Dude!” Clint said to Thor, who seemed stunned by the fact he had hit his brother.

Getting up and dusting himself off, Loki then ran toward the metal bat to retrieve it while Thor began heading toward his brother to stop him. However, both had only taken a few steps when they found Sigyn’s magic was holding them back. Sigyn glared at Thor who apologetically set Mjolnir down by third base and came over to where Loki was still being held by his wife’s magic. A hushed argument ensued in which Sigyn seemed to get the two brothers to apologize for their behavior, though neither one of them seemed to be happy about doing so. Sigyn then turned to the rest of the assembled group.

“I apologize, but I believe Thor and Loki deserve a time out for their behavior,” Sigyn said. “If that means our team has to forfeit this competition, I understand and I again apologize, Captain Rogers.”

“No… it’s okay,” Steve said. “I have to admit, this might not have been the best idea.”

“No, probably not,” Natasha agreed.

“Whose idea was this, anyway?” Pepper frowned, glaring at Tony.

“This wasn’t my idea!” Tony crowed, doing some weird little victory dance. “This was Capsicle’s bad idea! Captain America had a bad idea! Alert the media! This wasn’t my fault!” Steve looked sheepish, and Pepper sighed.

“Maybe we can try this again another time… when we have more mature parties involved?” Pepper suggested.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said to Pepper.

“It’s okay,” Pepper assured him.

“What? He doesn’t get a lecture? You’re not going to ground him from his shield?” Tony said to Pepper, flabbergasted.

“Because he knows how to apologize instead of just rationalizing why things aren’t his fault,” Pepper snorted. Tony opened his mouth, but found his words coming from someone else’s voice.

“But it wasn’t my fault!” Loki whined at his wife. “You saw it! Thor taunted me!”

“And you could have proven yourself above him by not having such a visceral response,” Sigyn frowned. “Good-natured taunting is apparently part and parcel with Midgardian sporting events. If you are not able to handle it, perhaps you should have recused yourself from playing.”

“But Thor…” Loki began.

“Thor is not my husband,” Sigyn replied, “and does not have to answer for his actions to me. You, however, were doing quite marvelously until just now. I am disappointed but not surprised.”
“Ditto,” Pepper said to Tony. The two women wandered off to check on the SHIELD agents, leaving their men behind.

“Ouch,” Tony grimaced as they walked off. Loki did not say anything, but the gutted look on his face echoed how Tony felt inside. Tony sighed as Pepper shot him another glare from where she was helping SHIELD agents pick up chip bags. Tony grimaced. “And I didn’t even do anything!”
Happy Name Day, Metal Man

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, there ain’t no party like a Tony Stark party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While the ill-fated baseball game - which Tony still maintained was purely Captain America’s fault - had not been a stellar start to the Memorial Day weekend, most of the actions of that day had been forgiven by Sunday. Tony had started the day talking excitedly about his upcoming birthday on Tuesday, only for Pepper to shush him when Steve walked in the room. She reminded Tony quietly that this was Steve’s first Memorial Day since being unfrozen, since losing all of his comrades. While Tony often insisted his birthday should be a national holiday or at least one in the state of New York, he set aside his ego and spent the rest of Sunday trying to help Pepper figure out a way to ensure Steve wasn’t isolated by Memorial day.

Steve had been a little morose all Sunday, already thinking about the fallen comrades he had to mourn. Steve had been invited to several events across the country and even Brooklyn’s famous historic parade, but had turned the all down. Tony - via Pepper - knew that what Cap wanted most was to spend some time decorating some graves out at the Holy Cross Cemetery in Flatbush. Steve had spent every Memorial Day there since he was a toddler, helping his mother decorate his father’s grave. Now, Steve felt it was his duty to return not only for his father but also for Bucky, who was buried not far from where the graves of Steve’s parents and Steve’s own grave lay.

Thankfully, Steve had been able to channel some of his grief by explaining the holiday to Thor. While Tony had planned a massive burgers-and-hot-dogs shindig for everyone out by the pool, Steve made sure Thor knew that eating and swimming were not the only parts of this celebration. Thor, for his part, listened with rapt attention and then explained to Steve about similar customs on Asgard and Vanaheim, held to remember the fallen who had passed on to the twin realms of the honored dead, Folkvangr and Valhalla. A yearly feast was held where the dead were not exactly mourned but rather libations poured out in their honor. Comrades of the fallen would tell stories of their most heroic efforts in remembrance.

Rhodie had arrived early that Monday morning to stay for the evening’s Memorial Day festivities and then Tony’s birthday the following day. Tony had explained to Rhodey that Cap was feeling low about the holiday, and thought another soldier might better understand how to help him out. After settling in, Rhodey offered to go with Steve and Thor to visit the cemetery and, after a fake pouting about how Rhodey was abandoning him after he just got in, Tony gave his friend some cash to make sure the guys had a good lunch somewhere in Brooklyn before heading back for the Tower’s all-out bash that evening. Oddly enough, the Memorial Day party Tony had planned for that evening was Avenger’s and associates only while it was Tony’s birthday the following day that would be the major party that various SI employees, celebrities and other insiders would be invited to. Pepper and Happy had years before decided Tony was always throwing massive celebrations for
his birthday because so many of his birthdays as a child and then after his parents’ deaths had been spent practically alone.

Tony officially declared the Avengers Memorial Day Pool Party would commence at one that afternoon, giving everyone ample time to have eaten lunch, changed into swimsuits and regroup at the pool. Steve, Rhodey and Thor arrived back just before the pool festivities were to commence. Steve had been worried because he didn’t have any swim wear, but Tony insisted some had been provided for him. Thor then grumbled about why Midgardians required particular clothing for bathing as all swimming on Asgard was done in the nude. Tony tried to make Thor swear on Mjolnir that he wouldn’t show up to the party naked, but Thor insisted Jane had already made him promise to adhere to the Midgardian custom of swimming while clothed. It had apparently taken her some time to explain to Thor that bathing suits were just worn for swimming, not for bathing and showering.

Arriving at the indoor pool, Tony found JARVIS had already lifted the retractable roof to let in the sunlight. He also found Pepper in a modest yet form fitting one piece, putting on sunscreen where she was sprawled out on one of the deck chairs. Bruce was sitting in the chair next to her, dressed in khakis, a button-up and sandals, a floppy bucket hat concealing much of his face. The bots were busy blowing up floats and tossing pool noodles into the water to prep the arrival of the guests. Tony made himself a drink and then headed over to Pepper.

“Need any help reaching your back?” Tony asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

“I think I’ve got it,” Pepper hummed.

“Bruce, you not taking a dip?” Tony asked curiously.

“I get awful swimmer’s ear,” Bruce said by way of excuse. “Can you swim with the arc reactor?”

“I mean, I can take baths so I don’t think it should be much of a problem,” Tony shrugged.

“I should hope you bathe,” Natasha said, somehow having stealthily entered the room. She was pretty stunning in the Baywatch type bathing suite she was wearing and Tony had to mentally chant “don’t ogle” over and over again to avoid getting in trouble.

“Where’s Legolas?” Tony asked. His answer was met by a giant splash after Clint, dressed in bright purple swim trunks, dove from somewhere on the roof into the pool. “Well, I guess that answers who’s going to be first in the water.”

Natasha took the deck chair on Pepper’s other side and Pepper passed her the sunscreen. The sound of laughter echoed in the hallways as Rhodey, Sigyn, and Darcy entered the room followed by a not very impressed Steve. Tony grinned to himself at the super soldier, decked out in the star-spangled swim trunks Tony had specifically ordered in case Rogers wanted to take a dip in the pool. Natasha let out a grin as Clint wolf-whistled at Steve. Even Bruce and Pepper cracked grins at the site of Steve in his patriotic glory.

“Really funny, Stark,” Steve rolled his eyes at Tony.

“Like you would have picked out anything else for yourself,” Tony snorted.

“Don’t you have a matching bikini, Lewis?” Natasha asked curiously, causing the intern to blush. Instead, Darcy was dressed in a more modest yellow and white polka-dotted tankini.

“I’m glad she didn’t bring it,” Clint replied. “Would have clashed with the stars and stripes bikini I brought as a backup.”
Rhodes cannonballed into the pool, nearly on top of Barton, while Steve took a seat next to Bruce. The two men talked about the evolution of sunscreen since World War II for a brief period, though Steve was sure his serum meant he didn’t get sunburned. Darcy and Sigyn, meanwhile, were easing themselves into the pool on the shallow end. Sigyn had on an emerald green bathing suit in a classic style that reminded both Steve and Tony of some of the classic pin-up girls. There had been no sightings of Loki so far that day, and if he was still sleeping like Sigyn insisted, he was definitely missing out.

Thor and Jane strolled in next, separating so Jane could join the other girls in slowly acclimating herself to the water. Thor had thankfully worn swim trunks, and soon dragged Steve into the water with him. Barton was trying to organize a game of chicken in the pool between the four guys when Natasha finally dove in like a swan, coming up and then swimming over to where the other women were lounging around.

It had been about thirty minutes into the pool party when Loki sauntered in, still wearing what appeared to be Asgardian pajamas. Still rubbing his sleepy eyes, Loki walked over to the poolside tiki bar Tony was currently manning and took a drink from his host’s hand, possibly thinking he had woken up and stumbled into the common room for breakfast. Darcy was in the middle of teaching Thor how to use pool noodles to squirt water after Thor had seen Clint do the same thing. Loki took a sip of the drink, looked at the antics in the pool and then seemed to wake up.

“Where…?” Loki began.

“It’s two in the afternoon,” Tony supplied. “We’re at the swimming pool for the pool party. You are terribly overdressed.”

“Less so than on Asgard,” Loki pointed out. “I see someone convinced Thor that it is culturally inappropriate to swim in the nude on Midgard. That must have been quite a feat.”

“With all the battle armor and dresses and stuff, I’m surprised Asgard has such a cavalier attitude toward nudity while swimming,” Tony mentioned.

“Well, it is not an activity typically done in mixed company,” Loki shrugged. “Public bathing facilities are also segregated. Of course,” Loki continued, seeming to have noticed Sigyn for the first time, “there is no shame in a private rendezvous with a lover.”

Sigyn was floating on her back and spouting water out of her mouth like a whale to the amusement of Jane and Darcy. Thor had explained to him that his sister-in-law was a skilled swimmer, taught by both his mother and her Vanir relatives during the nearly month-long trips she and her sisters often spent in her grandfather’s realm each year during their childhoods. Like most Vanir, Sigyn and her sisters had the ability to hold their breath underwater longer than most Asgardians though their half-dwarven heritage meant they could not outdo some of the records set by pureblood Vanir. Thor recollected his own mother could keep her breath under the waves for a full hour at least. There was some suspicion that the Vanir were related in someway to the marmennill, either descended from them or having interbred with them during some point in the early days.

“She’s like a fish,” Tony pointed out as Sigyn giggled and then flipped over in a dolphin-esque way.

“Her mother’s side are a seafaring people,” Loki shrugged. “They teach their children to swim before they can walk and to fish, sail and chart the stars as soon as they can talk.”

“The whole California girl vibe definitely doesn’t hurt,” Tony agreed. “If somehow you two ever get out to Malibu, we’ll have to see how well your wife takes to surfing.”
“Loki!” Sigyn called, noticing as her husband sipped on the Mai Tai Tony had made him. “Come in! The water is wonderful!”

“Hardly dressed for it, dear,” Loki pointed out. With a dismissive wave of her hand, Loki found his clothing changed from his bed things to a pair of black swim trunks. Thor seemed to be wearing a similar pair only in red. With a sigh, Loki set his drink on the bar and turned to Tony. “I suppose duty calls.”

“Yeah, being bossed around by a chick in a bathing suite is such a hardship,” Tony snorted as Loki sauntered off.

“Hey, Tony,” Pepper called over. “Do you think you could mix me something?”

“Ah, babe, you know I’ve always wanted to be your personal cabana boy!” Tony winked. Pepper rolled her eyes but smiled. “One Malibu Sunrise coming up for the lovely lady. Bruce, you want anything?”

“A vegetable smoothie?” Bruce asked.

“Lame.” Tony rolled his eyes, but pulled out the blender anyway. Tony Stark was nothing if not a gracious host.

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Within about fifteen minutes of Loki’s arrival, it seemed he and Sigyn had turned into one of those annoying couples who spent their entire time at the pool making out. After Loki had finagled Sigyn against one of the pool walls and was groping her like something out of a soft-core porno, Thor finally put an end to things by utilizing his newly acquired pool noodle squirting technique to douse the both of them. Sigyn thought it was hilarious, but Loki did not seem pleased that his hair had gotten wet.

He and Thor got into a splash fight that ended with Clint and Steve pulling Thor off Loki, who Thor had been holding under the water. After spitting some of the water he had been choking on at his brother, Loki huffed, got out of the pool, took a drink from Tony and curled up with several towels on a deck chair next to Pepper. Sigyn then proceeded to lecture her abashed brother-in-law about how he was always letting his horseplay with others get out of hand. For her part, Pepper decided Thor deserved a pool timeout for rough housing and made him go sit by the towel rack to think about what he’d done. Loki seemed pleased by this turn of events under the massive wad towels he had wrapped himself up in and was very happy to stick his tongue out any time Thor looked over his way.

For the rest of the pool party, Loki remained relaxing on the deck chairs with Pepper and Bruce. He had wrapped his hair up in a towel in the hopes of drying it, and even had a nice conversation with Pepper about how water always made hair unmanageable. While Loki was more used to the salt water of Asgard and Vanaheim, Pepper gave him some helpful tips about making sure the chlorine in the pool wasn’t too detrimental to his locks. Pretty soon, Tony had a feeling Pepper would be sharing her entertainment magazines with Loki so they could dish on various celebrities together.

When Pepper finally decided that Thor had sat out long enough - apparently ten minutes was the most patience an Asgardian had - he returned to the pool with a triumphant splash and the suggestion of a swimming contest. Tony decided to be the official judge, having DUM-E set off his fire extinguisher to signal the beginning of the race between Rhody, Rogers, Thor, Barton and Sigyn. By the time the others were halfway through with the race, Sigyn was already sitting back on the steps in the shallow end, having made it across the Olympic-sized pool and back. Barton demanded a
rematch with more laps, but Sigyn won again.

“It’s not fair!” Barton proclaimed. “Thor, you didn’t tell us she was part dolphin!”

“Those are the intelligent fish we should not eat, correct?” Sigyn asked, looking to Darcy and Jane for confirmation.

“They are mammals, technically,” Jane said.

“We so need to get you to watch *Flipper,*” Darcy nodded.

“I don’t know why you are complaining about her,” Tony pointed out. “You came in last both times. I mean, Rhodes is in the Air Force. You should be kicking his butt.”

“Man, just because you’re in the Air Force doesn’t mean you don’t have to know how to swim,” Rhodey snorted. “You ever heard of an aircraft carrier?”

“They still call you guys the Chair Force?” Steve asked, before realizing what had slipped out.

“That’s Colonel Chair Force to you, Captain,” Rhodey snorted. “And you know what Army stands for, right? Air Force Rejected Me Yesterday.”

“Yeah, but Steve’s been in the military for like 70 years,” Bruce pointed out. “Technically, with back pay and regular rank promotions he should probably be General America by now.”

“I don’t know if they consider all that time in the ice being on active duty,” Steve admitted. “I mean, it wasn’t like a was a POW or anything.” Tony and Rhodey exchanged a look.

“I can have some of my legal people look into your back pay and rank stuff if you want,” Tony said.

“SHIELD’s already handling the back pay issue,” Steve admitted. “And honestly, the only thing higher ranks mean is more paperwork.”

“Amen to that,” Rhodey agreed.

“It is not your fault you cannot swim, Hawk Man,” Thor said, clapping Barton on the shoulder. “It is just not in your nature.”

“I’ll show you my nature,” Barton snorted before attempting to dunk Thor in the water. Thor was easily able to turn the tables on Barton, attempting to dunk him instead.

“Is drowning people Thor’s way of showing affection?” Tony asked Sigyn curiously.

“Around water it is,” Sigyn snorted as Barton somehow wriggled out of Thor’s grasp and set off across the pool to hide behind where Natasha was lazily treading water. Thor was too cautious to disturb Natasha, though he was annoyed when Clint stuck out his tongue in defiance.

To distract from any more pool violence, Tony decided he was going to construct the ultimate raft for himself out of the pool noodles and floats the bots had blown up. Jane, Darcy, Steve, and Thor assisted in construction while Rhodey and Bruce supervised from the edge of the pool. Tony seemed bound and determined to build a raft that would support both Steve and Thor at the same time, though the attempts at testing the device ended up dunking one or both men in the water repeatedly.

Meanwhile, Nat and Clint engaged in an underwater handstand and acrobatics contest while Sigyn got up out of the pool and sauntered over to her husband’s deck chair, tucking herself into his side. Loki gently wrapped one of his spare towels around her and gave her a second to dry her own hair.
Sigyn had to hold in the laughter at the site of the towel her husband still had wrapped around his head like a turban to help protect his own hair from water and humidity.

A little after four, Tony got up out of the pool and decided it was time to fire up the grill. The roasted vegetables and Bruce’s tofu dogs would be first and then he would work on the burgers and hot dogs for everyone else. Pepper got to work helping arrange the various bags of chips, condiments and soda bottles. She smirked to herself as the grill seemed to slowly draw the men to it like a moth to the butterfly. Within twenty minutes, Tony was surrounded by Rhodey, Clint, Steve and Thor - all of whom seemed to just want to be in the presence of grilling meat. Sigyn left the side of her napping husband and returned to the pool where Nat, Darcy, and Jane were all relaxing and talking in the shallow end.

When the food was finally served up, everyone chowed down poolside. Tony encouraged the actual celebration of the day’s intention by having Rhodey tell stories about his time in basic training. Rhodey’s tales of the hilarity and hijinks of his day as a grunt eased the way for Steve to talk about his own experience in basic and then the camaraderie with the Commandos. However, Steve still seemed a little sad with these stories. Clint offered a distraction by talking about some of his adventures when he was first recruited to SHIELD and was getting to know his way around. His storytelling was met with copious eye-rolling from Natasha and a reminder from her that these stories were technically not supposed to be shared with those without SHIELD clearance. Thor wrapped things up with tales from his many battles on Asgard, which caused Loki to occasionally roll his eyes and add in the occasional sarcastic comment or assure everyone Thor was completely over-exaggerating whatever he was saying.

After eating, swimming resumed with Tony procuring a net and a ball with the intention of teaching volleyball in the water to his Asgardian friends. Sigyn coaxed Loki into the pool, but he insisted on being on her team. It ended up a battle of guys versus girls plus Loki. It turned out volleyball was the one sport that Jane had really gotten the hang of in school, and she proved rather fierce. Darcy was used to being bossed around by Jane when she was on a science bender, but the authoritativeness in Thor’s usually absent-minded and occasionally timid lady love seemed to both surprise and intrigue Sigyn and Loki. Naturally, the highlight of the game was when Jane spiked a ball right into Thor’s face causing him to swim toward the net, compliment her prowess and kiss her. Tony called the game on account of the lateness of the hour, his inability to stop the “inter-team fraternization” between Jane and Thor, and the fact that Thor’s hard head had busted the ball they were using. The group sauntered off to their individual rooms for a peaceful night of sleep. Tony insisted they would need it if they were to survive his birthday festivities the following night.

Every Tower resident awoke Tuesday morning to JARVIS’ playing the Beatles “Happy Birthday.” Over breakfast, Pepper explained to Steve that the Beatles song had not taken over the traditional “Happy Birthday,” and then to explain to Steve how a song from a 1933 musical had become the “traditional” birthday song during his time under. Meanwhile Darcy and Jane had to explain to the Asgardians that birthday songs were not, in fact, some sort of Midgardian aging ritual chant and that Midgardians didn't simply stop aging if no one sang the song to them. Despite the fact that his 35th birthday had not been declared a state or federal holiday, Tony was still in a cheerful mood, eating birthday cake pancakes for breakfast.

Tony had planned an all-out bash for himself. With Thor, Jane, and Darcy leaving so soon afterwards, Tony agreed that about twelve percent of the party could also be a going-away shindig for those not remaining in the tower indefinitely. Pepper was still plenty mad at Tony about the whole baseball thing, and Sigyn seemed a bit cheesed with Loki still, but Tony had demanded that no one was allowed to be angry on his birthday. He also suggested that instead of buying him
presents, everyone could just wait and forgive him for one massive stupid thing he would do in the future.

Asgard was known for its massive feasts, mighty tournaments and the spectacular entertainment brought from across the realm to keep courtiers occupied, but Loki, Sigyn and Thor all had to admit they had never seen a bacchanal quite like Tony Stark’s thirty-fifth birthday party. There was enough alcohol flowing to drown an entire herd of bilgesnipe and enough statuesque blonde women parading around in skimpy outfits that Sigyn began to wonder if her mother had children on Midgard she had never told anyone about. It was a distinct possibility since she had kept her dwarven children hidden for so long. Loki was enjoying the fast-paced music, however, as it reminded him of a good old-fashioned flying.

Rhodey was glad to give Loki the run-down on modern rap and hip-hop, though it discomforted him a little bit to know how much Loki delighted in lyrics about acquiring wealth and status whilst simultaneously threatening one’s enemies with death. Rhodey tried to explain to Loki that there was one term in particular that he as a Prince of Asgard was best off not repeating because of the paleness of his skin. Rhodey’s attempt at bringing context to this word only earned him a thirty-minute-long lecture on the various racial slurs for the people of Jotunheim and how frequently they were used on Asgard. After seeing Rhodey’s increasing distress, Sigyn made an excuse to drag her husband away and received a thankful smile from the colonel.

Jane - under the influence of some alcohol and the realization that she and Thor were both leaving the next day - had practically grabbed Thor and pulled him into a corner to make out for most of the evening. Darcy was chatting up some of the Stark Industries PR professionals who had no doubt been called in to the party for the sole purpose of getting a head start on spinning whatever antics Tony got up to. Meanwhile, Natasha and Pepper seemed to both be on Tony damage control as the drunken billionaire danced on top of his piano and Billy Joel belted out some of his hits on the keys. Clint and Steve were hanging out in a darkened corner, but every once in awhile Clint would shout out a request for Tony to dance to. Sigyn decided that putting her husband in this shadowy corner was probably the safest bet as well.

“See you’re making friends,” Steve said to Loki as they arrived.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “The colonel seems most sensible. I find it strange that he and the Man of Iron would be such good compatriots. Then again, it may be helpful to find friends who balance one out.”

“Tony definitely needs some stabilizing influences,” Steve admitted. “I don’t think he’s had the most stabilizing life.”

“Probably why he’s so fond of you,” Clint nodded. “So, what’d you get him? Autograph those swim trunks for him? Bet he’d never take them off.”

“How much have you had, Barton?” Steve asked.

“Twelve,” Clint shrugged.

“Beers?” Steve said, surprised.


“How are you standing so still?” Steve said, impressed. “And no, I got him a model plane kit for a Beechcraft Model 18. Pepper said he liked to build models as a kid.”
“Any particular reason for that one?” Clint asked.

“It’s the plane Howard flew me in,” Steve shrugged. “What did you get him?”

“I didn’t get him anything,” Clint snorted. “He can buy himself whatever he wants. I just made him a card and told himself to buy himself a pizza.”

“Do not tell me you purchased a present for Sir Stark on our behalf,” Loki grumbled.

“Of course not,” Sigyn snorted. “I made one. It’s a depiction of the stars as they would have looked over Midgard the night of Sir Stark’s birth condensed into a glass bulb so that it may be viewed from all angles. Some of my better work.”

“You shrank down the entire night sky into a little glass orb?” Steve said, impressed.


“Kind of like that terrarium?” Clint nodded.

“Yes,” Sigyn shrugged. “I believe the Lady Darcy would refer to it as ‘busy work.’”

“You best hope he doesn’t break it,” Loki huffed. “The unrestrained magic could make him go temporarily blind or turn him purple.”

“Now I want him to break it,” Clint sighed.

The clinking of glasses began, signaling that someone wanted to make a toast. Tony seemed to be looking around from atop the piano to see where the clinking had begun only to realize it was coming from himself. Downing the last of his glass, filling it up with more champagne and then throwing a lascivious wink in the direction of a highly displeased Pepper, Tony decided he might as well use all of the attention currently focused on him.

“Ladies, gentleman, and the rest of you bums I call friends,” Tony said in a voice much more loud than he realized, “thirty-five years and nine months ago, my old man put on an expired condom and now, here we are today.” The joke got a few laughs, but Sigyn noticed the Captain was blushing bright red just as Loki whispered into her ear asking if she knew what a condom was. “I suppose I should thank the old man for his carelessness. I know he definitely thanked my mom for being excited and not strangling him. It’s definitely been a long, strange trip since then. I know if you asked, there are plenty of people out there who would be shocked that I made it to thirty-five. Hell, this time last year I was one of them. I guess what I’m trying to say, in short, is drink my booze, eat my food and maybe that will give me enough good karma to milk about another thirty-five years or so!” The crowd cheered and proceeded do exactly that as Tony jumped down off of the piano and began accosting Pepper with drunken requests way too personal for the volume of his voice.

“Well, that is the strangest Name Day toast I have ever heard,” Loki admitted. “Even stranger than the one Fandral gave Thor a decade ago.”

“I haven’t heard a toast like that since I was in the Army,” Steve agreed.

“Aren’t you still in the army?” Clint frowned.

“Well, it is his Name Day,” Sigyn shrugged. “Sir Stark should probably be enjoying himself.”

“Hey, Cap,” Clint grinned. “That blonde over by the bar is giving you the eye. I think she modeled for Maxim a couple months back.”
“Great,” Steve frowned, his blush reaching all the way up to his ears. “I wanted a drink refill and now I can’t go over there without her thinking I’m gonna talk to her.”

“Why don’t you talk to her,” Clint said, giving Steve a gentle nudge.

“Did Natasha put you up to matchmaking duty tonight?” Steve sighed. “Besides, I don’t think I’m ready for… a relationship.”

“Who said anything about a relationship,” Clint said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

“Sigyn’s healing knowledge could easily detect whether or not the wench is carrying any communicable disease, if that is your fear,” Loki said. “You wouldn’t even have to be in close proximity to the woman, would you sweetling?”

“Be a dear, would you husband, and freshen our drinks,” Sigyn said to her husband with a raised brow.

Loki harrumphed, but had a feeling anything else he would say would get him in trouble. He returned moments later with refreshed drinks and an entire tray of hors d’oeuvres he had swiped from an unknowing waiter. Loki ensured Sigyn grabbed a few before he extended the tray of crab cakes and shrimp puffs toward the two men she was conversing with. Clint was eagerly shoveling the crab cakes into his mouth while Sigyn and Steve conversed about their mutual experiences with learning to operate microwaves.


“What a dame sham. I mean damn shame,” Tony said, ambling over to the group. “Did you at least read the instructions? I imagine it usually says unwrap before putting it in.”

“It didn’t,” Steve frowned.

“You should write the manufacturer a complaint letter,” Tony nodded. “I’m sure I can scrounge up a typewriter… unless you prefer a fountain pen?”

“I’m disappointed, Stark,” Clint said. “There aren’t any loaded potato sliders at this thing. And what’s the deal with those Greek salad skewers?”

“Pepper thinks I need to adopt healthier eating habits,” Tony groaned. “Just be glad she let me keep the bacon deviled eggs in exchange for the grilled artichokes. Though I don’t think she’s too happy at how fast the deviled eggs are going.”

“Well, happy birthday, Tony,” Steve said, shaking Stark’s hand.

“Thanks,” Tony grinned. “We doing all this in a few months for you? I have to admit, it’s going to be hard to get ninety-something candles on a cake.”

“I think I’ll be fine without any big to-do,” Steve insisted.


“I’ll see what I can do,” Tony said before knocking back his drink. “Princess, Lord Vader, how’s this Midgardian shindig shaping up?”

“About the same amount of alcohol, less food and less toasts that your typical Asgardian Name Day
“It is a lovely party, though, Sir Stark,” Sigyn assured Tony. “It is nice to see that you have so many friends who want to partake of your Name Day festivities.”

“Actually, I think I know less than half of the people here,” Tony shrugged. “Well, I better go mingle!” He staggered off in direction of the bar.

“How are you going to fit ninety something candles on a cake?” Clint inquired from Steve seriously. “Because I’m sure the wax would mess up the frosting something awful.” Steve opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Thor’s booming voice.

“Happy Name Day Metal Man!” Thor thundered loudly, a somewhat tipsy Jane at his side. “I wish you much felicitations. Now, my Lady Jane and I are off to bid our farewells to each other by consummating our love!” Jane let out a yelp as Thor picked her up and threw her over his shoulders, carrying her off like some kind of prize. Once she was reoriented, Jane let out a bit of a laugh and smacked Thor’s butt just as the elevator doors closed on them.

“Charming,” Loki sneered at their retreating forms.

“Yes,” Sigyn snorted inelegantly. “You’ve never made a similar display in your entire life.” Clint and Steve both raised their eyebrows in Loki’s direction as the younger prince suddenly became very interested in counting how many crab cakes were still on the tray in front of him.

It was not long after Thor made his grand exit that Sigyn noticed her husband beginning to look agitated - well, perhaps more agitated than normal. She knew he was not a fan of large crowds, particularly crowds where he did not know many people. Citing her own tiredness and the earliness to which their friends were leaving the next morning, Sigyn suggested they bid farewell to the party’s host and retire to their rooms. Being that Tony was completely surrounded by hangers on, Sigyn decided it might be easier to bid a goodnight to Pepper, who was unhappily glowering in another corner of the room.

“Well,” Loki said to his wife once the elevator doors had closed, giving them some semblance of privacy, “I must say Stark surprised me this evening. I have never seen him more drunk or make more of an ass of himself in public.”

“Yes,” Sigyn said, raising a brow in her husband’s direction. “Perhaps you should take him aside and give him counsel in preparation for future events. After all, you’ve certainly never been drunk or odious at your Name Day celebrations, let alone both.”

“I think I have matured since I was in my seven hundreds,” Loki harrumphed. Sigyn rolled her eyes at him, but smiled in spite of herself. Loki returned her grin, taking her hand and bringing it up to his mouth for a kiss. “Did you enjoy yourself, my love?”


“Why is that?” Loki asked. “He had a massive celebration with his hundreds of friends.”

“I do not think many of them were his friends,” Sigyn shook his head. “He did not know many of them by name, and I believe some of them only came to take advantage of his wealth and stature. I doubt very much there were many people in that room who really cared for him. I suppose it saddens me that he feels like he needs to fill a room up with a crowd of people who truly care little for him in
order to feel important. It is almost as though he would rather build a false reality around himself then open himself up to those who might truly care for him.”

“He has Lady Pepper,” Loki shrugged. “And I suppose he has the second Man of Metal with that ridiculous name… War Machine? What is he supposed to be? A catapult?”

“I think the two of you got along rather well,” Sigyn pointed out. Loki grumbled as the elevator door opened to their suite. Sigyn headed to their door, but Loki stopped, looking down the hall to the entrance to Thor’s suite.

“You know,” Loki mentioned, “this might be an ideal time for some payback…”

“As hilarious as it would be to embarrass your brother in such a way,” Sigyn said, “I would not wish such humiliation on Lady Jane. Besides, I have it on good authority that Sir Barton has rigged some type of device with projectile purple dye to strike your brother when he next utilizes his indoor waterfall. There was some matter of a bow being broken in training yesterday…”

“Excellent,” Loki said happily, escorting his wife into her rooms. “Now, how should the two of us celebrate Thor’s return to Asgard?”

Chapter End Notes

Thor’s penchant for attempting to drown his friends comes from an actual Viking swimming game where one would see who could hold his opponent under the water for the longest. As death or permanent injury was not uncommon during Viking sports, everyone who participated was considered responsible for their own safety and could leave the game at any time they wanted.
Sigyn’s Snack Packs

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Sigyn and Tony debate whether the best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach or his ribs.

After seeing Darcy and Jane off to the airport, Thor moped around for a bit before getting together the things he wanted to bring back with him to Asgard. Thor insisted on leaving behind a good deal of the goods he had acquired on Midgard, claiming he would be back sometime and need them. Thor was then driven off to Secaucus to be returned back to Asgard, accompanied by Coulson and several other SHIELD agents. Sigyn bid him a cheerful farewell though her husband was basically asleep on his feet the entire time. If Loki noticed the slight purple tinge to Thor’s hair, he said nothing. However, Tony and Clint were both happy to take photos to show him later.

With Thor gone, Loki was hauled off with Tony, Clint, Steve, and a host of SHIELD agents to get a start on the day’s cleanup work. Taking off Memorial Day and Tony’s birthday hadn’t necessarily put efforts behind, but it didn’t seem fair to skip another day of work. Despite only really getting in a half a day of work, Loki seemed exhausted when he arrived back in their chambers that evening. Sigyn watched worriedly as he ate ravenously and then went to bed. A few hours later, he was up again, vomiting into the toilet. The next day, he refused most food she offered to him and, she later learned from Steve, had skipped lunch. When Sigyn offered him supper that evening, he provoked an argument with her and then put himself to bed. Sigyn arose to make them breakfast the next morning to find an entire refrigerator shelf had emptied overnight.

Sigyn had assumed her husband - hungry from having gone to bed without supper - had just gotten up to eat in the night. That was until she found a package of blueberry muffins hidden under a chair cushion. She asked him why he had stuffed the half-empty package into the cushion only for Loki to snarl at her about why she was snooping before demanding to know if she had eaten the remaining muffins. The following morning, she discovered all of their cookware had been reorganized during the night and, while working with Tony’s bots to clean their rooms, found a package of cheese stuffed into a bookshelf, a bag of nuts in the cabinet under the sink, and a box of noodles shoved into a decorative box. At first, Sigyn though to confront her husband, but she feared that doing so would only make things worse.

Instead, over the next few days, she returned any food she found hidden to its rightful place, tried to encourage him to eat whenever possible and cataloged his behavior. Loki was agitated, of course, but she wasn’t sure if it was from his improvised work-release program or something else. He was aloof and morose a lot of the time, but then again had always been that way. It was when Sigyn discovered her husband was having an entire new set of cookware delivered to their chambers - something he claimed was for an experiment he was working on - Sigyn decided she could no longer keep things to herself. Her heart heavy, Sigyn waited until her husband was sleeping and then stole down to the labs.

She had wanted to talk with Dr. Banner as he was the most knowledgeable about healing, but she was not surprised to find Stark down in Banner’s lab, working on something himself. Sigyn knew
that Lady Pepper would not be pleased that Stark was again working on clean-up during the day and then spending most of his night tinkering. While normally Sigyn understood the stress of having a partner who often neglected their personal health in favor of research and intellectual pursuits, she decided that she would not alert Pepper to Stark’s bad habits so long as he was helping her with her husband. Both men did seem rather surprised to see Sigyn down there, though she wondered if it was perhaps she was donning her long Asgardian nightgown with the shimmery silk robe tied around it, her hair loose rather than pinned up and framing her face.

“Is everything okay?” Bruce asked her worriedly.

“We couldn’t have woken you up,” Tony nodded. “Haven’t blown anything up all day.”

“Sir Banner, I was hoping to speak with you about my husband,” Sigyn said, fidgeting with her hands.

“Should I…” Stark began.

“No, you may remain,” Sigyn said. “Perhaps you have some insight as well.”

“What seems to be the problem?” Banner asked.

“I believe my husband is suffering some ill effects as the result of his time under the influence of the Mad Titan,” Sigyn explained. “He has been able to hide it, I believe, but now that he is back in a normal routine again I think more noticeable symptoms are manifesting.”

“It wouldn’t be uncommon for there to be detrimental long-term effects of whatever torture he underwent,” Banner agreed.

“He looks better than he did,” Tony mentioned. “Whatever you Asgardians have that reverses the effects of malnutrition worked pretty quickly.”

“Physically he is much better,” Sigyn agreed. “However, as of late he has begun eating large amounts, becoming sick and then ignoring food completely for a brief period before binging again. I also know that mentally and emotionally… well, those scars are much harder to heal.”

“What sort of symptoms is he displaying?” Banner asked. Sigyn thought for a moment.

“He is very anxious and sometimes cannot remember things easily… things he should know or things that only happened a moment ago,” Sigyn explained. “He keeps forgetting where he just laid something down and then becomes frustrated. He has not been sleeping well and he has been even more mercurial than normal. He has also… begun collecting cookware and rearranging our kitchens. And has begun hoarding food. I find bits and scraps of meals hidden all over our rooms. I dare not remove them because the one time I spoke with him about it, about it he accused me of trying to consume his food before him.”

“Considering what he’s been through, I wouldn’t say it's abnormal,” Bruce mentioned.

“How would you know?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“Hunger is a big problem in India. I read up on it while I was there,” Bruce explained. “Following World War II, the U.S. did something called the Minnesota Starvation Experiment. During the war, the victims of concentration camps were often starved to death, and there was really no knowledge of helping them recover. Some of the survivors literally gorged themselves to death afterwards, their bodies unable to handle the food after being deprived of nutrition so long. The Minnesota Starvation Experiment was designed to discover how to help people recover from extreme starvation, but it's
greater legacy might be that of the psychological effects of extreme starvation that it uncovered.”

“And those were?” Sigyn prompted.

“Hysteria, depression, hypochondrias, emotional distress, self-mutilation, a preoccupation with food, decline in comprehension or concentration, lack of judgement, and lack of sexual interest,” Bruce said.

“I’m guessing you aren’t too worried about the last one,” Tony smirked. Sigyn ignored him.

“And what can I do to help him?” Sigyn asked Banner hopefully.

“That I will have to do more research on,” Bruce shrugged. “Physically, the best bet would be to start him off on bland foods and gradually work him up to more flavorful things. However, he does seem to be handling a variety of food already.”

“Well, my husband has always had a diverse palate,” Sigyn shrugged.

“You know what they say,” Stark said, wiggling his eyebrows. “The way to a man’s heart…”

“Is through his ribs?” Sigyn replied, confused.

“Um… on Earth we say through his stomach,” Tony explained.

“If your heart is behind your stomach, I daresay you should see a healer,” Sigyn replied.

“No… it’s an expression…” Tony replied. “Not literally… just that feeding a guy is the best way to… I’m guessing you don’t have that saying on Asgard.”

“Well, my mother always said the best way to a man’s heart was a sword through the ribs,” Sigyn shrugged. “Loki insists one through the back is better, but Mother doesn’t approve of underhanded tactics. She always the entire point of stabbing a person through the heart is to see the expression on their face when you do so.” She turned back to Banner, leaving Tony aghast and slightly afraid of the diminutive woman before him. “I suppose psychological care is more of what my husband needs at this point.”

“Well, I still might have to do more research,” Banner shrugged, “but I believe the best way to start would be to make sure he adheres to a routine of eating balanced meals, and helping him feel that his food supply isn’t in any danger. He needs to feel secure about knowing where his next meal is coming from and that he won’t starve again. Finding someone to talk to and help him reason things out might be a good idea, though he might need to talk to someone who is objective on the situation, not personally involved.”

“It would be very hard to get my husband to talk with someone he doesn’t trust,” Sigyn said. “Especially if he is telling them things he does not want others to know.”

“You know… after I came back from Afghanistan,” Tony mentioned, “I had a hard time because they weren’t really into feeding me there. Pepper suggested I carry around something around with me at all times afterwards to help out. I wanted to carry around a cheeseburger, but apparently those go bad. So, I started carrying around packets of peanut butter crackers or nuts or chocolates or whatever. Helped me feel like I at least had something to munch on. Maybe if you made him a peanut butter sandwich or something to take with him it would help him feel better. Like he knows he’s always got something he can eat.”

“Thank you, Sir Stark,” Sigyn nodded. “I will take both of your advice into mind.”
The next morning, Loki found himself facing a bland breakfast of porridge, scrambled eggs and banana slices. He stirred his coffee, staring suspiciously at his wife who was humming, using her seíðr to clean up the cookware they had been using while simultaneously eating her own breakfast of various fruits, toast with jam and tea. He had a feeling Sigyn was up to something, but he wasn’t sure what. Slowly, he ate his own breakfast while keeping an eye on his wife, who had begun humming to herself as she ate. After he had dressed, he emerged to find Sigyn ready to see him off for another day of mind-numbing if not necessarily back-breaking work. As he leaned in to kiss her goodbye, he felt her shove something into one of his pockets.

“What is this?” Loki asked, curiously, pulling the bag out to examine.

“A big of mixed nuts,” Sigyn said happily. “I thought you might like them in case you want a snack before or after the midday meal. They will keep well, and some of them were roasted in honey!”

“Why do I need these?” Loki asked, eyeing his wife suspiciously.

“I just thought it would be nice for you,” Sigyn frowned. Loki sighed and decided he didn’t want to upset his wife before leaving for the day.

“Alright,” Loki said, giving her another quick goodbye kiss. “Hopefully, we will be on schedule today and I will arrive home on time.”

After seeing her husband off, Sigyn made quick work of cleaning up breakfast, and then finished up a book she had been reading. With Jane and Darcy gone, she no longer had reason to go down to the labs and spend her day helping them in their work. After puttering around the rooms for a while and deciding she was not yet ready to start back to work on some of the research she had been conducting, Sigyn settled in front of the television with her loom. Loki was not a fan of the talking picture box, the strange voices coming from it unnerving to him as JARVIS. He also wasn’t very interested in the programming, though he never begrudged Sigyn’s delight in watching the various nature programs. Sigyn personally thought her husband would like the melodramas Darcy had referred to as “soap operas,” though he would be loathe to admit it.

When Loki returned home that evening, he found Sigyn eating some take out pizza she had ordered while watching the talking box. She had finished an entire undershirt for him on her loom and seemed to be in the process of making another when she had stopped to order their evening meal. Loki wasn’t exactly disappointed that Sigyn had ordered out - she had obviously been busy during the day - but he wasn’t sure he liked the fact she had spent the entire day in front of the talking box. Now that Lady Jane and Darcy were gone, Loki slightly worried Sigyn would be lonely during her days.

“Husband!” Sigyn smiled happily. “I hope you do not mind! I became rather busy in my work and did not realize it was well past time to prepare a meal. I ordered the pizza instead. I also got the one with the meat toppings you prefer. And the cheese bread!”

“I see you have been busy today,” Loki said, looking over his wife’s work. “I am glad that you had means of keeping yourself occupied.”

“To tell the truth,” Sigyn admitted as Loki sat down with the large pizza his wife had ordered specifically for him, “I only did my loom work so I might procrastinate from the actual research I have been conducting.”

“Well, at least you did something productive,” Loki shrugged. “I spent the entire day moving refuse
from one area to another just so a man in a truck could haul the refuse to a third location. There might be nothing more dissatisfying than realizing you are a cog in a machine that just moves garbage further down the line.”

“Not so futile as your mother attempting to teach Thor to chew with his mouth closed,” Sigyn pointed out with a smirk.

“Perhaps not,” Loki said, a smirk of his own on his mouth as he popped a pepperoni into his mouth. “What is that?”

“A meerkat,” Sigyn explained. “This series has been on about them all day and their family in their burrow. It is rather interesting to see how the creatures interact with one another.”

“I’m sure,” Loki said, getting up to fetch a drink from the refrigerator.

“Did you enjoy your mixed nuts?” Sigyn asked him.

“What?” he replied.

“The snack I packed for you this morning,” Sigyn reminded him. Loki paused and eyed her momentarily. He felt his pocket where he had tucked the snack away for safekeeping.

“Yes,” he said evenly.

“Oh, good,” Sigyn smiled, not wanting to read too much into his strange reaction. “I was thinking of something different for tomorrow. Perhaps mixing in some chocolates and marshmallows and pretzel sticks. What do you think?”

“Perhaps,” Loki said, still seeming suspicious of her motives.

“Wonderful,” Sigyn said happily before returning to the veggie pizza slice she had been happily munching on.

Loki eyed his wife for a moment and then stealthily checked the yogurt cups he had hidden away. He had learned the hard way that yogurt cups did not do well when not in the refrigerator. He then took out the drink the Captain had informed him was called “soda pop” and returned to the living area. Sigyn seemed to think these drinks were better cold, though Loki didn’t care either way himself. He polished off his evening meal slowly, a feeling that his wife was watching him, and then allowed Sigyn to snuggle into him once they had both eaten and were satisfied. Certainly, Loki found an evening of watching the talking box mind-draining to the point he thought it was possibly part of a larger plan by SHIELD to render him too mentally incompetent to be of use. However, Loki had also put up with far more annoying things in order to have Sigyn cuddled up against him in her current manner.

Yes, Loki was certain now that he could not have been in his right mind entirely when he fell from the Bifrost. Had he been sane, he would have known that, if nothing else in his life, Sigyn was worth living for. While he was glad to have spared her the pain of his dealings with the Mad Titan, he doubted very much he would have allowed himself to fall if Sigyn had entered his mind at all. For that, he felt a bit guilty. She should have been first among his thoughts, but ever since that fateful moment with Gungnir had been placed in his hands, all he could think of was Odin’s favoring of Thor, his own belief in his superiority to his brother and the millennia of pain he had experienced by always being considered second best, extra, the spare. He idly wondered if there was something at Gungnir that brought out the worst in people in addition to symbolizing their authority over Asgard, The Allfather seemed to have gotten worse personality wise over the years, perhaps from prolonged
exposure. He might have to ask Frigga if she had noticed any changes since when Odin first began wielding the staff and now.

A gentle sigh and slight stretch from Sigyn drew Loki’s attention back into focus. She had fallen asleep, nestled against him with her head tucked under his chin and her arms wrapped around him. The clock read close to midnight and the television was now airing some other show about backwards men who attempted to catch fish with their hands. Loki doubted very seriously these men had the blessing of his grandfather-in-law, though Njord would probably be delighted to see such feats himself. With a sigh, Loki turned off the talking box and then picked up his wife, carrying her to bed. Sigyn let out a slight snore as he jostled her around, and he smirked to himself about his wife’s heavy sleeping. Before undressing and getting into bed himself, he felt the pocket of his pants to ensure his bag of mixed nuts were still there. He just hoped Sigyn didn’t discover the other food he was hiding.

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Loki had woken up early that morning - a rarity for him - and used the time before Sigyn began stirring to ensure all of his hidden foodstuffs were accounted for. He then repacked the previous’ days package of roasted nuts into the pocket of the pants he would be wearing that day. Hearing Sigyn begin to stir, he tried to come out of the bathroom in a nonchalant manner. However, as soon as she rose, stretched and noticed her fully dressed husband standing in the doorway between the bedroom and bathroom, Sigyn was instantly suspicious. Loki was only up this early if he had not gone to bed the night before or was up to something he shouldn’t be. Sigyn desperately hoped it was the former.

“You are up rather early,” Sigyn noticed. “Usually, I have an hour or so to myself in the mornings.”

“Not all of us can be early birds all of the time,” Loki snorted, sauntering over to where Sigyn was sitting up in bed, her rumpled nightdress revealing a delectable hint of shoulder and upper chest.

“Did you at least sleep well last night?” Sigyn asked him worriedly. “I fell asleep…”

“In front of the talking box,” Loki snorted. “Yes, I put you to bed around midnight.”

“And then?” Sigyn asked.

“I stayed up for a while,” Loki admitted. Sigyn sighed.

“How are you to work properly with no sleep?” she asked him. Loki sat down on the bed beside her, beginning to kiss up the exposed length of shoulder. “Loki, now is hardly the time…”

“I cannot help myself,” Loki said, moving to suckle that spot on her neck right under her ear he knew she couldn’t resist. “You are just so appealing in the early morning light…”

“Husband,” Sigyn gasped, her voice coming out headier than she really wanted. He was trying to distract her from something, but a part of her wanted to just let him have his way and ignore the voice deep down that was telling her something was wrong.

“Yes, my love?” Loki smirked, his breath against the shell of her ear.

“One of us is going to have to get up and prepare our morning meal,” Sigyn said. “And since you will not eat with the others in the morning and refuse to learn how to utilize Midgardian cooking equipment…”

“I do not refuse to learn,” Loki snorted. “I just don’t see why I should bother. I don’t see why you
bother since you can adequately use your seiðr to cook for you…”

“And when I do not wish to cook?” Sigyn asked with a raised brow.

“Then we are fortunate that Midgard has a wide variety of taverns willing to deliver various meals and all hours of the day,” Loki shrugged. Sigyn pushed her husband off of her with a playful shrug and then slid out of bed, walking over to her vanity to retrieve a comb and ribbon for her hair.

“I am surprised you haven’t bothered to learn your way around Midgardian cooking equipment,” Sigyn said as she braided her hair, “if for nothing else, because Thor is so perplexed by it. I’m sure he would be flabbergasted to find that you so easily mastered the toasting device in his absence. And you wouldn’t need to rely on me for your beloved pastries…”

“They aren’t my ‘beloved pastries,’” Loki harrumphed. “I just find them superior to the other drivel that passes for cuisine on Midgard.”

“Yes, the fact that I have to order a new box every three days is purely coincidental,” Sigyn snorted, finishing up her hair. Loki rolled his eyes and then Sigyn magically changed into her day clothes. Sometimes he wondered if she insisted on doing so in front of him each morning just to remind him who had their seiðr and who did not.

“You are not badgering me into lessons about Midgardian cookware,” Loki informed his wife as she strode for into the living quarters.

“Of course not, dear,” Sigyn called over her shoulders.

She smirked to herself, moments later, when Loki was trying to seem bored and lazily draping himself across the island counter so she wouldn’t realize how intently he was watching her use of the toaster oven. She could only hope that when he finally felt safe enough to test out the device himself he would not burn himself or the entirety of Stark Tower down around him. Her husband was usually the worst victim of his own stubbornness, though she sometimes felt it was a bit of payback for the bits of mischief he visited on others.

Once his breakfast was complete, Loki devoured it as Sigyn worked on complete her own. As she began digging into the bowl of fruit she had made for herself, Loki poured himself another cup of coffee, and Sigyn was a bit surprised to see him engaging her in polite conversation about her plans for the day. She admitted she was getting back into some research for her healing works at the palace and though she didn’t have access to all of the ingredients necessary, she was hoping that she could find some Midgardian substitutes to the plants she regularly found on Asgard.

In fact, Sigyn thought it might be helpful if there ever was a greater exchange between the two realms for there to be some guide for Asgardians as to which Midgardian plants were helpful and which should be avoided. Loki encouraged her work, just as he knew his mother, Nanna and Eir the head palace healer would as well. However, Loki couldn’t help but worry that Odin would think such a pursuit frivolous and tell Sigyn he thought so at the first mention of it, dashing her positivity about all of her hard work.

Before he could slip out of the room while Sigyn began setting the dishes aside, Loki found himself cornered by his wife with another sandwich bag full of odds and ends. This time, she had done the so-called trail mix with marshmallows, candies and bits of cereal. Loki panicked that she was going to reach into his left pocket - as she had the day before - exposing the previous day’s snack he had stored away for later. He took it from her before she could do so, distracting her with a kiss of thanks before making his swift exit.
With the door closed behind him, Loki sighed with a heavy heart, tucking his second snack into his other pocket. Sigyn was very clever, and he had no doubt she would figure out his problem soon - if she hadn’t already. Loki hadn’t wanted to burden Sigyn with something else, and he preferred to handle his problems himself anyway - though he admitted he was hardly handling it at all. Rather than get his wife involved and possibly see her heart break for him all over again, Loki resolved he would handle things himself.

Rather than heading straight up to his rooms after another day of listening to Midgardians complain about their ordinary lives and slogging around in debris, Loki found himself standing in front of one of the last places he ever thought he would find himself. Cautiously, he eyed the doctor consumed in his work, not realizing he was being watched on the other side of the glass. Thanos had showed Loki glimpses of the doctor, a fellow shapeshifter who could turn instantly from a calm, precise, and detail-oriented man into a gigantic beast capable of destroying everything in its path without rhyme or reason. At first, he had been intrigued by the goliath known as the Hulk, but after encountering it personally he was more fearful of the creature than anything.

Certainly, Loki had a certain begrudging respect for the Hulk as he did any of his fell chaos-bringers, but the very nature of chaos is that it cannot be controlled. And for one who so loved chaos, Loki very much liked being in control. Another one of his personal paradoxes, he supposed. The Hulk was too much of a variable to accurately rely on when calculating chaos and even more frightening, the creature had been so close to Sigyn. While the Hulk hadn’t harmed his wife - even seeming to fall in love with her a little bit as all creatures, reasonable or not, seemed to do - Loki did not like such a dangerous creature close to that which he cherished. And one of the things Loki had come to cherish was his own life.

Now, he found himself internally debating whether or not approaching the potential green giant with his problem would be helpful to his health or just imperil it. Before Loki could manage to talk himself out of the visit, he was noticed by Banner, who waved him in through the door. Loki couldn’t help but feel slightly annoyed that the doctor seemed to be more comfortable in his presence than Loki was in the doctor’s. He did not like it when someone else had the upper hand and treaded carefully into the doctor’s inner sanctum. Perhaps he should have called this tête-à-tête on neutral ground. He walked over to where the doctor was eyeing something on a screen, focusing on his work for a minute before actually addressing Loki.

“I’m guessing you came to see me for a reason?” Bruce asked him curiously.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “You are a healer, are you not?”

“Well, I’m not actually that kind of doctor…” Bruce began.

“But you do know the basics?” Loki asked curiously.

“What’s wrong?” Bruce asked, pretty sure he already knew the answer.

“Things were fine once I was returned to Asgard,” Loki explained. “Physically, everything seemed healed. What wasn’t, Sigyn continued to work on once we returned here. I have been so focused on my punishment and adjusting to life here that I suppose I was too distracted… but now that things have calmed down I realize I am having a recurring issue…One I would rather my wife not find out about.”

“I’m not sure I feel comfortable helping you conceal something from your wife, especially if it’s something important concerning your health,” Banner replied.
“You really wish to cause her more pain?” Loki huffed.

“Look,” Banner said, deciding it might be easier to anger Sigyn than Loki, “if this is about your food issues, your wife already suspects…” Loki looked surprised for about a split second and then annoyed.

“She has already come to you,” Loki said, miffed.

“Because she loves you, and she didn’t know where else to turn,” Bruce replied, hoping Loki would calm down. “She’s a… a healer herself, and I’m sure what hurts her the most is when she can’t fix those she cares about.” Loki was quiet for a moment and then produced two sandwich bags out of his pockets, laying them on the table before Banner.

“She made these for me,” Loki informed him.

“Snack bags,” Bruce said approvingly. “She wanted to help you feel more in control… that you could have something to munch on whenever you wanted. Tony said it worked for him in the past. It’s why he’s always got something to eat stashed somewhere.”

“And she didn’t discuss this with me,” Loki said, annoyed. “Why?”

“I didn’t want to burden you,” Sigyn’s hushed voice said from the doorway. Banner and Loki both whipped around to see her standing there, slightly embarrassed. “I thought you would prefer things this way.”

“What are you doing here?” Loki asked worriedly.

“You did not return with the others,” Sigyn shrugged. “I asked Sir JARVIS where you were and he told me.”

“Damn invisible man,” Loki muttered.

“You did not tell me you wished to be concealed, Your Highness,” JARVIS responded. Loki glared in the direction of the disembodied voice.

“Do not be cross,” Sigyn insisted, crossing the room and coming to her husband’s side. “I was worried, that is all. Now, I have told you why it was I sought out Healer Banner’s help instead of speaking to you directly. Why was it you did not wish to confide in me?”

“I didn’t want to burden you,” Loki admitted. “I have a confession, Sigyn, I have…”

“Not eaten the snacks I gave you?” she finished. Loki frowned.

“And I suppose you already know that I broke the handle off of the skillet when I could not deduce the workings of the stove,” Loki sighed.

“No,” Sigyn paused for a moment. “That I had not known.”

“Damn,” Loki grimaced.

“I think instead of trying to settle this problem individually you guys need to be working together,” Bruce pointed out. “I also still think Loki should talk to someone about this.”
“I have been speaking to you,” Loki pointed out.

“A professional someone,” Bruce said.

“You are not in this profession?” Loki asked confused.

“But if that isn’t an option,” Bruce sighed. “I thought perhaps it might be better for him to express his issues in a different way. I don’t like talking to people about my issues… and the fact that I’m technically still considered a fugitive by some people makes getting a regular therapist hard. So I journal.”

“You want me to keep a diary?” Loki grimaced.

“Believe me, it can be helpful,” Bruce said. “It allows you to get things off your chest. Very cathartic. And I’m sure you guys have some kind of Asgardian magic that can stop Thor from reading it or whatever you think could happen if someone else found it.”

“This idea is pleasing to me,” Loki agreed.

“And perhaps I could give you more instruction as to the use of Midgardian cooking devices,” Sigyn prompted. “That way you have more options?”

“Fine,” Loki sighed begrudgingly. “But I will not be pleasant about it.”

“I did not expect you to be,” Sigyn smirked. “Now, since we have all of this settled, perhaps we should allow Sir Banner to have his laboratory back?”

“Alright,” Loki admitted. As Sigyn exited the room, Loki gave the doctor a once over. Bruce looked at him expectantly, wondering what the godling was going to do no.

“Is there something else you need?” Banner asked.

“I appreciate that you kept Sigyn’s confidence until faced with me,” Loki informed him. “That was a wise move.”

“Yeah, well,” Bruce said, not sure he liked where this conversation was going, “she’s a nice person who needed help. And I’m sure she would have done the same for me. Or anyone else, really.”

“Do you, perhaps, need help with your work during the day?” Loki asked curiously.

“Trying to get off construction detail?” Bruce asked, confused.

“I believe Sigyn misses the company of the Lady Jane and the Lady Darcy,” Loki explained. “She did like working in the laboratory, and I think it might be a positive way for her to spend her time to do so again. One can only be cooped up in their rooms so long before they grow bored, after all.”

“I’ll ask her if she can help me out with some things,” Banner said. Loki gave him a curt nod and then dutifully followed his wife out of the lab. Banner smirked and laughed to himself after he was sure the pair had left. Tony was not going to believe this.
Loki Versus the Tooth Fairy

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, *the mysteries of Midgardian oral hygiene practices are revealed to Asgardians — with mixed results*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It had been a hectic week in the post-Chitauri recovery of New York City. Some up-state representative in the New York State Assembly had decided that public workers were costing the state too much in health benefits, therefore their dental plans needed to be cut. As a result, the public works union had gone on strike. Many of the other construction crews had decided to go on a sympathy strike, and work had been shut down. Steve had instantly wanted to go down to the offices of the state representative in question and voice a complaint, only for Tony to suggest that now might not be the best time for Captain America to be seen parading around at a union demonstration. Tony ended up getting a history lesson in Tammany Hall and workers rights as well as the sneaking suspicion that Steve’s sympathies for the working man would have probably gotten him named as a commie during the Red Scare. It was probably a good thing he had been frozen for a while.

Tony finally distracted Steve by getting him to explain the right to assembly and petition the government to Loki. Apparently, protest on Asgard weren’t much of a thing considering that it was basically an autocratic dictatorship where anyone could be thrown in the dungeon at the will of the Allfather. Occasionally, riots had broken out in Asgard but they were more akin to soccer hooliganism over a disappointing tournament result or tavern brawls that had gotten out of hand. Oddly enough, a riot every once in awhile was seen as a good thing in Asgard as it calmed the frustrations of the people and allowed the war-thirsty populace to get some good bashing in on each other.

As a result, Steve was having a hard time explaining the concept of peaceful demonstration to Loki, who seemed intrigued by the protests but confused as to why more bricks weren’t being thrown through windows and more people weren’t being punched in the face. The chaotic nature of protest seemed to delight the trickster god. He particularly liked the colorful, often alliterative and comical protest signs being bandied about as the constant news channel on the talking box covered the event. Perhaps the next time Odin made him cross he wouldn’t play a devastating prank but rather march back and forth across the throne room with a comical sign indicating his displeasure. He would have to remember to ask Sigyn to ensure all of the glitter and colorful but smelly pens they had acquired would be returned to Asgard specifically for this purpose.

Tony, meanwhile, was helping Pepper contact state officials to complain about how the strike was probably costing the taxpayers more than getting rid of the dental plan for civil employees ever would. He had assigned Clint and Bruce to ensure Steve - and now possibly Loki - didn’t lead some kind of coup against the state government, but he realized they were probably not the best guardians. Watching cable TV news stressed Bruce out, and Clint kind of wanted to see what would happen if Captain America showed up to the union protests. Natasha, meanwhile, was sitting in front of the coffee table with Sigyn, who was busy with the newest present Loki had given her: a 164 box of crayons and a stack of children’s coloring books featuring a variety of Midgardian animals, flowers,
foods, trademarked animated princesses, anthropomorphic trains, and, perhaps most ironically, oral hygiene practices.

The previous evening, Steve had asked to visit an art store in his way home and the group had accompanied him. While Steve exited with professional supplies, Loki had retrieved things Sigyn might like. Whenever the news program had a commercial break, the god-prince would look down fondly where Sigyn was coloring in wild animals based on the pictures Natasha had acquired for her on the screen of a cell phone. Natasha, meanwhile, was busy making her own additions into the background of the coloring book of sharks Sigyn had gifted her. Clint wanted to take the one of the sharks drawing and quartering a scuba diver back to SHIELD HQ to hang on the break room fridge. Maybe a warning coloring book page signed by Black Widow would be enough to stop whoever had been stealing his pudding cups.

“Well,” Tony sighed in defeat, coming into the common room after Pepper had chased him out of her office and banned him from further harassing lawmakers. “Pepper says I can’t personally subsidize health care for municipal employees across the state of New York. So, either we’re in this strike for the long-haul or until the mayor’s next golf game with the governor. Maybe I could set that up…”

“I personally think going to the dentist is over-rated,” Clint said, causing a look of horror to cross Steve’s face.

“Didn’t you have nineteen cavities the last time you went to the dentist?” Natasha pointed out.

“Yeah,” Clint muttered, “and Fury still made me do protection duty for that senator’s highly kidnapable daughter the next day.”

“You should go to the dentist, Clint,” Bruce said, sensing a Captain America lecture was upon them. “If you lose all your teeth you can’t eat hard candy.” Clint furrowed his brow and then shrugged, deciding this was a good enough reason to care for his teeth.

“I suppose this is what happens when all of the trees that produce toothbrushing sticks are extinct,” Sigyn shrugged.

“What?” Tony asked, confused. “We don’t brush our teeth with sticks.”

“You don’t?” Loki asked, as confused as Tony. “However do you get them clean?”

“Not with some stick found in the woods,” Tony snorted.

“They aren’t just any sticks,” Sigyn replied. “There are trees on Asgard with healing properties that specifically target teeth and bones. One uses the stick to pick at one’s teeth and then chews if for health. Since no sticks were made available, I supposed oral hygiene was not of much concern on Midgard. I was trying to be polite by not bringing it up.”

“You mean to tell me the two of you haven’t been using the toothbrushes and toothpaste provided in your suite?” Tony said, stunned. “You go through two tubes of toothpaste every day!”

“Is that what the strange metal stick with bristles is for?” Sigyn said, surprised. “But that is much too hard to eat!”

“It’s plastic, not metal,” Bruce sighed. “And you don’t eat it. You take the accompanying paste, spread it on the bristles, put it under water, and then brush your teeth with it.”

“That seems like an awful lot of work,” Loki snorted.
“What have you guys been using brushes those for?” Tony asked curiously.

“Cleaning our nails,” Loki shrugged. “And I thought the paste was some sort of evening delicacy on Midgard.”

“Yes, we each have one every night,” Sigyn nodded.

“Both of you have been eating entire tubes of toothpaste every night since you got here,” Tony said, in disbelief.

“Doesn’t that kill you?” Clint asked.

“Only if it’s fluoride toothpaste,” Bruce shook his head.

“Does Thor know how to use a toothbrush?” Steve asked curiously.

“He uses his to clean out his ears,” Sigyn informed them. “But he did not eat the paste. Said he did not like the taste.”

“I really hope Jane never borrowed his toothbrush,” Clint shivered.

“How has this happened?” Tony groaned. “I think this is Foster’s fault. It was her responsibility to teach Thor basic hygiene, wasn’t it?”

“Or perhaps he was incapable of learning,” Loki snorted.

“I am not teaching two semi-grown godlings to brush their teeth,” Tony informed everyone.

“Here,” Natasha said, opening up the oral hygiene coloring book at the bottom of the coloring book stack. “This should help.”

Loki and Sigyn curled up together with the coloring book, reading through it thoroughly together. Every once in awhile, Loki let out an undignified snort directed at the talking tooth floss box serving as the narrator of the tale. Sigyn rolled her eyes, never completely understanding why her husband seemed to delight in bad puns. The book finished, Sigyn gently set it aside and Loki returned to his position on the sofa as if he hadn’t just been reading a children’s coloring book on how to brush one’s teeth with his wife.

“I suppose the oral care devices you have provided will not be as talkative as the one in that narrative,” Loki said to Stark offhandedly.

“No, but I’m sure JARVIS could do the voices for you if that is what you want,” Tony huffed.

“Please do not volunteer me for such a task, Sir,” the AI intoned tiredly.

“Well, it seems like an awful lot of work for something that should be so simple,” Loki snorted.

“Paste and floss, drilling holes in one’s teeth, warding off tooth gremlins...”

“I believe those were merely the personification of tooth decay,” Sigyn replied.

“I think if you guys can just use the brushes and paste you’ll be okay,” Bruce assured him. Both Sigyn and Loki looked at Bruce expectantly. The doctor sighed and five minutes later found himself downstairs in the couple’s ensuite, teaching them how to properly brush their teeth.

“Well,” Tony said as the trio exited the common area. “I certainly hope they’re toilet trained. Because I am not teaching them how to do that.”
By day two of the construction strike, the protesting workers had been joined by the electricians union, sheet metal workers, painters and teamsters unions. Tony and Bruce spent the time in the lab, Sigyn assisting as their lab monkey. Loki followed his wife around and was generally unhelpful, mainly because Tony kept referring to him as the assistant lab monkey. Somehow, Sigyn managed to be the most helpful lab assistant Tony or Bruce had ever had, despite the fact that her husband was always either a hair’s breadth behind her or menacingly glaring at her workmates from where he was sulking in the shadows of the lab after she had fussed at him for standing too close. Thor had once said Loki orbited his wife like a moon orbits its planet, but Tony thought Loki’s connection to his wife was more like a baby koala clinging to its mother in some respects.

After lunch, Tony and Bruce tried to pawn Loki off on Cap, Clint and Widow in the hopes that getting him some exercise in the training rooms would not only get him out of the labs but tucker him out. However, Steve didn’t seem to think he alone could keep Clint and Natasha from probably killing or at least maiming Loki, and Loki himself did not seem to be keen on the idea of being separated from his wife, especially so he could indulge in physical activity. It was a relief when, after returning to the labs from lunch, Loki sprawled himself out on an unused lab table and took a three hour nap. He only awoke after hearing the noise of popcorning popping in the lab microwave that had clearly been marked “FOOD ONLY! NO SCIENCE! THIS MEANS YOU TONY!” The trickster god woke up from his nap long enough to have a his own entire bag of popcorn washed down with a soda and then briefly critique the aesthetics of Tony and Bruce’s project.

When it was apparent he wasn’t going back to sleep, Tony decided to pull the “please do something with Loki before he burns the lab down” card and convinced Cap to take Loki to do something constructive. The princeling harrumphed and whined the entire elevator ride up to the training rooms about how Sigyn needed him and the ire it would invoke in him if one of Tony or Bruce’s experiments went awry and harmed her in his absence. When Cap came through the training room doors, pushing a sullen-looking Loki along with him, both Barton and Romanoff exchanged shit-eating grins before turning aloof faces to the godling. Years of experience with similar interactions led Loki to believe he was about to get beaten up.

“Tony’s been working with some more training algorithms and projections,” the Captain informed Loki. “They’re very useful for training, especially since they keep you on your toes just like the enemy does.”

“Are you attempting to impress me with primitive technology?” Loki harrumphed.

“I was hoping you might want to blow off some steam and sharpen your skills,” Steve replied. “Wouldn’t want to go back to Asgard rusty, would you?”

“Perhaps you have forgotten,” Loki retorted snidely, “but I am without my seiðr to practice with.”

“He meant your knives,” Clint snorted before mouthing “duh” to Natasha.

“I see it now,” Loki sneered. “You attempt to put weapons into my hands so when I wound one of you I will be in trouble with the Furious One and possibly Odin for harming my captors. I am not going to be tricked by the likes of you.”

“Why are you always so suspicious of everyone around you?” Steve asked. “Why can’t you accept that maybe someone wants to help you?” Loki sized him up and harrumphed again.

“If you ask me, Captain, you would do well to be more suspicious of those around you,” Loki replied. “Not everyone is trying to be your friend. In fact, I am sure there are probably a lot more
people out there trying to kill you than you realize.”

“See, Steve,” Natasha said, hands on her hips. “I’m not the only person who thinks always trusting people to be good and do the right thing is going to backfire on you someday.”

“You realize you just took the side of a magical homicidal maniac?” Clint asked her.

“I am a magical homicidal maniac,” Natasha replied with a flip of her hair, causing Clint to burst out laughing. Loki rolled his eyes at the interaction while Steve just let out a sigh.

“Fury said there was a suggestion that once this cleanup business is done that you might be reassigned to helping out SHIELD with some projects,” Steve said to Loki. “If that is the case, you might end up in the field, and if you’re out there, people are going to want to be sure that they can rely on you in a combat situation. Training with us helps that trust.”

“I seriously doubt there is any intention of putting me into a situation where I need to defend myself or others,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Yes, but even if that isn’t intended it could still happen,” Steve replied.

“And I suppose having the Hawk and the Lady Spider here is just a coincidence,” Loki snorted. “Not a rather badly disguised ploy to assess how much of a threat I am?”

“If that’s their job, no one’s told me,” Steve shrugged, though now that Loki had mentioned it, he realized there was probably a reason the pair had suggested he give Bruce and Tony a respite from Loki terrorizing their lab.

“Well,” Loki sighed, “I suppose I will be made to perform sooner than later. Unfortunately, I do not have my knives upon my person at the present moment.”

“That is surprising,” Natasha admitted, certain that Loki would have attempted to smuggle something on his person everywhere.

“There are apparently metal detectors in the labs,” Loki replied.

“Well, I’m sure we could practice some hand-to-hand,” Steve shrugged. “Sometimes, your best weapon is yourself.”

“Says the guy who launches himself out of buildings without parachutes,” Natasha snorted.

“You talking to him or me?” Clint asked with a grin. The Black Widow rolled her eyes.

“I am not some barbarous oaf like Thor who uses his fists to solve his problems,” Loki huffed. Clint and Natasha gave each other a slight glance before looking to Steve in anticipation of what he would say.

“I agree. You can’t solve every problem with your fists,” Steve nodded. “But sometimes, it’s all you have. Besides, I’m sure you’ve had a lot more practice with all this than the rest of us. You might even be able to teach us a thing or too.”

“Flattery, Cap?” Clint snorted. “Really?”

“Come on,” Steve said to Loki, ignoring Clint and Natasha’s banter, “I’ll get you set up with one of the training projections to see what your hand-to-hand skills look like.” Loki nodded, a little skeptical of why the Captain was being so friendly.
After fifteen minutes of sparring with Tony’s computer projects, it was obvious to Steve that Loki was a lot better at hand-to-hand combat than he probably gave himself credit for. Of course, growing up over a span of a thousand years in a warrior culture probably gave him some advantages. Steve had a feeling that Loki felt his skills were inadequate not necessarily because they were but because they weren’t on par with the skills of more popular warriors, like Thor. Steve had to admit, Thor’s bulky frame packed more power into a punch but Loki obviously knew how to use his svelte frame and flexibility to his advantage. While Thor usually would just take a punch and keep on hitting - knowing his sturdy frame could withstand a lot - Loki had definitely developed good blocking skills as well as avoidance skills almost serpentine in their nature.

Thor would run headlong into someone’s fist if it meant he could get a couple of more licks in, Loki didn’t share his brother’s belief that the best defense was a good offense. With one projection in particular, Loki seemed to duck and weave until the projection got tired from trying to hit and narrowly missing him, allowing the younger prince to then strike when his enemy was exhausted. It was obvious Loki knew his own strengths and how to use them, but from what Steve had deduced, Asgardians preferred more head-on combat and distrusted those who used their wiles and cunning over brute strength.

“That’s all nice and good,” Clint said when Loki’s holographic adversaries disappeared. “But how about you fight a real enemy?”

“Clint,” Natasha warned.

“What?” Clint snorted. “Don’t you think I deserve a chance to get a few licks in after what he did to me?”

“I don’t think this is the best way of going about this,” Steve said cautiously.

“I can handle it if he can,” Clint snorted.

“Clint…” Natasha began.

“No, no,” Loki smirked. “Let the Hawk get in his revenge. I doubt it will do much damage.”

“See, we’re both on board,” Clint said to Steve. “Think of it as team-building.”

“Fine,” Steve groaned, “but I’m putting a stop to it if I think for even a second things are going too far.”

Clint squared up, ready to face Loki, who sauntered over toward the archer but made no action like he was ready to hit. Rather than waiting for Loki to get into his own fighting stance, Clint took a swing at the godling - something Clint ordinarily would have called out as a cheapshot had it been against anyone else. Though he had seemed unprepared for the assault to begin a split second before, Loki easily dodged the hit and then twirled Clint’s arm in such a way that the weight of the archer’s body sent him skidding to the ground. Clint stood up again, annoyed at being knocked down so early, and began hitting back. The archer managed to get in a few good licks that probably would have knocked back a man without godlike strength. Loki then sent a seemingly effortless punch to Clint’s chest that sent the archer skidding across the floor of the training room on his back.

“I believe that is enough,” Loki said, turning to walk away from the archer. “This exercise will not benefit either of us.”

“What, afraid to lose?” Clint said.

“I think I have already demonstrated my abilities thoroughly enough,” Loki said. “If I didn’t know
better, I would think you want me to hurt you.”

“You haven’t done anything yet,” Clint hissed as he stood up. Loki sighed, turned around, and sent a punch to the archer’s shoulder that again had him on the floor.

“I am finished with this,” Loki announced. Steve was about to thank Loki for knowing when to quit when Clint’s voice rose up again from the floor.

“I bet your wife could hit harder than that,” Clint taunted, getting back up from the floor.

“Clint,” Natasha warned him gently as Loki continued trying to walk away from his opponent.

“Maybe I should go find her and have her show me,” Clint smirked.

In an instant, Loki had turned on his heel and lunged for Clint, seemingly ready to bash the archer’s brains in. He probably should have done so when he had the archer under his power, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Steve, realizing that Clint was probably about to get pummeled to death by Loki, did his best to intervene. He reached the pair at the last second, managing to shove Clint out of the way and take Loki’s godlike punch to his own jaw. Steve couldn’t remember the last time he had taken a punch that had hurt so badly. There was pain in his mouth and he soon found himself bent over, spitting out blood. As he looked down on the training room floor, Steve realized there was a molar lodged in all of the blood he had just spat out.

Steve groaned, suddenly remembering the last time he had been punched in the mouth that hard. It hadn’t been by a fist but rather by the butt of a Nazi gun. It had knocked two of his back teeth out. The worst part wasn’t losing two teeth. The worst part was that his magical body-repairing serum made him grow them back. He had spent the night in agony, two of his back teeth regenerating and regrowing out of his gums while Howard Stark and three other military physicians spent the night poking and prodding him, amazed that his regenerative abilities extended to his oral cavity.

“Are you okay?” Natasha asked, not waiting for Steve’s answer before hitting Clint upside the head.

Yeah,” Steve groaned. “I’m just going to spend tonight in a lot of pain, regrowing a tooth.”

“Should thank me,” Clint snorted, earning a glare from both Steve and Natasha.

“For getting me punched in the face?” Steve snorted derisively before spitting out some more blood.

“I was aiming for the Hawk,” Loki said, annoyed and seemingly a little embarrassed he had hit the wrong target. “I would not have struck you had you not intervened.”

“No,” Clint huffed. “You should thank me for getting you another chance with the Tooth Fairy. I mean, what did you kids in the 30s get for losing a tooth anyway? Pennies? Kids nowadays get whole dollars for their teeth. I’m sure a tooth fairy visiting Stark Tower could afford upwards of a hundred bucks.”

“Hate to break it to you, Clint,” Steve sighed, “but the Tooth Fairy didn’t visit kids in Brooklyn during the Depression. I mean, I got a malt when I lost my last baby tooth, but that was it.”

“Who… or what is this tooth fairy?” Loki asked curiously. If there was a creature of any sort of magic on Midgard, he wanted to know about it. Clint’s grin broadened, realizing he had a gullible mark. As Natasha and Steve worked to clean up the super soldier’s face and alert Bruce about the dental mishap, Clint launched into his tale about the mysterious tooth fairy.

“She’s this magical fairy who hoards teeth,” Clint explained. “She prefers human teeth, of course,
but she can’t just steal them. So, when people - mainly small children - lose their teeth, they put them under the pillow. She comes in the night when they are asleep, takes their teeth and replaces the tooth with money as payment for being given the tooth.”

“What does she use these teeth for?” Loki asked, a little concerned that Midgardians seemed to think it was perfectly alright for a magical creature to sneak into their children’s bedrooms at night to exchange cash for body parts.

“No one really knows,” Clint shrugged. “Some people think she uses them to build a big castle for herself. Maybe she uses them as part of her magic.”

“Interesting,” Loki said.

“Alright, what happened?” Tony demanded to know as he strode into the room, Bruce and Sigyn at his heels. Bruce went over to inspect Steve’s mouth along with Sigyn, who seemed to have more dental knowledge between the two.

“Clint was a dumbass you couldn’t leave well enough alone,” Natasha snorted.

“And?” Tony prompted. “What did the Prince of Darkness do?”

“Nothing Clint didn’t deserve,” Natasha replied, glaring at the archer.

“I’m fine,” Clint sighed.

“Yeah, but Cap’s not,” Bruce pointed out.

“I will make you a paste for the pain,” Sigyn informed the Captain from where she had prodded into his mouth. “If you apply it to the gums, it should numb most of the pain. It is the best I can do given that I do not have access to a soul forge.”

“Thanks,” Steve said to her gratefully. “That’ll make things much easier.”

“Come Loki,” Sigyn said to her husband. “You will help me.” Loki trotted off behind his wife, giving the Avengers a sense that his help with Sigyn’s potion would be coming with a very long lecture on the side.

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It was around two in the morning when JARVIS woke up Tony and Pepper to alert them Clint had become trapped in the vents above the common area’s kitchen. Tony initially dismissed it as Clint eating one too many donuts and not realizing he was too fat to move around the air ducts, only for JARVIS to ping in a second time, informing Tony that the Black Widow was unable to dislodge Clint because he appeared to be trapped in some kind of snare. The next thing Tony knew, he, Widow, Bruce, and Cap were standing underneath the vent the top half of Clint was poking out of while one of the bots navigated through the vent to find out what it was the archer was attached to.

“What happened, exactly?” Steve asked.

“I got this craving for Funyuns, but I was all out in my room and my secret stash,” Clint shrugged. “I knew there were some leftover from when Thor was here in the common room and I came to get them. One minute, I’m crawling along in the vents and the next something has a hold of my ankle.”

“Why were you crawling around the vents in a t-shirt and underwear?” Bruce asked Clint.
“Because I was getting up for a midnight snack!” Clint huffed. “Can someone free my leg before it has to be amputated? Whatever has a hold of me seems to be getting tighter.”

“Then stop struggling,” Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Did anything in particular happen before you were...er captured?” Steve asked.

“Well, yeah,” Clint said. “I noticed this weird little thing in the vents. It looked like miniature pillow. I went to pick it up and…”

“You were snared,” Natasha said. Tony laughed.

“That reminds me of when I was five and tried to set up a trap for the tooth fairy,” Tony laughed. Clint suddenly went pale.

“What?” Steve asked.

“I think I know what happened,” Clint admitted embarrassedly. “I might have… indicated to Loki that the tooth fairy was real...and…”

“And he’s set up traps to capture a Midgardian magic wielder,” Natasha finished with a sigh. “Good job, Clint.”

“JARVIS,” Tony said tiredly. “Can you do a sweep of the building to see if there are any additional traps of this nature set up anywhere in the Tower?”

“Yes,” JARVIS nodded. “And the images of the snare attached to Mr. Barton are coming in now.” Tony pulled up one of his mid-air view screens to see the video of Clint’s big, smelly foot currently wrapped around what looked like a rabbit snare. The futurist pinched the bridge of his nose as Cap and Natasha seemed to admire the craftsmanship on the snare. Clint demanded to see and so the screen was turned around for him. He squinted and then huffed, wiggling his foot so he could see it on screen.

“It’s actually a pretty good snare,” Natasha said, inspecting the device. “I especially enjoy the irony of using tooth floss in it.”

“What has happened?” Loki said, bursting into the room excitedly. “Has she been trapped?”

“Sorry buddy,” Tony said, “Your trap worked but not the way you wanted it to.”

“Yeah,” Natasha snorted. “You caught something bigger and dumber.”

“Hey!” Clint protested. Loki frowned upon seeing Barton stuck in the vent.

“You ruined it, you fool!” Loki said, stomping his foot in anger. “Now she will be scared away! Setting up those traps were not easy! Do you know how hard it was to sneak out of the room with Sigyn’s and my baby teeth without her noticing?”

“You have all of your and your wife’s baby teeth?” Tony said, a little squicked out.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “Children’s teeth are seen as good luck on Asgard. The parents collect them in a pouch and then give them to the child to wear as a good luck charm. One who could find this Tooth Fairy’s store of teeth would be quite fortunate indeed.”

“Alright, Clint, fess up and I’ll let the bot cut you down,” Tony said to Clint.

“You got yourself into this mess,” Natasha pointed out. Clint sighed.

“Fine,” he huffed. “Look, Loki, there is no such thing as the tooth fairy. It’s a fairy tale.”

“Yes,” Loki said, confused. “Stories about fairies are fairy tales.”

“No, what Clint is trying to say,” Bruce sighed, “is that the tooth fairy isn’t real. She’s a story parents made up to make their kids feel less scared about losing teeth. The tooth fairy doesn’t put money under kid’s pillows in exchange for teeth. The parents do and tell the kids it was the tooth fairy. That way, the kids feel more excited about losing a tooth than afraid because losing teeth is painful.”

“You’re telling me,” Steve grimaced. Sigyn’s paste had dulled most of the pain, but it tasted like K-ration pork loaf.

A loud thump announced that Clint had been freed from the trap and sent tumbling onto the ground below. The archer stood up, dusted himself off and then noticed the tiny pillow and small piece of tooth that had come out with him. He picked them up up and gingerly handed them to Loki, who quickly swiped both away and tucked them into his pocket.

“So… there is not a seiðr-wielding pixie on Midgard who exchanges teeth for money in order to build her fortress of good fortune?” Loki asked, seeming a little depressed.

“I know, man, it’s a hard thing to find out,” Tony said sympathetically. “What’s even worse is that afterwards your old man stops handing you out Benjamins for losing your teeth.”

“Wait? You got a hundred dollars a tooth?” Bruce said, appalled. “I got like a dime!”

“I got a quarter,” Clint said proudly.

“It is just a silly tradition here in America,” Natasha said to Loki. “In Russia, they say that a mouse leaves money for teeth. Well, at least for children not in the Black Widow program. It is just a way of making childhood magical and trying to decrease fear.”

“What exactly were you going to do if you caught the Tooth Fairy?” Tony asked. “If you don’t mind me asking…”

“I would have demanded she tell me the location of her magical tooth fortress and where she acquires all of her Midgardian currency,” Loki said. “I highly doubt there is a large trade in teeth from which she could make a profit. She would do this and give me the secrets of her seiðr in exchange for her personal freedom. Then I would gift her to Sigyn. She does like pixies very much, and they can be so entertaining.”

“You were going to imprison the Tooth Fairy after getting her to spill her secrets,” Steve said, wondering how his life ended up like this.

“It would have been temporary,” Loki huffed. “Sigyn does have such a tender heart. I’m sure she would have released the pixie the first time it begged for it.”

“Okay, well, Loki no more trying to ensnare mythical creatures,” Tony said, “and Clint, no more pop culture lessons to Asgardians. You always seem to create situations when you try to teach them stuff.”

“I can still teach Cap, though, right?” Clint asked.
“Only if you teach him stuff that actually happened,” Tony said.

“I thought the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* really happened!” Clint said defensively.

“I think he was referring to the time you tried to convince Cap *Inglorious Basterds* was how the U.S. really won World War II,” Natasha pointed out.

“We really need to find you some less bloody movies to watch,” Bruce said to Steve.

“Are you going to stop causing trouble?” Tony asked Clint.


“Truce,” Loki agreed, shaking it.

“Good craftsmanship on that snare, by the way,” Clint said. “I didn’t even see it.”

“It’s an art,” Loki agreed. The two men began walking toward the elevator, discussing how to build a better snare.

“If the two of them team up, we might all be doomed,” Natasha said. Tony let out a long groan.

“I am going back to bed,” Tony announced, “and if anyone needs me, I suggest they reconsider.”

Chapter End Notes

TBH, this episode of "The Simpsons" was running through my head the entire time I wrote this:

~
Loki and the River of Sloth

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, some members of the gang take to water slides much better than others.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was an hour before sunrise Saturday morning when the occupants of Stark Tower found themselves rudely awakened by a small swarm of excited robots. JARVIS had to explain to more than one tenant that the robots were Tony’s way of waking them up for a surprise before any of said robots found a knife, arrow or shield sticking out of their hull. Of course, the ones that had made it into the Black Widow’s room were beyond help when the smoke cleared. Most of the group still assumed there was some kind of emergency and quickly dressed before heading up to the common area. Cap and Natasha arrived in their tactical gear while Clint and Loki were still in their pajamas, Loki leaning up against his wife. Sigyn and Pepper, meanwhile, were twinned in their yoga pants and floral patterned t-shirts. It was to this scene that Tony arrived, donning board shorts, flip flops and a Hawaiian shirt.

“What on Earth?” Tony asked, confused. “Did I miss a call to assemble?”

“You called us down here,” Steve pointed out.

“Before the sun has risen,” Loki grumbled, leaning on Sigyn for support so he wouldn’t topple over and fall asleep.

“Didn’t the bots deliver my message?” Tony frowned.

“You mean the robots that dumped me out of my bed, sprayed water on me and then retreated as I tried to shoot them?” Clint hissed at Tony. “Unless the message was awakening in abject terror, no, we didn’t get it.”

“Calm down, Legolas,” Tony snorted. “This was all for you anyway.”

“Um, what?” Clint asked.

“So, remember how you said you wanted a waterpark and mini cheeseburgers for your birthday?” Tony asked.

“Yeah… you know my birthday isn’t until Monday, though, right?” Clint asked.

“But we’ll be back at work Monday so long as the governor and mayor’s golf game goes well today and they get that worker’s strike settled,” Tony shrugged. “Anyway, I remembered I own a water park upstate. Won in some kind of weird bet back in 2002. So, we are spending the day at Wave World… Pep, maybe we should see about changing that name. It’s so boring… which I have so generously closed down for the day so we don’t have lines.”

“You closed down a water park on a Saturday?” Steve said, with a frown. “What about all the kids who were going to be there today?”
“Everyone who doesn’t get in today gets a free all-summer pass they can use for the rest of the year,” Tony rolled his eyes. “And I also comped stays at local hotels. And free all-you-can-drink sodas at the park.”

“What kind of rides are we talking about here?” Clint asked curiously.

“Eight water slides, a wave pool, zipline, obstacle course, log flume, float river, one of those giant funnel things you ride a float down, a giant bucket, and water cannons you can shoot at each other from rival pirate ships,” Tony said. “There’s also a kiddie section that honestly looks like something out of *Alice in Wonderland* with giant mushrooms and ladybugs.”

“And this is supposed to be an entertaining way of celebrating one’s Name Day how?” Loki huffed.

“We can get you a shower cap if you don’t want to get your hair wet,” Tony offered. Loki snorted with indignation.

“Come, husband,” Sigyn assured him. “I am sure we will be able to find some fun in this. They do call them amusement parks, after all.”

“Well, let us see how amusing it is,” Loki said.

“And the mini-cheeseburgers?” Clint inquired. “You promised mini-cheeseburgers.”

“They have full-sized cheeseburgers,” Pepper pointed out. “Any topping you want.”

“I was promised mini-cheeseburgers, though,” Clint said.

“Got them ordered up and ready to go along with the usual park fare,” Tony nodded. “Apparently the funnel cake topping bar is to die for.”

“Meaning that the amount of calories in it might literally kill you,” Pepper sighed. “In fact, there might even be a lawsuit…”

“You’ve never been to a water park, have you, Cap?” Clint asked curiously.

“I rode the Water Chute and Chute the Chute at Coney Island enough,” Steve shrugged. “Good on a hot day.”

“Prepare to have your mind blown, Spangles,” Tony grinned.

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It was hard to tell who was enthralled more with their introduction to the modern-American waterpark: Sigyn or Steve Rogers. The park brought out Sigyn’s love of all things water and swimming while the rides seemed to fulfill Steve’s seeming need to have an adrenaline rush every six to twelve hours. Initially, Sigyn had been a little nervous about trying out a waterslide. As an introduction to them, Loki agreed to go down one of the two-seater rides with her. With Clint and Cap doubling up on the slide next to them, Clint suggested they see who made it to the bottom first. Both pairs made it out of the slides and into the pool below around the same time. Had Clint not already been deaf, he was sure Steve’s excited screaming would have made him so. Sigyn was equally excited and enthralled when she came out of the slide, jumping up and down in the pool at the base. Loki, however, was not pleased to have been knocked off the float at the last second and sucked down into the pool. He stood up, angrily flopped his wet hair out of his face, and stomped back to the deck chairs where Pepper and Natasha were still slathering on sunscreen.
“That was most exhilarating!” Sigyn said happily, following behind her husband with Steve and Clint at her heels.

“Definitely better than the chute rides,” Steve grinned happily.

“Wait until you go down one without a float,” Clint suggested.

“Come husband!” Sigyn said happily. “Let’s try one!”

“Go ahead and be shot down all of the tubes you wish,” Loki huffed, attempting to dry his hair to no avail. “I will be content here.”

“If you want something a little calmer, maybe you can check out the lazy river with Bruce,” Pepper said. Loki gave a thoughtful glance toward where the erstwhile Hulk was floating around in a giant tube, asleep under his sunglasses and a bucket hat. Loki continued to rub his hair with his towel.

“You guys are already hitting the slides?” Tony pouted, trotting forth from where he had gotten a giant slushie from the concessionaires. His flip flops made sticky sounds against the pavement of the park, an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt flapping in the wind and his nose covered in sunscreen.

“You realize you aren’t supposed to eat before you go in the pool, right?” Steve pointed out to Tony.

“It’s just a slushie,” Tony shrugged, before sipping the last of the drink. “So, let’s hit the slides.”

“You better not pee on one of the slides,” Clint warned Tony as the four water park enthusiasts trooped off.

“I own the park,” Tony huffed. “I can pee where I want.” Pepper took her head in her hands as the group walked off, Tony explaining how the chemicals in the water should make a little urination no problem.

“May I ask exactly what you see in him?” Loki asked her with a snort. “Other than the wealth, obviously.”

“Well, he does own a waterpark,” Pepper sighed.

“What is my likelihood of being dumped out of the floating tube if I chose to recline in this so-called ‘lazy river’?” Loki asked finally.

“I made Tony promise that the lazy river was a prank free zone,” Pepper replied. “Which is probably why Bruce is going to spend the entire day in it.”

“He did bring you a shower cap if you want to keep your hair dry,” Natasha smirked. “Though I guess that’s a moot point after you got dumped out of the water slide raft.”

“To be fair, I probably should have known better,” Loki admitted. “Sigyn was just so eager…”

“Why don’t you get her to magic dry it for you?” Natasha asked curiously.

“She always makes it curly when she does that,” Loki huffed.

“Curls aren’t my favorite look either,” Natasha admitted, spraying something on her hair. “That’s why I use this.”

“Your Midgardian swimming pools are not as hard on one’s hair as the salt water of Asgard or Vanaheim,” Loki admitted, “though I still tend to get an unpleasant curl or two if I am I the water too
“Ugh, tell me about it,” Pepper whined. “Swimming pools aren’t that bad, but something about salt water makes me look like I have a perm. Not to mention all the knots I get. Too much chlorine can make it brittle, too.”

“No, do you want to borrow my spray?” Natasha mentioned before closing up her sunscreen and sliding her sunglasses back on.

“Maybe some other time,” Pepper agreed before standing up, untying her sarong and leaving it on the deck chair. “Well, I’m going to go float some. Come and get me if Tony starts trying to do anything stupid. Last thing I need is to look up and find him in the Iron Man suit trying to change the direction of one of the rides or something.”

“I don’t know,” Natasha smirked. “Clint did say something about smuggling Cap’s shield on this trip to take it down a ride. Tony might not be the first one to break his neck today.”

“Shall we?” Pepper asked Loki. With a nod, the Asgardian prince trotted off behind Stark’s keykeeper, listening intently to the excited screeches of his own wife as she plummeted down one of the giant water-filled tubes across the park.

Loki spent the better part of the morning in his inner tube, floating not far from Bruce and Pepper along the lazy river. He had to admit it was his favorite of the “rides” in the park, allowing him to keep his hair out of his water but much of his body submerged in the coolness of the pools. He could easily see how the slow movement and comfortable tube had quickly lulled Banner and briefly Pepper to sleep. While Loki did close his eyes, he kept his ears open for the sounds of his wife in case she found any trouble. While she did shriek and scream a lot on the rides, they were not exclamations of panic but rather than same whoops and cheers she gave out when riding her horse, running about with her sisters or occasionally sailing. He had no doubt their next visit to the court at Vanaheim would be Sigyn informing her grandfather of all the interesting ways Midgardians had found to use water as entertainment.

As the sun blazed overhead, Stark decided it was time to break for the noon meal as to avoid the hottest part of the day. In the shade near the concessions stand, the crowd chowed down on Clint’s mini-cheeseburgers as well as the standard park food. Much of the food was meat and deep-fried. While Sigyn was not overly fond of most meat, Loki had begun to loathe the fried food that was seemingly ubiquitous in Midgard. He managed a few grilled chicken sandwiches and something called mac ‘n’ cheese Tony pointed out was off the kid’s menu. Sigyn, meanwhile, dug into a garden salad, loaded nachos and a giant pretzel covered with mustard.

The many oddly flavored slushies and sno-cones were a revelation to the Asgardians however. It wasn’t until Sigyn was nearly bouncing off the walls at the prospect of returning to the park, leading Tony to ask if Sigyn’s odd combo of Vanir-Dwarven heritage made her synthesize sugar differently. He received a glare from both her and her husband as a reply to his inquiry. Loki was also not willing to help Tony’s experiments into seeing if his Frost Giant heritage made him immune to brain freeze.

Pepper ensured the group waited a good amount of time before returning to the more raucous rides, not wanting anyone to throw up for the park employees to clean up. She was already paying them double for putting up with the Avengers for the day. Instead, the group lazed around in the kiddie area, Clint almost falling asleep in the one-foot deep water until Natasha pulled him up and made him go rest up against a palm tree that blew water from its top. Sigyn was enthralled with the water-
spouting mushrooms and flowers herself. When Pepper announced everyone could get back on the rides, Clint suddenly declared he wanted to be a pirate and headed toward the pirate ship, which was definitely meant for the twelve and under crowd. Natasha followed after him, muttering something about how he better not get stuck. As Sigyn began dancing under one of the water-dripping mushrooms, Loki found Tony taking the deck chair next to his.

“I think your missus has really taken a shine to this place,” Tony said.

“Yes,” Loki agreed, watching Clint and Natasha battle each other with the water cannons on the fake boats. “It is too bad there isn’t a real ship here. She would enjoy that.”

“I do have a yacht,” Tony said, “but I think it’s in California… Hey, Pep!”

“We are not getting the yacht out of storage and having it brought up here,” Pepper shook her head from where she was relaxing in the kiddie pool area.

“Maybe I should get an east coast yacht then,” Tony huffed.

“I’m sure the last thing SHIELD wants is you and our Asgardian houseguests swashbuckling up the East River,” Pepper pointed out.

“Fury would probably just commandeer it for himself so he can play at being a real pirate,” Tony huffed.

“I am sure one of your pleasure ships would not draw my wife’s attention,” Loki shook his head. “She prefers the longboats of her ancestors. And I daresay Midgard would not be able to beat the might of Skíðblaðnir.”

“Ski-what?” Tony asked.

“Skíðblaðnir,” Loki replied, “is the lead warship of my wife’s grandfather, Njord, and now overseen by his son and her uncle, the Crown Prince Freyr. It was a gift from the Dwarves using old magic. Fastest ship in the nine realms and yet it’s magic allows it to be folded up and put in one's pocket when finished. A neat trick indeed. Too bad Asgard acts as though it has such little use for seiðr.”

“A ship you can put in your pocket,” Tony snorted. “You're making that up.”

“Am I?” Tony asked tiredly.

“You ever sailed on this magic ship?” Tony asked.

“Once,” Loki frowned.

“Wait, the husband of the sea princess gets sea sick?” Tony snorted.

“It is hard to get sea sick when one’s lips have been sewn shut,” Loki huffed. Sigyn, thankfully, chose that moment to excitedly bound over to her husband so that Tony wouldn’t have to recover from his embarrassment at bringing up something that was obviously painful.

“Husband!” Sigyn said excitedly, pulling her husband up from the pool lounger he had practically melted onto. “Come! I am famished. Let us indulge in the deeply fried funneled cake! There are many berries and whipped cream to put atop it!”

“You will have to stay out of the water longer,” Loki reminded her.

“They also have chocolate sauce!” Sigyn said happily.
Loki pretended to be annoyed as his wife dragged him toward the concessionaires, but could not keep a ghost of a smile off of his lips. It didn’t take long for the pair to finish off the enormous sticky, sweet treat. The fact that they were surrounded by park employees did nothing to discourage Loki from sensually licking the remaining powdered sugar and strawberry juice off of his wife’s fingers, making Sigyn giggle and flutter her eyelashes at him. They returned to the deck chair he had been lounging earlier, and Loki tucked Sigyn into his side. She agreed to sleep against his chest for a bit until she returned to the water. About twenty minutes later, Loki’s comfortable relaxation in the shade of the massive pool umbrella and with his wife plastered against his side was interrupted by a giant yelp coming from the lazy river.

Banner had apparently underestimated the amount of sunscreen he would need for the day and was now starting to turn the same strawberry-red color Sigyn’s funnel cake berries had stained her fingers. Tony and Clint were unable to hide their guffaws, even after a glare from Steve tried to silence them. Sigyn had been awoken by the noise, and Loki moved in front of her to protect her if Banner’s inner creature emerged to wreak havoc.

“How did this happen?” Bruce moaned. “I put on the spray and rubbed it in!”

“Did you check the SPF?” Pepper asked.

“Ugh, I don’t know,” Bruce sighed, walking over to the shady area with the deck chairs where his bag was located. Loki noticed Sigyn bending down and beginning to rifle through a leather bag of his she had packed for their day at the water park.

“I didn’t bring anything with me,” Pepper said to Bruce sympathetically, “but I know we have plenty of aloe back at the Tower if that will help.”

“Thanks,” Bruce said, attempting to take a seat on of the shaded chairs. He hissed as his back hit the chair. “It already stings.”

“Here,” Sigyn said, retrieving a bottle that Tony thought belonged on a Harry Potter set. “Use some of my salve.”

“What is it?” Bruce asked, taking the bottle. He uncorked it and breathed in a slight hint of chamomile, mint and a slight herby, floral scent he couldn’t place.

“A remedy for burns,” Sigyn replied.

“Is it safe for…” Tony began. “You know, humans?”

“I have no reason to see why not,” Loki huffed. “All of the ingredients are plant-based and none of them are known poisons.” Bruce tentatively put a small amount on his fingers, smelled it, and then began rubbing it on his arm. He instantly let out a sigh of relief when the lotion contacted his skin.

“Where did you get this?” Bruce said with a relaxed sigh. “It’s amazing!”

“My sister Nanna and I developed it,” Sigyn said. “Actually one of the first healing remedies either of us really worked on. As five fair-haired sisters who had before lived only underground, the sunshine of Asgard was somewhat of a shock to my sisters and I. We burned frequently as children after playing outside all day. When we got older, Nanna and I decided to see if we could make to ease the pain since we were tired of always troubling the healers a cure. This salve was the result.”

“Don’t you guys have magic medicine machines?” Tony pointed out. “I saw one basically reattach some guy’s head to his body.”
“Soul forges are wonderful instruments, but one does feel bothersome using them for things such as sun burns, headaches or small cuts,” Sigyn shrugged. “The ointment isn’t just for burns from the sun, though. Var uses it to heal her wounds from the forge, so it works on burns from fire as well.”

Tony walked over to Bruce and began investigating the ointment himself, managing to get a few dabs of it before Bruce turned away with the potion, cradling it like it was his child. While Bruce worked to apply the salve to his body, Tony rubbed some between his fingers, sniffed it and then put it on his own skin. While he wasn’t burned himself, he was amazed to find his skin felt nourished and almost caressed by the ointment. He turned back to Sigyn.

“You could make a fortune off this stuff.” Tony announced.

“We already have a fortune,” Loki huffed. “In case you have forgotten, we are royalty.”

“I mean here on Earth,” Tony said. “People who totally eat this stuff up.”

“I should hope not,” Sigyn frowned. “It does cause a burning sensation in the throat if consumed.”

“Forgot,” Tony muttered. “The idioms don’t always translate.”

“Besides, I believe several of the ingredients cannot be found on your realm,” Sigyn said.

“Produce it on Asgard and sell it here,” Tony suggested.

“I doubt very much that Heimdall would like his position reduced to serving as a courier for sun salve,” Loki snorted.

“But…” Tony began.

“Sorry, honey,” Pepper said to him, “but I think that’s a hard pass on the sun screen empire idea.”

“Have I lost my negotiating skills?” Tony pouted.

“Come husband,” Sigyn said to Loki. “We have rested enough. You will indulge in more slides with me.”

“I don’t want to go down the slides again,” Loki huffed as Sigyn attempted to pull him up from his deck chair.

“Go on the slides with me and I shall join you in your River of Sloth,” Sigyn replied with a twinkle in her eye. Loki eyed her for a moment and then stood up, allowing his wife to pull him along.

“How’s that salve coming, bud?” Tony asked Bruce. He looked over to find Banner had already fallen asleep in the deck chair, under the umbrella’s shade.

After Sigyn forced Loki on all the park rides at least once - including one where the couple had to share a raft with Natasha and Clint - she happily joined him in the lazy river on a double float. While her husband spent the vast majority of the time complaining about sad state of his hair after day in the water and his penchant for developing swimmer’s ear, Sigyn remained smiling and happily floating along with him. The other assembled Avengers didn’t quite understand how she could put up with his many complaints with such a happy attitude, but Sigyn knew her husband was often grumpy and occasionally downright mercurial. Her husband immensely disliked forced group activities as well as the damage water sometimes caused his hair and ears. The fact that he had made it through the day
thus far without threatening murder was a vast improvement. Of course, their new friends didn’t exacerbate her husband quite like their comrades from Asgard did.

While he still detested the after effects of swimmer’s ear and having to deal with chlorine-damaged hair without the aid of his seiðr, even Loki had to begrudgingly admit that a day at the water park was one well spent. Thor would be most jealous that he had missed out, and Loki had a feeling that Hogun and Volstagg would be allured by tales of the slow-moving river of floats. Sif would no doubt delight in the rush of excitement from the slides, like Sigyn had, though he was sure Fandral would spent most of such an outing flirting with Midgardian women in their bathing suites.

Loki suddenly shuddered, his mood quickly turning sour. He was still thinking of Thor’s friends as his own, but they were certainly not. When push had come to shove and they had to chose between their loyalty to him and their loyalty to Thor, his older brother had won out. Thor would always win out. Save for maybe his wife, Loki had no friends of his own. No one had ever wanted to befriend the sullen younger prince save to help their own interests. While Thor had found genuine companionship and loyalty, Loki was and had always been just tagging along with his older brother. Even after his supposed death, the only one of his so-called friends who Sigyn had mentioned coming to comfort her in her grief was Sif, and Loki knew that was only because Sif genuinely liked Sigyn, not because of any sense of comradeship Sif had for him.

“What are you thinking of, my love?” Sigyn asked him suddenly, the pair of them curled on the same deck chair as Clint tried to eat all of the remaining mini-cheeseburgers the park had specially made. Stark was cheering him on while Pepper, Natasha and Bruce were shaking their heads. Cap was stealthily taking a few to eat himself from time to time, not wanting Clint to overdo it and actually eat some 530 mini-cheeseburgers on his own.

“Nothing,” Loki said dismissively.

“Thor will be disappointed his missed this adventure,” Sigyn said offhandedly. Loki tried not to show any look of surprise. Sometimes, he was almost certain his wife had the ability to read his mind.

“The big oaf would probably have gotten stuck in one of the tubes, and we would have had to spend the entire afternoon retrieving him,” Loki snorted.

“Somehow, I think you would have found that more entertaining than anything we have done today,” Sigyn pointed out.

“What can I say,” Loki simpered, “I enjoy the simple things in life: a roaring fire, a good book, a nice pint of ale, and seeing Thor get his fat arse stuck somewhere he knows he shouldn’t have gone.”

“I think my sisters would like this place,” Sigyn said with a wistful sigh.”Grandfather, too. I will have to tell him about it. Sometimes, I think he misses Midgard. Odin’s ruling that prevented visitation was hard on him. He would be delighted to see the many ships the realm has devised in his absence.”

“I am sorry you miss your family, my love,” Loki said, his sense of guilt starting to well up beneath him.

“I should have inquired whether this banishment of ours prohibited communication,” Sigyn said. “I was too busy thinking about what to pack I forgot to clarify if sending letters would be allowed. I suppose not since we haven’t received any. And I would hate to make Heimdall my own personal courier.”
“Hey love birds!” Tony called out to them. “Come see Bird Brain blow out his candles.”

Sigyn and Loki trotted over to where the rest of the group had gathered for the ceremonial portion of Midgardian Name Day festivities. The park employees brought out a cheeseburger with a candle atop and began signing ‘Happy Birthday.’ When they belted out the verse “happy birthday, dear Hawkeye,” Clint let out a huge fist pump. He demolished the burger not long after blowing out his candle. The Avengers then posed for several pictures with park staff before Pepper pointed out they were nearly late for the rendezvous with Tony’s helicopter to take them back into the city.

After spending a day in the sun and water, most of the group conked out immediately after settling into their seats. Loki found that he, Natasha and Bruce were the only ones still awake. Sigyn was lying up against Loki while Bruce had seemingly resigned himself to Cap’s head resting on his shoulder. Natasha was the only person who didn’t try to put up with her seat partner’s sleeping. She had shoved Clint away from leaning off her. He let out a loud snore and then began leaning the other way, drooling down the side of the leather airplane seat. Loki inadvertently caught Natasha’s eyes as Clint let out another loud snore followed by more drool. The female spy glanced at Clint, back at Loki and then rolled her eyes. Loki couldn’t stop the ghost of a smile from creeping across his own face. He then turned back to Sigyn, who was snuggling more tightly against him in her sleep.

“I’m guessing she’s out for the night,” Banner said to Loki quietly. “At least she’ll be easier to bring inside than Steve.”

“Most of the time,” Loki concurred. “She does occasionally get aggressive if she is having a bad dream, and she is a heavy sleeper. It is often difficult to rouse her.”

“I can see how that might be a problem,” Bruce smiled gently.

“She will deny it,” Loki said with a slight smirk, “but she snores terribly.”

“Keeps you up at night?” Bruce asked curiously.

“No,” Loki shook his head, looking back over his wife. “Actually, I find it quite hard to sleep without the noise nowadays. It’s oddly comforting.” Bruce smiled sadly for a moment and Loki raised his brow questioningly.

“I miss that sort of thing,” Bruce admitted. “You know, little quirks about another person that you think would annoy you but actually become endearing.”

“Yes, I believe I have more than a few of those myself,” Loki smirked.

“She’s a good woman,” Bruce remarked.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “I hardly deserve her.”

“It gives me hope, though,” Bruce admitted. “You know, the two of you.”

“That you might find someone who…” Loki said before eyeing Bruce up, seeming to think carefully on his next words, “will not mind your particular condition?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said, blushing a little.

“I suppose,” Loki said, brushing some of his wife’s hair out of her face and then pressing a kiss to her head, “anything is possible.”
Chapter End Notes

Follow the series' companion blog for cool stuff like [this cool family tree](#) I made for Sigyn.
It was a random Wednesday morning when Loki and Sigyn walked into the communal kitchen for breakfast, a mass of flowers intricately braided into both of their hair. Most of the Tower residents had gotten used to the fact that strange things seemed to follow around their Asgardian housemates. If not dressed in comfortable Midgardian clothes two sizes too big for her, Sigyn was almost always in a dress more suited to a fairytale princess or forest pixie. Loki sometimes absent-mindedly walked around while he read, looking up from a book on Vanir ship-building or Dwarven history to find he had wandered into the labs or Steve’s bathroom or a Stark Industries Board of Directors meeting without realizing it. Then there was the time an experiment gone awry in their makeshift laboratory had left both Sigyn and Loki’s hands purple for a full day. So, the pair of them coming into breakfast decked out in flowers didn’t raise many eyebrows.

What did startle the Avengers and draw questioning looks was when Sigyn looked around, gasped and then worriedly asked Tony.

“Where is your pole?”

Tony bit his lip until it bled, trying not to make a quip about stripping. He could feel the glares of Rogers, Banner and Pepper all leveled at him, waiting for him to slip up. Thankfully, the oblivious and only partially-awake Clint Barton looked up from his entire gallon of coffee to respond.

“What pole?” Clint asked.

“For Miðsumarsblót!” Sigyn said.

“Midsummer?” Tony frowned. “It’s June.”

“Tonight is the solstice!” Sigyn continued worriedly. “If you do not have a garland pole for dancing, how are you to welcome in the growing season?”

“Um… you mean a May pole?” Steve asked.

“No, a Miðsumarsblót pole,” Sigyn shook her head.

“Is this… some sort of religious or cultural event on Asgard?” Banner asked.

“Miðsumarsblót is the time when the days again become longer and the nights shorter to allow for the growth of plants,” Loki explained. “It is generally celebrated by the creation of flower garlands, wearing of flowers or flower wreaths, ceremonial dances around the Miðsumarsblót pole, feasts, drinking, toasts, speeches, and concludes with a bonfire. It is the time of year when the deeds are brightest and the heart is most daring. And usually when half of Asgard's new babies are conceived.”

“Yeah, I’m going to say that this might not be the best time for any fertility rituals,” Tony pointed out.
“But…” Sigyn began worriedly.

“Now, lykýng, I told you that the Midgardians most likely didn’t celebrate these festivities,” Loki said to her soothingly. “I’m sure we can endeavor to have our own… private celebration later, hmm?”

“Well, that’s hardly fair,” Pepper spoke up. “We can’t expect our guests to celebrate our holidays along with us and not return the favor.”

“I’m surprised you’re on board with the whole setting a bonfire in the tower thing,” Tony said to Pepper.

“We can make due with the fireplace,” Pepper shrugged before turning to Sigyn. “How about you, me, Bruce and Natasha get everything ready while the guys are at work. We can have the celebration tonight.” Sigyn clapped her hands excitedly and then gave Pepper a big hug, taking the taller woman slightly by surprise.

“That is wonderful! Thank you!” Sigyn smiled.

“Perhaps I could…” Loki began.

“No, you must work,” Sigyn cut him off with a shake of her head. “I think you have had enough of a break from your duties for the time being. I will see to it all the preparations are made.”

“But…” Loki protested.

“Oh, do not act like you participate in the preparations for festivals at home,” Sigyn snorted. “At most, you and Thor spend the morning hunting a few stags for the feast and the afternoon getting drunk to celebrate either your success or lack of it, usually resulting in one or both of you showing up to the official celebration late and in no condition to be in public.”

“Burn,” Tony coughed under his breath.

“Fine,” Loki huffed, “but if you find your Midgardian compatriots are lacking in their ability to help you accurately prepare, do not be cross with me.”

With Natasha as their official guard, Bruce, Pepper and Sigyn set out to acquire all of the goods that would be needed for the celebrations that morning. Most of what Sigyn said was needed could be found in flower shops and a farmer’s market, though JARVIS had placed a few orders for some other, harder to find components like some of the fish, fresh meats, and casks of honey mead. Pepper briefly second-guessed throwing the festival when she learned strawberries were a major component of the celebration, but Sigyn explained that the consuming of strawberries during the feast was less a requirement and more part of the fertility meaning behind the celebration.

Much of the afternoon was spent decorating the communal areas of the Tower. While Sigyn employed her seiðr to cook the various meals needed for the evening’s festivities, she instructed the others in the making of garlands and weaving corn husk dolls and small ships out of grass. Bruce took a shine to his weaving and was slightly disappointed to learn that the dolls and ships would eventually be burned in the bonfire.

“So… we’re weaving these just to burn them up?” Bruce asked, disappointed.

“It’s part of the ceremony,” Sigyn shook her head. “You write a wish or a hope on a piece of paper and then put it in the boat. The boat burns and carries your wish up to the Norns.”
“And the dolls?” Pepper asked curiously.

“They are sometimes used for wishes, but most commonly they are used by women hoping for children,” Sigyn explained. “Women tend to make dolls themselves and then burn them, hoping that they will be blessed with a babe before the next celebration.”

“So… no burning a doll unless you want a baby?” Pepper frowned. “Then why are we making so many?”

“Well, it isn’t just a wish for a baby. It is only a babe if you do not write anything on it or decorate it in anyway,” Sigyn explained. “Other times, people write hopes for their children on them, such as good health and fortune, and then wish that way. Wishes on boats are typically for material things - success in business, fortune, or victory. Wishes on dolls are typically more family oriented - hoping for good health for those you love, wishing to be reconciled with a loved one, or protection from the Norns in an upcoming battle. That sort of thing. We are leaving the dolls blank because it is best to paint the doll to look like the person you are wishing for. Unless you are wishing for a baby. Then blank is best.”

“What do you usually wish for?” Bruce asked curiously.

“I usually burn a doll for my husband, one for each of my sisters, my mother, my father, my grandfather, and grandmother” Sigyn counted off. “My in-laws, of course. Sometimes I will burn one for a friend having a hard time or a patient in the infirmary who is going through a particularly difficult ailment. I also burn a ship or two to wish me success in my healing endeavors and with my seiðr in the coming year.”

“It seems nice,” Bruce mentioned, “just writing down your hopes or concerns and watching them disappear in the smoke.”

“It can be a very cathartic experience,” Sigyn agreed, “as if you have given up all your worries… even if the sensation is only brief.”


“Yes, Miss Potts,” JARVIS replied as Pepper turned to Sigyn.

“I have a feeling those will be easier and less messy than actual paint,” Pepper explained. “Steve I’m sure would have no problem, but with Tony and Clint we might have issues.”

“I must admit, it is fun to see Thor and other large warriors of his ilk attempt to manage the tiny brushes and paints during doll making,” Sigyn giggled.

Pepper and Natasha soon finished wrapping the variety of garlands around the pole that would decorate the center of the room. Bruce went over to help the bots erect the poll under Natasha’s supervision. Other completed garlands would then be strung from the top of the poll to the walls around the room with other walls and areas of the room decorated with flower garlands, bouquets and baskets of fresh fruit. As Bruce and Natasha tried to instruct DUM-E on garland draping, Pepper noticed Sigyn sadly looking down at a row of dolls she had just finished.

“Have you ever…” Pepper said quietly, picking up a blank doll of her own to look at, “wished for a baby with one of these.” Sigyn shook her head sadly.

“It has never been the right time,” Sigyn sighed.

“I know what you mean,” Pepper agreed. “I’ve spent the first part of my life building up my career,
and now I have it where I want it… but I’ve never really let go of the dream of motherhood either. I know I’m in a position where I wouldn’t exactly have to give up my job to be a mom, but… Honestly, I don’t think now is the right time for Tony to be a dad, and I don’t exactly see myself having a kid with anyone else. Between being Iron Man and all his PTSD… I don’t know. Sometimes I worry it may never happen for us. I mean, I know we could always adopt, but something in me just really wants a baby that’s part of two of us, you know?"

“Yes,” Sigyn said with a slight nod. “I suppose it seems silly for me to worry about such things, especially when I have another few thousand years in which to bare children. Still, I sometimes wonder if my life will ever settle down to a point I bring children into it safely. Even when he is not being banished off realm, Loki does quite a bit of travel for Asgard, and we both have many duties expected of us. Sometimes, I fear, Loki is not keen on having children either.”

“What makes you say that?” Pepper asked, wincing as DUM-E knocked over the garland-covered pole just after it had been properly situated. Bruce left the room momentarily to calm himself from the stress while Natasha whipped out her phone, taking a photo to send to Tony that was captioned “look what ur dumb robot did.”

“Loki has always been nervous about children,” Sigyn admitted. “Oh, he is wonderful with them to be sure. My niece would tell you he is among her favorite people. But Loki has always feared fatherhood… even before he discovered his true nature. He worries he will be like Odin or worse, like the father who abandoned him. He almost fears passing down some sort of tainted blood or that the arrival of a child will turn him into a monster unworthy of raising it. Naturally, it is no use trying to explain the irrationality of some of these fears. I try to tell him that, if anything, the mistakes Odin has made with him will make him a better father…”

“But he doesn’t listen,” Pepper nodded. “Let me tell you, having Howard Stark as a father doesn’t exactly make someone excited to jump into fatherhood. Tony even scheduled a vasectomy for his eighteenth birthday until his mom found out and made him cancel it.”

“A what?” Sigyn asked, confused.

“It’s a medical procedure Midgardian men undergo so they can’t have children,” Pepper replied. “Most of the time, they do it after they’ve had all the children they want to.”

“How odd,” Sigyn said. “Then again, I suppose Midgardian children aren’t as rare as the one’s on Asgard.”

“I thought you are one of ten,” Pepper pointed out, confused.

“My mother’s ability to birth so many children is rather out of the ordinary,” Sigyn explained. “The two daughters she did have with her actual husband took several years of marriage and were both uncomfortable births, as is my understanding. Sometimes it gives me hope to know that Frigga only birthed Thor after hundreds of years of marriage and several miscarriages. She had no more children after Loki, either, though she says it wasn’t for lack of trying. Most Asgardians have around two children and not necessarily because that was all they wanted. I used to think I wanted as many children as I had siblings, but I am starting to think that is an impossible dream.”

“I wouldn’t say impossible,” Pepper shook her head with a kindly smile. “One day, it will be the right time. Or maybe there never is a right time. But I’m sure it will happen one day. Despite his own misgivings, his childish nature and irresponsibility, I still have little doubt Tony will make a great dad one day. I don’t see why you shouldn’t hope for the same.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Lady Pepper,” Sigyn replied earnestly.
“The pole is secure,” Natasha reported as she ambled over to where the two other women were sitting. “It should remain that way unless any of the bots knock into it.”

“Perhaps I’m better at supervising DUM-E than Bruce,” Pepper suggested. “I’ll help you and the bots finish hanging the rest of the garlands. Bruce might like a calmer task.” The man in question re-entered the room, still a little green around the gills.

“Come, Sir Bruce,” Sigyn called over, patting the seat Pepper had just vacated. “We still have flower crowns to assemble. Let me show you how.”

After Sigyn-mandated showers, those that had spent their day working to clean up the streets were finally permitted to check out the decor in the communal area. A mix of hard work and seiðr had transformed the post-modern decor of the floor into something akin the castle of a fairy queen, covered in greens, fresh fruits and flowers. Before getting able to really look at the room, Tony, Steve, Clint, Loki and Phil - who had been invited up for the occasion - found flower crowns stuffed on their heads as part of the festivities.

Sigyn, Bruce, Pepper and Natasha had the ability to make their own crowns during the day. While Sigyn and Pepper put together a hodgepodge of flowers and brightly colored ribbons they liked, Natasha had opted for a more simple crown of red roses and similarly colored ribbons. Bruce had woven together a crown of daisies, lobellias and carnations with some ribbons of his choosing. The rest, however, had their flowers chosen for them by Sigyn based on her knowledge of Asgardian floral meanings and displays as well as some advice from her Midgardian counterparts about flower meanings in their realm.

Both Phil and Steve had been given crowns of red poppies, nastarium, staticie and forget-me-nots to honor their positions as soldiers, white ribbons woven in between the petals. Clint was bequeathed a purple crown of irises, hyacinth, gladiolus and geraniums, which he seemed to take in stride. When Tony was presented with his crown of red carnations, red clover, daffodils and yellow aster, Loki seemed temporarily miffed about Tony’s flower crown until Pepper informed Tony she had made his crown with Sigyn’s advice. While some of the other men embarrassingly adjusted their floral crowns, Loki preened in delight when presented with his. Handmade by Sigyn, the crown of primrose, gorse, amaranth, and bellflower sat a bit lopsided on the prince’s head. However, Loki didn’t seem annoyed at all when he found himself adjusting the crown all through the evening, instead giving his wife a suggestive smirk whenever the crown began to tilt.

“Not that you did bad work or anything,” Tony whispered to Pepper as Sigyn explained the decorations to some of the others. “But do we have to wear these all night?”

“It’s part of the festivities,” Pepper replied.

“We all look like…” Tony began, causing Pepper to raise an eyebrow. “...hippies…”

“From what I can tell, Asguardians are a very nature-worshipping people,” Pepper shrugged. “Or, at least the sect Loki and Sigyn belong to seems to be.”

“You expect me to believe a big guy like Thor prances around in a flower crown at one of these shindigs every year?” Tony snorted.

“He even makes his own flower crown,” Pepper replied knowledgeably. “Picks the flowers from his mother’s garden and everything. Despite some of their more archaic gender norms, Asgard apparently encourages everyone to decorate themselves from head to toe in flowers from time to
“The more you know,” Tony rolled his eyes as Steve expressed his admiration of one of the garlands Bruce and Natasha had worked on across the room. He sighed and then sniffed something delicious coming from the kitchen.

“Did you make more of that awesome fish in the cream sauce?” Tony asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Sigyn smiled demurely. “Herring and new potatoes are the traditional foods of Miðsumarsblót. I encourage you all to have at least a bite of each later for good luck. But I also made some of the things I remember you all enjoyed last time. The festival typically has some lighter fare as well, so there roasted chicken and vegetables.”

“When do we chow down?” Clint asked hopefully.

“Things are still cooking,” Sigyn shook her head. “Besides, we have some other traditions to participate in first.”

As the bots came in with the various arts and crafts supplies JARVIS had ordered for the evening, everyone sat down around the dining table and Sigyn gave instructions on the tradition of decorating dolls for burning in the fire later. Loki added in a bit of commentary on his own - mainly that burning an effigy of a person one did not like and wishing ill on them apparently could lead to unnamed disastrous consequences. Tony and Clint were the most skeptical of the crowd when it came to this tradition - though if Natasha did have any opinion she wasn’t showing either way. Already donning flower crowns, both men shrugged at each other and set to work without complaint about this latest weirdness in their lives.

As Pepper had predicted, Steve took to doll decorating with gusto. He had sheepishly and quietly asked Sigyn beforehand if dolls could only be made for living people. Once she had assured him that one might wish for the peaceful rest of the deceased, Steve set to work making an entire set of Howling Commandos dolls along with one of his mother and some other people from his own neighborhood. He then set to work making mock-ups of his Avenger friends as well, earning a kind smile from Sigyn when she noticed Steve working on a miniature Loki doll among them.

Tony, selfish as he was, felt a little annoyed that one couldn’t burn a doll effigy of themselves for good luck. It was apparently against the rules and, like trying to wish ill on one’s enemies, was apparently a quick way to anger the so-called Norns. While Tony took little stock in all of this Asgardian ritual nonsense, Pepper pinched him and reminded him he still had to be respectful of other cultures despite his own atheistic beliefs. Tony was further perturbed by the comical goatee Pepper drew on her doll version of Tony, though he had to admit Steve’s rendering of him was almost frighteningly lifelike. Possibly to cover a lack of artistic talent, Clint lazily drew smiley faces on all of his dolls and then scribbled names of certain people on them before slipping under the table to take a nap.

After using some old folders Pepper had found to set up workstations around those who wanted their doll construction to be more private, Sigyn set to work on her own doll creatures with various fabric scraps she had collected. She and Steve easily took home the best-looking doll awards - Steve with his tiny version of Peggy Carter in full WWII uniform done completely in fabric pen and Sigyn with the flashy doll of her husband, complete with pokey, gilt helmet. Loki rolled his eyes as Sigyn waved her doll version of him in his face before focusing back on adding yarn hair to his doll version of Frigga. Sigyn smirked but said nothing when she noticed was also a tiny Thor doll making an odd face and with patchy facial hair sitting next to Loki’s little Sigyn doll in its pretty green dress.

Like Bruce, Tony expressed dismay that the well-woven grass boats were to be set ablaze. While the
boats Bruce did were reminiscent of something that might win second-prize at the county fair, Tony was certain Sigyn’s ships would float and possibly even carry some of the cornsilk dolls as passengers. With a sigh and playful roll of her eyes, Sigyn allowed each man to keep one of the woven boats as a memento of the Asgardian feast. For the rest of the night, Loki bragged to the two men about his wife’s weaving prowess and made them swear that they would give her due credit if anyone asked where their fabulous grass boats had come from.

The burning of wish boats and dolls began before the feast in the massive fireplace in the communal room. While initially the ceremony had called for burning to happen after the feasting began, Sigyn and Loki said that it was quickly discovered drunk Asgardian warriors and flames did not mix. Now, the ceremonial burning kicked off the feast and dancing. Loki and Sigyn explained the typical bonfire on Asgard was probably the size of the communal living room, but Tony’s gas fire place was good enough to burn the tiny effigies.

As per the custom, the group lined up from oldest to youngest to burn their tiny effigies in the Stark fireplace. Participation in the ritual burning ranged from reflective and respectful - Steve had said a little prayer and even crossed himself afterwards - to borderline blasphemous (Tony had screamed “Burn, baby, burn!” after throwing a handful of little cornsilk people and his wishing boats into the flames). Once everyone had burned their effigies the group gathered around the fire for a bit of reflection before Sigyn announced it was time for a traditional dance around the pole before the feasting could begin.

After getting a glare from Pepper for making a pole dancing joke, Tony resigned himself to learning the steps in the traditional Asgardian dancing around the flower pole. Natasha caught on quickly to the ceremonial steps, though Tony was delighted to find - for all his USO experience - Steve had two left feet when it came to dancing. More than once Steve found himself heading the opposite direction from everyone else or a couple beats off in his dance steps. To liven up the atmosphere, Tony suggested some music. While there weren’t any Asgardian musicians available that evening, Tony had JARVIS create a playlist of traditional Viking and Celtic music for the group to dance to, switching over to his own R&B favorites as the evening got later.

The first traditional dance over, Sigyn announced the feast could begin but that dancing could resume once the participants had eaten their fill. Once everyone had gotten their food and begun eating, Loki tapped his glass and announced that part of the traditional Miðsumarsblót feast were toasts and speeches honoring the solstice, wishing for a good growing season, and honoring important people.

“Who wants to go first?” Loki asked.

“It’s your party,” Tony pointed out. “Shouldn’t you go first?”

“My husband is usually made to wait to give his speeches and toasts until toward the very end of the evening,” Sigyn said proudly. “His way with words could easily shame some of the less eloquent members of the court. And it is also at that point that most members of court are too drunk to remember any of his insults.” Loki smiled at his wife kindly.

“It is easier to make a speech when one can play off the idiocy a drunken mob has displayed beforehand,” Loki shrugged.

“Well, the idiocy of this drunken mob will have to wait,” Tony chortled. “Show us how they do it in Asgard.”

“Must I?” Loki looked to his wife with a sigh.
“Give them one of your old favorites,” Sign grinned with a twinkle in her eye.

“Here’s to cheating, stealing, fighting, and drinking.” Loki grinned cheekily as he raised his stein. “If you cheat, may you cheat death. If you steal, may you steal a woman’s heart. If you fight, may you fight for a brother. If you drink, may you drink with me.”

“Skål!” Sigyn called from behind her husband as the two clinked steins and drank. As Loki sat, Sigyn rose from her seat with her drink in hand, her toast proving more of a ritual chant than anything.

“As summer’s light falls to the ground, lending crops and trees its power the summer winds blow warm and round, touching the corn silk and the flowers,” Sigyn recited. “We’ll teach our children year after year to love with their hearts and live without fear.”

“Skål!” Loki echoed as the rest tipped back their drinks.

“Now,” Sigyn said happily as she returned to her seat, “I believe it is time our Midgardian friends shared in some of their toasts?”

“Well, as the room’s resident Irishmen, I think Steve needs to begin,” Tony said. Steve groaned and grumbled a little but willingly stood up from his table with his stein of honeymead.

“May you have warm words on a cold evening, a full moon on a dark night, and a smooth road all the way to your door,” Steve replied. “Sláinte.”

“Got another one, Rogers?” Clint asked as Steve continued to look into the bottom of his glass.

“Yes, actually,” Steve smirked. “This one was a favorite of a good friend of mine. May your glass be ever full. May the roof over your head be always strong. And may you be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows you’re dead.” Tony laughed as Steve took a swig and sat back down. Howard had used that one before too. He also said he it was a favorite of an old friend, but never really elaborated.

“You got a Russian toast for us, Widow?” Tony asked as Cap sat back down. Natasha coolly stood up from her seat with her glass of red wine.

“May we suffer as much sorrow as drops of wine we leave in our glasses,” Natasha said before throwing back her cup and taking a drink. “Будем здоровы!”

“Are all Russian toasts so dismal?” Pepper asked, a little surprised.

“Most Russian toasts are just excuses to drink more,” Natasha shrugged.

“I know one!” Clint shot up out of his seat. “Be good. If you can’t be good, be careful; And if you can’t be careful, name it after me!”

“I’m sure you know a fair amount of toasts, Tony,” Steve pointed out.

“How about I go with old Howard’s favorite?” Tony suggested. Steve smirked and laughed a little as Tony stood up with his glass. “Here’s to you and here’s to me, the best of friends we’ll ever be, but if we ever disagree, to hell with you and here’s to me.” Tony threw back his glass, garnering some laughter and more drink clinking from the group.

“What about Tony Stark’s favorite toast?” Clint asked.
“Oh god,” Pepper said, putting her hands in her head as Tony grinned cheekily.

“Here’s to all of the women who have used me and abused me…” Tony smirked. “And may they continue to do so!” Most of the table groaned as Tony sat down. As soon as Tony touched his seat, Pepper seemed to shoot up out of hers, holding her wine glass aloft.

“Here’s to God’s first thought, Man! Here’s to God’s second thought, Woman!” Pepper grinned. “Seconds thoughts are always best, so here’s to Woman!” Sigyn and Natasha let out loud whoops and clinked glasses with Pepper while the men laughed among themselves.

The eating and drinking continued for a little while longer until most of the group was inebriated enough that they could be coaxed back out onto the dance floor for some less than ritualistic performances. Clint and Natasha had apparently learned how to square dance for some undercover mission in Kansas, and they proceeded to teach each other some steps. Tony then tried to teach Steve and Loki the Robot without much success. Of course, Pepper argued Tony - especially after he had three glasses of whiskey - probably wasn’t the ideal person to be teaching the Robot anyway.

After a dessert of strawberries and cream - peaches and cream for Pepper - the group decided to call it a night. Sigyn promised to be up early the next morning to help take down the decorations, but a drunken Tony insisted the bots would do most of the work. He regretted it when he was awoken at four in the morning by JARVIS to learn that U had knocked the giant decorated pole over on top of DUM-E, who had responded by letting the fire extinguisher loose on the living room furniture. It would be three weeks before all the flowers and greenery were removed from the robot’s various parts. At least Butterfingers had been nice enough to film the entire thing.
Asgardian Arts and Crafts

Chapter Summary

_In which Pepper and Sigyn go to a spa for some much needed R&R, leaving the guys to fend for themselves_

Pepper quickly learned that her desire to see Tony and Loki get along might have been misplaced. She had hoped the two grown men could put aside their differences if only to make the living arrangements less uncomfortable for everyone involved. She didn’t count on the fact that an overgrown man-child with a penchant for destruction and mischief probably shouldn’t be encouraged to befriend an overgrown god-child with a penchant for destruction and mischief. It had all started with the CEO of famous New York real estate empire known for his strange coiff and orange skin made a disparaging remark about Tony’s dual roles with Stark Industries and as Iron Man, indicating that SI was only conducting medical research and upping its aid programs to make Iron Man look good.

At first, Pepper had tried to keep the article from Tony but douchebags on Twitter attempting to amp up the beef prevented that. Then she had tried to talk Tony out of retaliation or going on his own Twitter rant. Tony had assured Pepper that he was too mature for this sort of thing, and wasn’t about to sink to an Oompa Loompa’s level. In her blind trust, Pepper had sat back and relaxed, thinking that for once Tony was going to be the bigger person and let things go. The fact that he had suddenly gotten buddy-buddy with Loki and even invited the trickster on a tour of his lab should have tipped Pepper off.

Three days later, a certain large tower in New York City had to be evacuated due to what police could only determine was “a highly advanced model of stink bomb.” This device not only let out a smell that would rival every garbage dump on the east coast but also seemed to have emitted a chemical that turned all the windows of the gaudy golden tower a rather understated dark green. Police, bomb squads and SWAT teams had swarmed the tower to search for what they felt were multiple devices, only to come up empty handed. They were able to determine a point of entry and exit for whatever device it was, indicating that the stink bomb was somehow mobile. When Pepper arrived in the lab that afternoon to see Tony and Loki laughing at the news reports - Tony’s legs propped up on a very smelly robot that had four legs - she instantly knew who was responsible for the attack.

“What is this?” Pepper demanded.

“What is what?” Tony asked.

“That,” she said, pointing to the robot.

“Oh,” Tony said with a smile. “Pepper, let me introduce to you my newest creation. His name is SMEL-E. It’s an acronym for Secret Mobile Essence Leaving Entity. You’re lucky you came up when you did. We just finished giving him a bath.”

“You created a stink bomb robot,” Pepper said, unimpressed.
“We created a stink bomb robot,” Tony said, throwing an arm around Loki’s back.

“It was my idea for the green spray,” Loki said proudly, “and that the automaton should be able to make a stealthy exit so the machinations could not be traced back here.”

“What?” Pepper groaned.

“It’s great! He has this awesome stealth technology…” Tony said, pushing a button as the robot disappeared. “Of course, he can only stay in stealth mode for a few minutes at a time. We just needed to get him into the air vents and out without being detected.”

“Why did Banner have to go to that conference,” Pepper groaned. “This lab could use some impulse control.”

“You think Banner brings impulse control to the lab,” Tony deadpanned.

“Do you realize that federal agents are swarming Manhattan right now? That people are thinking this is some kind of weird terrorist cell?” Pepper groaned.

“The odor isn’t harmful,” Tony shook his head. “Just… annoying.”

“If they find out you’re behind this, we are going to get so much bad press,” Pepper grimaced. “And I don’t want to deal with the people over there. They’re nuts! Not to mention the outrageous fumigation costs…And SHIELD! What are they going to say?”

“Pep, calm down,” Tony shook his head. “It’s a harmless prank. And I am one of probably thousands of people that could get blamed for this. Hell, I’m sure the head of the U.S. Department of Commerce has been thinking about doing something like this to that guy for years now. They’ll have to interview his enemies going back to the 1970s. I’ve got a good fifty years before they even reach my name on that list.”

“You did this because someone said something mean about you in a magazine,” Pepper huffed. “One must show those who would spread rumors and accusations they are not to be trifled with,” Loki pointed out. “From what I have heard, this orange Midgardian would do well to learn how to hold his tongue and consider his words.”

“See! This was for the greater good!” Tony nodded. “And, Mr. Mischief and I actually managed to get along and complete a project. You should be proud of us!”

“The two of you agree on this,” Pepper shook her head. “This is not what I meant when I said you should cut each other some slack and try to be friendly!”

“You could be nicer,” Tony said to Pepper. “You don’t see Sigyn down here, crushing our dreams.”

“I would not…” Loki began as the door to the lab was thrown open. Furiously, Sigyn rushed toward her husband and slapped him.

“What were you thinking!” Sigyn yelled.

“How did you…” Tony began.

“I know my husband’s handiwork when I see it,” Sigyn fumed. “Did it have to be green? The building? You realize how tenuous our stay here is, don’t you? The Allfather could call us back at any time! You would ruin your shot at redemption just to play a prank on some… some pompous ass of a landlord?”
“Sigyn…” Loki began.

“I’m going to use that one,” Tony said.

“I bartered my life for you and this is how you thank me?” Sigyn continued. “And it had to be something so large and attention-getting that all of Midgard would know about it! Do you honestly think Heimdall has no means of hearing about this with all the discussion it has caused?”

“It was my idea,” Tony said, defensively. “I asked him to participate. I didn’t think it might violate the terms of his… probation.”

“It was his choice,” Sigyn said angrily.

“Yeah, but you guys are kind of under my roof and my rules,” Tony said. “If the Allfather gets stressed, I’ll tell him it was all my idea and I put the idea in Loki’s head that the two of you would get kicked out or something if he didn’t participate.” Loki looked at Tony in surprise. “Look, you’ve made a good effort so far, and I know how hard the whole redemption thing can be, especially when you see someone who deserves to be knocked down a peg or two. I’m not about to let you get in trouble for something that’s not your fault, mainly because it was all about my ego.”

“Loki,” Sigyn prompted her husband.

“Thank you,” Loki said so quietly Tony barely heard it.

“I am still furious with you,” Sigyn informed her husband.

“I would think you would be pleased that I was up to my regular, comical sort of mischief rather than the more destructive kind,” Loki pointed out.

“Yes, because forcing people from their homes and shelters isn’t destructive in the least,” Sigyn hissed.

“In all fairness, the people who can afford to live in a place like that probably aren’t hurting for much,” Tony said. “Half of them are probably in their vacation homes right now anyway.”

“We did plan this well,” Loki smirked. “I am told the summer swelter will make the smell much harder to remove.”

“I should send you over with a mop and bucket to rectify this situation,” Sigyn said furiously.

“No,” Pepper disagreed. “A mop and bucket is too good for these guys. We should send them over with bars of soap and toothbrushes. And no cleaning robots to help.”

“Pep, come on,” Tony groaned.

“I hope your fun was worth the panic and unrest you’ve caused,” Sigyn huffed at her husband before turning around and storming out of the room.

“Sigyn!” Loki called after his wife as she used her seiðr to magically slam the door in her wake.

“You better find some way to make up for this,” Pepper informed Tony before turning on her heel and exiting, slamming the door just as Sigyn had. The two men were left standing in the lab, contrite.

“So, are we both going to be sleeping on the couch tonight?” Tony asked Loki, “or is there something else women do in Asgard when they’re mad?”
“No,” Loki grimaced. “It will be sleeping on the sofa for me as well, I fear.”

Pepper and Sigyn seemed to have teamed up on showcasing their anger. Neither of them were speaking to their respective partners and the two women decided to go out to dinner together that evening, leaving their glum men behind to sulk and scavenge their own food. The news was now reporting that a sewer leak due to shoddy construction was being investigated as the cause of the stink bomb attack earlier that day. When that story broke, Tony was plating the meal he had cooked up for himself, Loki, and Clint since the womenfolk were out for a night on the town. Loki had glared at dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets and curly French fries Tony had cooked while Clint was eating the meal with gusto. The fact that Tony had laid out various sauces like ketchup, barbeque and honey mustard to add to the chicken didn’t seem to distract Loki from the meal’s childish shapes.

“So, how mad are they?” Clint asked between bites.

“What?” Tony asked.

“Sigyn and Pepper,” Clint said.

“How did…” Tony began.

“I was in the ventilation system when you guys were testing your robot out the other day to see if it would fit,” Clint informed them. “Of course, I decided to be nice and not say anything. I also told SHIELD I had no reason to think either of you were behind the attack.”

“Thanks, man,” Tony nodded. “The womenfolk are...uh...cheesed.”

“I’m sure Lady Pepper will easily forgive you,” Loki harrumphed, dipping a fry into ketchup as he had watched the others do. “Sigyn, however, will most likely remain furious that I nearly destroyed the chance she put so much effort into bargaining for me. In retrospect, perhaps we should have chosen a different color. Perhaps a nice wenge or tea rose. I understand men on your planet have issues with shades of pink and violet. Perhaps a cerise or mauve may have emasculated him.”

“She’s just worried about you getting pinched on a parole violation,” Tony shook his head. “When she sees that this was just harmless fun, I’m sure she’ll calm down. Pepper, however, will hold this over my head for the rest of my life.”

“You seem to forget that my lifespan exceeds yours by millennia,” Loki snorted. “Sigyn will be reminding me of this when the remains of you and all those you know and love have long been turned to dust. And Vanir women have very long memories. I still occasionally get harped on for something I said five hundred years ago. By both her and my mother.”

“I think women in general have very long memories,” Clint pointed out. “Regardless of species or plane of origin.”

“So, we have to do something to make this up to them,” Loki nodded.

“I already sent Pepper out with my credit card so they could get a nice steak dinner,” Tony pointed out. “And I encourage Happy to take them jewelry shopping after. Whatever they want.”

“And Pepper does not find your ploys to buy her love distasteful?” Loki asked, curiously.

“Um…” Tony began.
“Because Sigyn truly hates it when I buy her something when she is incensed with me,” Loki said. “Oh, sure, love gifts when things are going well are always appreciated, but when she is angry she always wants something done by hand like a bouquet I personally picked or clouds shaped like the characters in her favorite stories formed in the sky or rainbows created in our rooms.”

“Seeing as you don’t have your magic, I doubt anything but the flowers will be possible,” Clint pointed out.

“You make cloud figures for your wife?” Tony said, surprised.

“Wouldn’t you if you could?” Loki smirked.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “That would be a pretty boss move. Hey, JARVIS, see if we can figure out some cloud manipulation for the suit.”

“I believe we can install a misting spray,” JARVIS retorted tiredly.

“Unhelpful, as always,” Tony muttered.

“I could take the ladies to the range,” Clint offered. “Get some of the aggression out.”

“Yeah, no,” Tony shook his head. “Pepper hates guns and violence. And you might put it in their heads to shoot us or something.”

“Sigyn has shot me before,” Loki mentioned offhandedly.

“What?” Tony gaped. “Was it intentional?”


“I don’t believe your wife shoots with a bow. I haven’t seen her do it for all your bragging” Clint said, clearly interested.

“It is one of the weapons the Vanir are known for, though they aren’t known particularly for battle on land,” Loki replied. “And no, I would not recommend some sort of contest between the two of you. Not if you want to retain any semblance of your ego or self-confidence.”

“You think your wife could beat me in an archery contest,” Clint huffed.

“I know my wife could beat you in an archery contest,” Loki snorted. “Perhaps you have some preternatural abilities that make you a decent shot, but Sigyn has literal centuries of practice, the aid of seiðr, and the improved physical and mental prowess possessed by us gods. Even blindfolding her wouldn’t do much to give you an advantage.”

“Look, buddy, I know you love your wife and all,” Clint said, “but I’m the best shot there is. They banned me from participating in the Olympics because they were convinced my abilities were the result of government experimentation, not wholly natural.”

“When Sigyn beats you,” Loki said dangerously, “I will purchase for you the first tankard of mead to help you drown your sorrows.”

“You’re on,” Clint agreed.

“As charming as this is,” Tony pointed out, “it doesn’t get either of us out of the doghouse.”
“Fenrir’s bed is easily more comfortable than the sofa,” Loki snorted. “He is also permitted a blanket, even when Sigyn is cross with him.”

“Being in the doghouse is an expression,” Tony rolled his eyes. He then opened them wide. “Unless your wife makes you sleep on the dog’s bed?” Loki huffed, refusing to dignify Tony’s question with comment. Tony wondered if that meant “yes.”

“Why don’t you guys do something nice for them?” Clint shrugged. “I don’t know… to show you’re thoughtful or whatever?”

“Barton,” Tony grinned. “That is a fabulous idea.”

“And what, exactly, would be considered nice?” Loki asked.

“Does Sigyn like being pampered?” Tony asked.

“Who doesn’t?” Loki scoffed.

“JARVIS, find me the best spa resort in New England,” Tony ordered before turning back to Loki. “We are going to send our girls on an all-expenses paid trip to relaxation world. I’m talking steam baths, deep tissue massages, mani/pedi/soaks…”

“Why do the residents of Midgard think of saunas as a luxury?” Loki asked no one in particular.

“They are going to eat quiche and freshly caught fish,” Tony continued, “and hang around in super fluffy bathrobes at one in the afternoon. This, my friend, will certainly get us out of trouble.”

“Yeah,” Clint snorted, “as long as neither one of them takes up with a burly masseur named Sven.”

“I’ve never met a Sven I liked,” Loki agreed.

“Missing the point,” Tony said to both of them, “how can they stay mad at us when they’re so blissed out on endorphins they can’t see straight? It’s perfect!”

“And what if they decline?” Loki asked.

“Would you decline a weekend of pampering?” Tony asked.

“Depends on who’s offering,” Loki replied.

“They’re going to love this,” Tony said. “I promise.

Pepper and Sigyn arrived back at the Tower close to midnight, both of them giggly. Pepper’s giggle fits were more from the champagne she had imbibed while Sigyn’s were just part of her bubbly nature. While the two women looked pleased with themselves, Happy looked anything but. Trailing in behind the two women, Tony could tell the bodyguard had probably overheard some girl talk he was never going to get out of his brain. Tony made a mental note to maybe give him a hazard pay bonus for the month.

While the two women seemed happy their entire way into the common area, they both stopped short and began glaring at their men once they noticed them. Clint was on the sofa with a mixing bowl full of instant pudding he had made for himself, attempting to explain tennis to Loki. The hardest part was explaining why the players hit the ball with rackets and not each other. Tony tried not to let the furious glares of the two women before him get him down. He knew the spa package JARVIS had
picked but he and Loki had agreed on would show the womenfolk they were at least trying to be good.

“How was dinner?” Tony asked them.

“We both ordered forty-five dollar salads and then only ate half of them,” Pepper informed him.

“But we sampled everything on the dessert tray!” Sigyn said happily.

“Chocolate goes well with the top shelf champagne,” Pepper nodded.

“Did you girls go out after? Do any shopping?” Tony asked.

“No,” Pepper shook her head. “We mainly just drove around Midtown and thought of ways to punish you.”

“Pepper thinks you should do one of those actuality television programs where they make you give up electricity for a month,” Sigyn informed him.

“A reality show with no electricity,’ Tony nodded.

“And Sigyn said she would turn you into a newt,” Pepper informed Loki, “but then we decided that would be an insult to newts.”

“Lovely,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Well,” Tony began, “we know you’re both still mad. And we understand. We also wanted to make things up to you.”

“What did you do?” Pepper demanded to know, worriedly.

“Promise me you didn’t acquire anything illicitly,” Sigyn begged her husband.

“You ladies, are spending a spa weekend in the Poconos,” Tony announced.

“We’re what?” Pepper asked incredulously.

“Poconos?” Sigyn enunciated, confused.

“It’s all booked. You leave early Saturday morning in the helicopter and arrive there in time for lunch,” Tony said. “You have your choice of their smorgasboard of treatments. I’m actually kind of jealous. If either of you get the thing where they rub caviar all over you let me know if it works. I even made sure they would have extra fluffy bathrobes and slippers in the rooms. Come home late Sunday, and we promise to have a nice, relaxing meal ready for you so you don’t blow two whole days of pampering.”

“And you won’t burn down the Tower or start a flame war with the CEO of Apple or wind up drunk and naked in Central Park while we’re gone?” Pepper asked accusingly.

“I promise not to throw fireballs at an apples while you are away,” Loki said. “Of course, without seiðr such things are difficult.”

“I swear,” Tony said, holding up two fingers. “Scouts honor.”

“I know you were never in scouts,” Pepper pointed out.
“Then Stark’s honor,” Tony replied. Pepper decided to hold back the acerbic comment on the tip of her tongue since Tony actually looked a bit sincere.

“And you promise not to make yourself unbearable to our hosts,” Sigyn said to her husband, “not to cause any harm to anyone, and to at least contemplate being on your best behavior the rest of the time we are on Midgard?”

“I swear on my father’s grave,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“That isn’t good enough,” Sigyn shook her head.

“I did mean Laufey’s and not Odin’s,” Loki pointed out.

“Dude, that’s like an atheist swearing to god,” Clint rolled his eyes.

“Which I have done,” Tony nodded.

“Loki,” Sigyn grimaced, tapping her foot.

“Fine,” Loki groaned before taking his wife’s hands in his own and staring into her eyes. “I swear on my deep and unending love for you that I will at least endeavor to keep out of trouble in the roughly two days you are gone.”

“I know that would be a record for you,” Sigyn replied, causing Loki to roll his eyes, “but it does please me greatly to know you will at least be trying.”

“This is going to be fun.” Tony insisted. “You ladies are going to get the treatment you deserve, and you don’t have to think about us for thirty-six hours at least.”

“Though you could think about me a little,” Loki informed his wife. Pepper and Sigyn exchanged a look.

“Alright,” Pepper agreed.

“But,” Sigyn told them, “if either of us gets so much of an inkling that either of you are up to something…”

“.we will be back in this city and on your asses so fast your heads will spin,” Pepper finished.

Pepper and Sigyn had been seen off early Saturday morning, both of them chattering away about the various treatments and services offered by the spa. Tony and Loki had offered their respective partners kisses and promises to be on their best behavior before seeing the women off on the helipad. Loki had made Sigyn promise to set up wards and protection spells in both hers and Peppers rooms while Tony had given Happy explicit instructions on what to do if there was even a perceived threat toward either of the women in his charge. With their womenfolk gone and Clint dead to the world for at least another four hours, Loki and Tony realized they now had to find something to do to occupy themselves.

The first few hours went well enough. Tony tinkered in the lab while Loki caught on up his reading. Pepper sent a text confirming that they had landed safely along with a picture of herself and Sigyn in their fluffy robes. She then informed Tony that neither women would be contacting them until they left unless something catastrophic happened. Tony showed Loki the picture but then had to fight for his phone back after Loki decided to go through his camera roll until he found an embarrassing
picture to laugh at. Tony was sure Loki would probably blame it on being an Asgardian ignorant of cell phone etiquette, but he knew deep down Loki had gone through this camera roll because it was a jerk move.

It was about an hour after Clint woke up that Loki started to seem on edge. At first, Tony and Clint thought he was being paranoid considering what had happened with The Other and Thanos. Tony could understand if his fears of Sigyn being captured and tortured while he wasn’t there to protect her had manifested. Soon, they realized that Loki was just a pain to be around when he was missing his wife. He constantly asked them what they thought Sigyn was doing at right that minute and didn’t take kindly when their answers became rude or sarcastic. Loki complained about how little time he had with Sigyn recently and then nearly broke Tony’s coffee table when Clint pointed out Loki was sort of the cause of his own problem. It was then that Tony decided Loki needed to be put in some sort of constructive employment.

Since Tony wasn’t about to risk wrecking his lab and Clint decided weaponry shouldn’t be involved, the pair asked Loki if there was something from Asgard he could teach them to do. Neither man had counted on Asgardians being so into arts and crafts. The first night, Loki attempted to teach them how to weave. Loki brought up Sigyn’s looms and Tony ordered up some yarn for them to experiment with. While Tony was used to threading wires and Clint to stringing up bows, both men found that they couldn’t weave to Loki’s satisfaction. By the time the three men turned into bed, Loki had woven a blanket while Tony had made something akin to a scarf and Clint decided his ratty creation could possibly be used as a potholder.

Tony had intended on sleeping in the following morning only to be awoken by the fire alarm going off and JARVIS informing him of a possible breach on Loki and Sigyn’s level. Loki had attempted to make himself the sort of breakfast Sigyn would normally cook for him, but he seemed useless without the aid of his seiðr. Apparently, no one had told Loki not to put tinfoil in a microwave. When the thing exploded and shot out electrical sparks, he had first thought his brother was attacking him and then began beating the machine until it caught fire. Tony had found Loki standing over the flaming microwave with some kind of mace that had apparently been stowed away in Sigyn’s bottomless trunk. After Tony worked to clean up the mess and Clint managed to coax Loki into putting the mace away, Tony made everyone his breakfast speciality: cereal.

Tony then decided that they should give Loki a chance to show them some non-weaving crafts from Asgard, mainly since Loki harping on them about how badly they were doing was better than him whining about Sigyn being gone or detailing every facet of her personality and figure he liked. Loki tried to do show them how to do some wood carving, but tensions mounted between Loki and Clint. Tony then decided that it was best they engage in something that didn’t require knives. They ended up making flower wreaths. By the time the women arrived home, both Tony and Clint were wondering why Asgardians couldn’t have taken up an easier artform like fingerpainting. Tony even debated introducing DVDs of Bob Ross to Asgard.

The helicopter landed and Happy got out, escorting out first Pepper and then Sigyn. While Pepper walked slowly toward Tony, Sigyn broke out into a run and jumped into her waiting husband’s arms. Tony learned later from Pepper that Sigyn had been somewhat vocal about missing her husband, but she was nowhere near as unbearable as Loki was on the subject. As Happy moved to start bringing out their luggage, the foursome moved back inside to catch up. Tony and Loki were both pleased that Pepper and Sigyn were all smiles and seemed rather relaxed. Clint was watching TV when the entered back into the common area, but he looked up and offered both women a welcoming smile.

“So, how was it?” Tony asked the women, trying not to betray how tired he felt as he slunk onto the couch, Pepper slipping onto it beside him.
“It was wonderful!” Sigyn said, throwing her arms around her husband again. “They let us soak in mud and wrapped us in seaweed, and I ate a rainbow fish!”

“Rainbow trout,” Pepper whispered to Clint and Tony.

“And they painted my fingers and toes!” Sigyn proclaimed, showing off her hot pink nails to her husband. “It is apparently a custom of Midgard.”

“They look very fetching,” Loki agreed, kissing her hand affectionately.

“Pepper says that we can get polish in any color we want and put it on our nails,” Sigyn informed him. “I bought some gold polish there, and I can do your nails tonight!”

“Wonderful,” Loki grinned.

“Um…” Tony began, but Pepper gave him a look that silenced him.

“Well,” Loki informed the group, “I think I shall take Sigyn back to our quarters before the evening meal just to show her how much I missed her.”

Not caring if the others were grossed out, Loki swept Sigyn into his arms and proceeded to carry her back to the suite. Sigyn continued babbling on about her experiences in the spa such as the various things rubbed on her body and the new types of food she had eaten. As they entered the elevator, Sigyn began taking off her shoes to show her husband the color on her toes. Sigyn had just twisted her leg over her shoulder in some weird yoga-like pose so her husband could get a better look at her colored toes when the doors closed. With the pair gone, Tony turned and sank into the sofa with a groan. Babysitting Loki had been exhausting. He wondered how Sigyn did it.

“How was your weekend?” Pepper asked curiously.

“It was unbearable,” Tony moaned. “He wouldn’t shut up.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad,” Pepper snorted.

“Clint, buddy, help me out,” Tony said.

“He talked about her all night Saturday,” Clint told Pepper. “He gets this high-pitched, nasally voice when he’s missing her. Every ten seconds it was ‘what do you think Sigyn’s doing now?’ or ‘do you think she’s thinking about me?’ or ‘what do you think Sigyn’s thinking about right now?’ Over and over again. It was like listening to a preteen girl with her first crush. We had to shut him up. And Tony vetoed my idea of shoving a sock down his throat.”

“We sort of did an Asgardian arts and crafts weekend,” Tony groaned. “I thought if we kept him occupied he wouldn’t keep badgering us.”

“That doesn’t sound bad,” Pepper shrugged.

“It was the most demented arts and crafts weekend that has ever happened or will ever happen,” Clint insisted. “He wove this giant blanket with a wolf on it - I suspect just to show off - and then made fun of the color scheme on my weaving because I chose ‘peasant colors.’ Then the next morning, he attacked the microwave with medieval weaponry and then pouted because none of us can cook like she can. Then Tony got the great idea to give everyone whittling knives.”

“I wove you what might loosely pass as a scarf,” Tony informed Pepper. “And I whittled something. I think it was supposed to be a flute? It might pass for a blowgun.” Pepper cocked an eyebrow.
“I whittled a shiv,” Clint said, “to stab Loki with if he ever tries to make me do arts and crafts with him again.”

“The flower crown thing turned out to be pretty inspired though,” Tony said. “We used kiddie scissors so there wouldn’t be any sharp objects. Loki might consider giving a class on it down at the Learning Annex or something.”

“As long as people don’t mind being bored to death. He gave us a lecture on what types of flowers Sigyn likes to braid into her hair or make flower crowns with. It included a top ten list. Then there was a pop quiz,” Clint grumbled. “Then he gave us a top ten list of flowers she likes based on the season. Then he gave us another pop quiz. Then he told us her favorite flowers by color, and, you guessed it, gave another pop quiz. As if we need to know any of that. Then he tried to teach us the Asgardian meaning behind each flower.”

“Apparently, flower crowns are highly symbolic on Asgard,” Tony nodded.

“Yes,” Pepper snorted. “If you remember, I made you one a few days ago.”

“He tore one of mine apart because the positioning and varieties of my flowers meant ‘I want to inspire you to be unfaithful to your lover,’” Clint said. “Then he accused me of trying to seduce his wife. Then I cut my finger on a rose thorn. Then Loki would only let me make flower crowns with flowers he said meant ‘rejection.’ Why did he make us order flowers that mean ‘rejection’?”

“Is that why there are ribbons and fresh cuttings all over the dining room table?” Pepper asked.

“Yes,” Clint grimaced.

“Oh, and Pep,” Tony said, “we owe approximately a quarter-million dollars to six separate florists around Manhattan now.”

“Did you at least make me a flower crown this time around?” Pepper asked.

“It’s in the safe,” Tony said. “I was worried Loki would steal it. It apparently means that you are patient and forgiving and have superior merits to other women. He took the first one I made because he thought Sigyn would like it even though it apparently didn’t have any discernable flower message.”

“He made me wear mine. He called it the Crown of Rejection,” Clint grimaced. “I flushed it down the toilet when Loki went to get glitter. Apparently, they just have a tub of glitter lying around in their rooms. When and where did they have time to purchase an entire tub of glitter? What are they using it for?”

“At least you learned something,” Pepper shrugged. “And you didn’t spend all weekend in the lab.”

“Just know that eight hours is the approximate length of time Loki can go without Sigyn unless he is otherwise occupied,” Tony informed her. “It’s a wonder any of his evil machinations have been able to get off the ground with how whiny he gets without her. Was he that whiny back when you were his henchman?”

“Thanks for reminding me, and no,” Clint grimaced, “though the brainwashing might have had something to do with it. He did mention her a couple of times though.”

“You have to admit,” Pepper said, “they are kind of sweet together.”

“I will give you that Sigyn is sweet,” Tony said. “Loki is just slightly more bearable when she’s
around.”

“Well,” Pepper smiled, “I think your weekend has punished you enough. I guess next time I’m mad at you I should just send you out on a guy’s night with Loki.”

“Yeah, no,” Tony replied. “Just murder me instead.”
Double Cross

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Steve and Loki find themselves pawns in a much larger chess game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I need your help,” Sigyn and Tony said to each other at the same time.

The futurist and the princess eyed each other suspiciously from where they were standing outside Tony’s lab. Tony had summoned Sigyn down to talk to him, so he was curious as to why she was using this as an opportunity to seek his help. For her part, Sigyn had anticipated Stark was going to ask her for something and she felt the opportunity might help her gain a little quid pro quo. Growing up in the Asgardian court, Sigyn had learned that it was rare to get something for nothing, and those who offered something for nothing usually came back asking for more than you were willing to give.

“Okay, now I’m curious to see what you want, but I also kind of want to ask for what I want first because I, technically, am the one who orchestrated this meeting,” Stark said.

“Ask away, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said.

“So, the Fourth of July is coming up,” Tony began. “It’s a holiday…”

“Celebrating the anniversary of your country’s freedom from an island across a great ocean,” Sigyn nodded. “Apparently there was a great battle where tea was thrown into a bay for some reason? My husband quite enjoyed the flag of the great snake the nation once flew.”

Tony blinked out of his mind the image of Loki with a tea pot on his head waving around a “Don’t Tread on Me” flag.

“And then a great warrior named Gøran of the Washing Town fought with his armies through a great winter so they might vanquish the soldiers of Hessen - the descendants of the people once known to Asgard as the Chatti - upon the celebration of the winter solstice,” Sigyn continued. “This resulted in the surrender of the Great Lord of Kernow, a place of sailors my grandfather once visited. Today, I believe you know this place as Cornwall?”

“Yeah, I’ll have Cap recommend you a good American history book maybe,” Tony shrugged. “Anyway, the Fourth of July is also Cap’s birthday. I’m not sure, but they probably made him Captain America because he was born on the fourth. I’ll have to ask. So, Pep thought it was a good idea - since Cap is turning the big 9-4 and hasn’t celebrated a birthday in like 70 years - that we should forgo my usually Independence Day party barge on the Hudson and instead throw Cap a birthday party.”

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded. “He is your comrade in arms. Celebrating his arrival at a new age is an important part of your friendship and teamwork.”

“The thing is,” Tony sighed, “Pep wants this to be a bit of a surprise. So, I was wondering if you or the hubs had anything… I don’t know… magical that could help out?”
“This is an interesting proposition,” Sigyn smiled, “and I believe will become more interesting once you hear of my request for aid.”

“Oh?” Tony asked.

“You see, the day before the Name Day of your friend the Captain and the anniversary of your country’s secession is the Name Day of my dear husband,” Sigyn smiled. “Or at least when we have always celebrated. The revelation of my husband’s adoption could mean the true day in which he received his name may never be known. I was actually coming here to seek your help in planning a small celebration for him… without his knowledge.”

“So, we want the same thing for different people,” Tony said, surprised.

“Honestly, I think this is a perfect opportunity for something a bit deceptive,” Sigyn confided in Tony. “A little misdirection may be the order of the day.”

“I think I like where this is going,” Tony grinned. “So, you think by getting Cap involved in planning Loki’s party we can distract him from his own surprise party. And by getting Loki to help out with Cap’s celebration…”

“He will be too busy to go snooping about for any signs of his own celebration being planned,” Sigyn smiled.

“May I say your ability to plan subterfuge is impeccable,” Tony said.

“Well,” Sigyn smirked, “one does not stay married to a trickster as long as I have without picking up a few tricks of their own.”

“So… how does one celebrate a Name Day?” Steve asked Sigyn as he escorted her through the party supply store she had picked out.

Steve was a little bit flattered that Sigyn had come to him asking for help in planning her husband’s upcoming birthday celebrations, though he worried she had a little too much faith in his ability to educate her about modern Midgardian parties. Still, Sigyn said she had noticed Steve’s artistic eye and that he would helpful in her decision-making. Normally, Sigyn said she had her mother-in-law, sisters and half a dozen handmaidens to help her plan an event. This time around, Tony had given her his credit card and the offer to “go nuts,” but nothing beyond that. As she would need both a guard and a helping hand to acquire party supplies, she had sought out Steve and asked him with help concealing the event from her husband.

“Ooh! These are delightful,” Sigyn said, examining some paper lanterns hanging on display. “We have ones in Asgard, though they are made of glass and float of their free will.”

“I’m sure Tony could design something like that,” Steve nodded, “though I don’t think he’ll make your timeline.”

“I do like the gold ones, but I don’t want them to seem…” Sigyn sighed, looking through the various paper lantern offerings.

“Gaudy?” Steve offered with a nod. “What about this one?” Sigyn eyed the black and gold damask pattern on the lanterns Steve had found.

“Wonderful!” she clapped her hands. “How many do you think we will need?”
“Not too many,” Steve shrugged, piling a few packs into their cart. “Don’t want to overwhelm things with a single element.”

“Quite right,” Sigyn agreed before letting out a squeal and bounding off to look at assorted ceiling decorations.

When all was said and done, Sigyn’s decor search had piled the cart up with hanging lights, glowing orbs, hanging gold pennants, gold tinsel garlands, fanned-out gold centerpieces, and enough balloons to fill up the main lobby of Stark Tower. Steve was worried that he and Sigyn would spend the entire weekend blowing up all these balloons in time for the party, but she assured them that she had overbought on purpose. Apparently, balloons rather delighted Sigyn and she wanted to take a few back to Asgard with her. She had also gotten some clear balloons they would eventually fill up with glitter. She had gotten the idea from Pepper. The next item on their list was an entire tub of glitter. Clint had warned Steve that Loki and his wife seemed to have an obsession with the stuff, but Steve hadn’t actually believed it until Sigyn began loading bags of the stuff into the cart.

“What are these?” Sigyn asked curiously as they turned onto the next aisle.

“Party favors,” Steve explained. “Sort of a gift you give people as thanks for attending your party... Something to remember the event by. Usually a thing only rich people did when I was growing up. Though I did make hand-drawn thank you cards every year for people who gave me birthday gifts.”

“I thought one received gifts upon their Name Day in Midgard?” Sigyn asked, confused.

“Yes,” Steve nodded. “Usually, the gifts you receive for your birthday are a bit more expensive or took more time to make than party favors. And each person gets the same party favor while the gifts given to the birthday boy - or girl - are usually unique.”

“Sir Stark seems to think that this realm is above ritual,” Sigyn snorted, “but I see there are many rites in Midgard with their own specific instructions.”

“In my experience, we’ve always liked to seem more advanced, more logical and knowledgeable than those who came before us,” Steve shrugged. “Makes us feel better. Makes us feel like we’re on the right track, I guess.”

“Old ways aren’t always bad,” Sigyn said. “After all, they are usually our fundamentals and everything must be built on fundamentals.”

“I suppose,” Steve nodded.

“So, which party favors to you think would most intrigue my husband’s guests?” Sigyn grinned. Steve had a feeling Tony wouldn’t be too keen on the party favors Sigyn picked out, including gold bubble tubes, assorted whistles and noisemakers, party poppers filled with glitter, slap bracelets, a 100-pack of finger traps, and bouncy balls. She had also gotten several gold and green pinwheels, various prism and kaleidoscope tubes, glow wands, and maze puzzles with tiny metal balls. Steve was pretty sure the hundreds of assorted stickers Sigyn purchased would not be making it up past her quarters. Not that Steve could blame her. Between the stickers that glowed in the dark and the scratch-and-sniff ones, Steve had to admit he too was pretty impressed.

“And what do you do during your Name Day parties here on Midgard?” Sigyn asked Steve curiously.

“Well, I haven’t really had one for a while. Hard to have a party in the middle of a war. When I was a kid we usually some kind of game or activity,” Steve shrugged, thinking back to his childhood.
“You know, pin the tail on the donkey, hide and seek or something.”

“We should have a game then,” Sigyn nodded.

Sigyn picked out a “pin the tail on a horse” game as well as enough decorate-your-own-kite kits for everyone attending the party. Steve was surprised to learn that kite flying was actually a very common activity for Vanir children, though Sigyn maintained the diamond-shaped variety were rather rare in her homeland. Apparently, Vanir kites came in a variety of odd shapes and strange patterns. Sigyn had a book of various kite illustrations depicting their meanings and artistry she promised to show Steve later to quench his artistic curiosity. With decor, activities, and favors taken care of, Sigyn was ready to check out.

“What about stuff for the cake?” Steve asked curiously as they headed to the front of the store.

“Cake?” Sigyn frowned.

“I guess you guys don’t do that on Asgard,” Steve said, scratching the back of his neck. “See, here with have a cake with a candle for each year you’ve been alive on it…”

“It would have to be a large cake,” Sigyn smirked, “for a thousand and forty-nine candles.”

“I suppose it would,” Steve laughed.

“Besides, Sir Stark showed me a place where one can order Name Day cakes,” Sigyn said. “They are not part of the traditional Asgardian celebration, but Sir Stark insisted. He apparently has a personal cake decorator on his staff who he says is underutilized.”

“What type of cake did you end up getting?” Steve asked curiously.

“I chose one from the baker’s portfolio,” Sigyn said as they got in line to checkout. “It is a dragon. Well, it doesn’t look like any dragon of Asgard, but I suppose with a few color changes and adjustments…”


“I suppose I could find some bestiaries for you to look at as well,” Sigyn laughed.

“Thanks,” Steve smiled. “And thanks for asking my help with all this.”

“Well, I was afraid that Sir Stark might plan something… a bit over the top,” Sigyn shrugged. “And having someone with an artistic flair is helpful.”

“Glad to be of service,” Steve smiled.

“And the Captain has no idea?” Loki said mischievously.

“We had a feeling he would protest if we were to make a big deal out of it,” Tony shrugged. “So we thought it would be best to keep the party a surprise. I’m guessing you have some experience with subterfuge, and I was hoping you could help us keep Cap out of the loop.”

“I wouldn’t pin your captain as one who would be hard to hide things from,” Loki snorted.

“He can do covert ops when needed,” Tony insisted. “And I have a feeling he would sense something is up about this. He does seem to pick up on people plotting things where he’s involved. I
mean, you saw what happened with Barton and I conspired to steal bacon off his plate at breakfast.”

“Well, one should expect such a reaction when interrupting the morning meal and its delicacies,” Loki huffed. “Besides, the knife barely grazed Barton. I don’t know why he is still pouting about it. I should say he’s endured worse.”

“All I’m asking is that if he gets too close to our planning or preparation, you through him off the scent,” Tony insisted. “I doubt very much you’ve gotten to flex your deception muscles since you got here, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want to return to Asgard rusty.”

“Do you doubt my abilities, Stark?” Loki huffed, annoyed.

“I’m just saying,” Tony smirked, “sometimes when we let ourselves get out of practice, we find our performance can be… less than desirable.”

“I am not spying on the Captain for you,” Loki insisted.

“I’m not asking you to spy on him,” Tony snorted. “If I wanted a spy I would have asked Barton or Romanoff. I mean, stealth isn’t exactly your strong suite, is it Reindeer Games?”

“I will have you know I am a master of espionage,” Loki huffed. “The best in Asgard.”

“With your invisibility magic, I’m sure,” Tony shrugged. “Maybe I’m asking too much of you. I mean, keeping Steve off the scent and making sure he doesn’t stumble onto any of our party plans probably would be a piece of cake if you had your magic. But without your supernatural abilities… I don’t know.”

“Do not underestimate me, Stark,” Loki hissed lowly.

“I’m surprised that you aren’t using this opportunity to put your skills to work for good,” Tony said, switching tactics a little. “I’m sure it would impress the All-Daddy.”

“I care not for his praise,” Loki said, lifting his nose in the air slightly.

“No, I get it,” Tony smirked. “Why prove Sigyn right, huh? Why show everyone that everything she’s ever said about there being a soft center beneath that hard exterior being right? Making Odin see red is much more important than making your wife happy or giving her a reason to say ‘I told you so’ to all those people who have always doubted her.”

“I know what you are attempting, Stark,” Loki said, annoyed. “You think you can use my wife to manipulate me.”

“Is it working?” Tony grinned.

“I will work with you to deceive your Captain,” Loki said. “Not because I feel my skills need to be honed or in any way that I need to prove to you I have talents beyond my seiðr. I am doing this merely because Midgard is boring me terribly, and I have deciding taking on a small project of this nature might be the right thing to pull me out of the doldrums.”

“Glad to be of service,” Tony saluted.

Loki hardly believed the Captain was the type to become suspicious over anything that wasn’t completely overt, but his beliefs were soon tested when he found the man exiting the quarters he
shared with his wife. Steve Rogers had the look of a man who had been poking around where he shouldn’t belong, and even if it had nothing to do with the planning of the Captain’s Name Day celebrations, Loki was going to get to the bottom of why the man had just exiting a room Loki knew Sigyn to be in alone. Had Steve been able to sweat, he most likely would have broken out in one upon seeing Loki’s glowering form exiting the elevator. It was a good thing they guy had no magic, otherwise Steve was pretty sure he would have been sent flying down sixty-odd floors and into Stark’s basement garage.

“Why, good Captain,” Loki said, trying to keep his voice even, “what brings you to my humble quarters?”

“A book,” Steve managed out, really wishing he had taken Natasha up on that offer to sharpen up his covert ops skills. He hoped he could stall for time. Sigyn still had to hide all of the decorations they had been working on.


“Kites,” Steve said, regaining his composure. “Sigyn and I were talking about things we did as kids the other day, and she was telling me about the kites she had growing up.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “The Vanir are known for their kites.”

“Very colorful,” Steve nodded. “And much different shapes than the one’s I’m used to. All those colorful birds and fish and butterflies…”

“I was always partial to the dragons myself,” Loki mused.

“I really like all the odd shaped ones,” Steve nodded. “You know… with all those neat patterns and colors. They seem pretty difficult to make, though.”

“They are,” Loki nodded.

“Well, I should be going,” Steve said. He attempted to pass Loki only to have his arm grabbed by the god-like strength the princeling still possessed.

“Speaking of your book on kites,” Loki said, glaring into Steve’s eyes, “where is it?” Steve looked down and briefly panicked as the door opened.

“Captain Rogers,” Sigyn said, poking his head out. “You left the book on the table. Thank you for helping me fetch those bowls from the top shelf, by the way.” Sigyn handed the book off to Steve and then looked at her husband with a sly smirk. “My usual fetcher of high things was unavailable.”

“It was no problem, ma’am,” Steve nodded before heading to the elevator at a much faster than normal pace.

“Do you have to be so cruel?” Sigyn asked her husband as the elevator closed around Steve. “The poor thing spent half the time he was in here staring at his feet and blushing. I think it takes him a while to warm up to women.”

“So long as he doesn’t warm up to you too much,” Loki snorted before throwing an arm around his wife. “He might not like the results.”

“Please,” Sigyn snorted. “When have I ever gone for the tall, blond and righteous type.”
Steve knew that Loki was up to something. After his morning marathon, Steve had gotten a bottle of water and some fruit and was sitting in front of the TV in the communal area to catch up the news and the scores from the baseball games he hadn’t kept up with the previous night. What he didn’t expect was for Loki to come lurking into the room, walking almost up against the wall as if he was trying to remain stealthy and unseen in one of the most brightly lit rooms in the tower. The fact that Loki was acting extra creepy wasn’t the only thing setting off alarm bells in Steve’s head.

The guy was never willingly up this early on a non-work day, and he definitely didn’t spend his time poking about the common areas as if he was looking for something. Loki never lurked around places he might find the other Avengers if he could avoid it, and he most certainly never sought any of them out unless he wanted something. Steve also knew that Loki thought all of the humans in the Tower mentally below him, a fact that incensed Tony Stark. Steve, however, knew that sometimes it was best to let your enemy play on what they thought was your weakness, allowing them to think they had the upper hand until you could get what you want.

“Everything alright?” Steve asked as Loki sidled up behind the couch Steve was sprawled out on.

“Yes,” Loki said, internally cursing Stark and his disembodied manservant.

Why couldn’t the two of them find what they were looking for in the Captain’s quarters while the man was out on his morning constitutional? No, instead they had sent Loki to distract the man in question while they found their aim. The prince of lies hardly understood why Stark thought this “little black book” so essential to their Name Day plotting. While Loki thought it mildly entertaining that Stark seemed to think the Captain kept some sort of grimoire, he doubted very much that a journal or any other record of the Captain’s keeping would help their endeavors. When Stark tried to explain the little black book was actually a record of names and addresses of the Captain’s friends, Loki was certain the Captain was a fool. No one in their right mind kept a list of their allies and the best methods of contacting said allies written down where anyone could find it. It was almost as if the Captain wanted his enemies to systematically go through his compatriots, possibly torturing them and whatnot, just so they could get closer to the Captain himself. The man had obviously never received training in protecting himself from outside harm.

“Are you sure everything is alright?” Steve asked after Loki seemed to completely zone out for a good minute.

“I am…” Loki said, not wanting to waste a good lie on such a dull man, “…looking for something…”

“Did you lose something?” Steve asked curiously.

“Sigyn,” Loki said. “Sigyn lost something…”

“What did she lose?” Steve prodded.

“A… pen,” Loki decided finally.

“A pen?” Steve said skeptically.

“A particular pen,” Loki said. “One of her favorites. She was using it up here earlier…”

“Alright,” Steve sighed, about 90 percent sure he was walking into something he was going to regret. “Did she say where she had been using it?”

When Tony arrived in the common room fifteen minutes later, eating an apple, Steve and Loki had overturned all of the cushions on all of the furniture in the room and where presently working to
overturn the large, L-shaped leather sectional around the TV. Tony paused for a moment, taking another bite out of his apple and wondering if he should make his presence known or just watch the two men before him continue to tear the room apart like mad men. He ultimately decided Pepper would be upset if he let anything happened to her furniture.

“Lost something?” Tony asked.

“Sigyn lost a pen,” Steve replied.

“What does it look like?” Tony asked.

“The feather is blue with rather large plumage. The nib is silver,” Loki replied.

“I thought you said she was missing a pen?” Tony frowned.

“You meant a quill pen?” Steve groaned, dropping his end of the sectional with a loud thud. “I thought we were looking for like a fountain pen or something.”

“A what?” Loki asked, confused.

“Like a quill pen but with plastic or metal instead of a feather,” Tony offered.

“I think we would have noticed a feather by now,” Steve frowned. Tony shot a cheerful smirk in Loki’s direction.

“Well, I suppose it isn’t here,” Loki said, glaring back at Tony for taking so long. “I’ll have to tell her it must be somewhere else.” Loki stalked off, stealthily giving Stark a light punch in the arm as the Captain began putting back the pillows on the furniture.

“I really hope you didn’t scratch the floor when you put the sofa back,” Tony said to Steve, leaning up against the wall and continuing to eat his apple as Steve continued to clean up the room. “Pepper will be cheesed.”

Sunday afternoon, things came to a head. Tony needed to ensure that Cap was kept out of the communal living area so the Stark Industries party planners could take the appropriate measurements for decor as well as find ideal places for things like the giant ice sculpture of a bald eagle and chocolate fountain Tony had ordered for the evening. Meanwhile, Sigyn needed to keep her husband out of their quarters so she could put the finishing touches on the present she was giving him. The pair put their heads together and, around two that afternoon, Loki found himself inexplicably standing before the door to the Captain’s room, one of his and Sigyn’s hnefatafl boards tucked under his arm. Steve answered the door warily after JARVIS informed of his visitor, and his curiosity was piqued by what appeared to be a chessboard tucked against Loki’s size.

“Can I help you?” Steve asked as Loki pushed him aside and entered the room with a “harumph.”

“My wife is under the impression that showing friendliness and camaraderie to the other occupants of this Tower would behoove me and help gain a favorable impression with those who have imprisoned me here,” Loki said, strolling into the center of the room and seeming to eye up Steve’s decor. “She seemed to think engaging in some sort of bonding activity would show growth on my part and indicate to others that I can, as Stark so eloquently put it, ‘play well with others.’”

“So… you came here?” Steve said, trying to figure out Loki’s logic.
“Of all the occupants of the Tower,” Loki said as he began unfolding and setting up the game board, “you and the Widow seem to possess the best skill when it comes to stratagem. Despite the perception many have of me, I am not a fool and I know the Widow’s close relationship with Barton would preclude her from willingly spending time with me, particularly in a setting conducive to developing an acquaintanceship.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, “You are not exactly Nat’s favorite person.”

“Therefore, I was able to quickly deduce that you and your more amicable nature might be more beneficial to me,” Loki said, sitting down before the board as Steve crossed the room toward him. “As you are more affable and also share with me a common interest in developing one’s mental prowess, I thought you a better place to begin my endeavors at developing a rapport.”

“You don’t make friends easy, do you?” Steve said, sitting on the chair across from where Loki had just finished setting up the game. Loki paused, his hand in mid air for a moment.

“No,” Loki admitted, his hand falling to his side. “My whole life, I have only had two friendships to count upon. The first was that with my erstwhile brother and the second is that with my wife. I believe only one of those relationships have withstood the recent fracas I am responsible for.”

Steve looked at Loki for an instant. The man somewhat reminded him of a turtle, using his hardened exterior to protect the extremely sensitive, vulnerable parts of him underneath. Steve thought about assuring Loki that Thor still wanted to be his friend and brother, but he decided those words would be better off coming from Thor himself. Instead, Steve decided to take a different tactic.

“I’ve never made friends very easily,” Steve admitted. “In fact, growing up I only had one really good friend. He looked past everything people said and thought about me, cared about the real guy underneath. Once I got the serum… people wanted to be my friend for the first time. It was a little strange, but eventually I found some people who liked me for who I was, not what I was. I’m still awkward around people a lot of the time, but I guess that’s something that gets better with practice.”

“I suppose,” Loki frowned.

“So,” Steve said, “what is all this?”

“This is a hnefatafl board,” Loki explained. “The smallest version typically used for beginners. The largest ones can get up to nineteen by nineteen squares. The white player attempts to protect their king while the black player attempts to prevent the king from escaping and then capture him. Then we may switch sides.”

“Alright,” Steve said eagerly. “Teach me.”

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“I think this has worked out really well,” Tony said from where he was tinkering with a new suit at his workbench. Sigyn sat across from him, eating grapes out of a bowl. “Steve is so worried your husband has it out for him that he seems to have forgotten he’s even having a birthday in two days.”

“Loki is distracted as well,” Sigyn agreed happily. “He is frightfully concerned that I allowed your Captain to borrow my book on kites and then the dragonoid bestiary for artistic viewing. I received a lecture on how mere mortals most likely do not have the mental capacity to comprehend the wonders of our world and then a rather tasteless and poorly veiled lecture about how our library is an inner sanctum and I shouldn’t be letting people into it all willy-nilly.”

“What did you do?” Tony asked curiously.
“I asked Loki if he thought the Captain and I were sleeping together, which then caused my husband to choke on his own tongue and struggle to make anything but odd, garbled noises for a good ten minutes,” Sigyn shrugged. “I made some of your popped corn while he recovered. When he regained his composure, Loki then demanded to know why I would dare accuse him of accusing me of having an affair.”

“That’s a stretch,” Tony snorted. “Even for me, that’s a stretch.”

“Well, my husband can never allow the perception that he is somehow in the wrong,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “It was quite entertaining to see him trying to backtrack. He’s rather adorable when he’s tongue-tied.”

“I’ll take your word on that,” Tony snorted. “Socket wrench?” Sigyn handed him the tool as he set aside the screwdriver. Apparently, Sigyn’s earlier years in the dwarven forges made her a handy workshop assistant. “So, I take it you’re not bothered by the fact that your husband believes you’re hiding from him and his first thought is extramarital affair not surprise birthday party?”

“Please,” Sigyn chortled. “I am the goddess of fidelity for a reason, Sir Stark. My husband does not think me capable of such machinations. He merely feared that your good Captain, as a result of his inexperience with women, might misconstrue my friendliness as something more. And then, before I could explain gently to the Captain I have no feelings with him other than friendship, Loki would feel it necessary to intervene and most likely try to trap the Captain in some interdimensional realm or turn him into a topiary or make goat noises come out of his mouth whenever he speaks.”

“I take it this has been a problem in the past?” Tony asked, curiously.

“Not long after we were wed and returned to Asgard, there were two young courtiers who I had never even spoken to that each separately decided it was their sworn duty as chivalrous lovers to ‘save’ me from my marriage,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “One attempted to abduct me from a garden and another from the healing rooms. I attempted to put them off, but this only convinced them I was under some sort of enchantment. Before I could approach the All Mother to ask her advice in how to proceed, Loki had stored one of them in a pocket dimension he was also using to breed spiders in for some reason. The other he turned into a topiary in the garden he attempted to abduct me from. It was a good thing Queen Frigga found him before the gardener’s hedge clippers did.”

“Did Loki get in trouble for this?” Tony asked curiously.

“Princes of Asgard are given some leniency,” Sigyn shrugged. “Odin considered Loki’s punishment severe enough to have taught both men a lesson, though the All Father also gave them lectures on accosting female courtiers. They’ve both since married and neither resides at court any longer.”

“So, creepy dude bros exist in other realms,” Tony snorted. “Wait, then who did he make talk like a goat?”

“It was something he liked to do when Thor interrupted him at the dinner table,” Sigyn shrugged. “A trick he learned and modified from Frigga. When Thor and Loki were boys, Frigga did not take kindly to them fighting each other at family mealtimes. She had a special charm that would make them only able to say nice things about each other until she felt they had learned their lesson. Loki would try to work his way around it sometimes, but he usually gave in. Loki eventually learned the charm and worked it around to have Thor make goat noises when he interrupted too frequently.”

“I would almost pay to see that,” Stark snorted. “So, where are the birthday boys?”

“So they would both remain distracted, I sent Loki off to teach the Captain the Asgardian game of
hnefatafl yesterday eve,” Sigyn explained. “It is like your Midgardian chess? Apparently, the Captain caught on to the game and has advanced rapidly to using one of the larger boards. While my husband does not like to be bested, he does enjoy a game with a worthy opponent. They have been in our rooms playing since your party returned from work this afternoon.”

“Are you telling me that Cap and your husband, the wannabe Horned King, are on a playdate?”

Tony snorted.

“They appear to be getting on rather well,” Sigyn nodded.

“Why do I feel a friendship between your hubs and Cap might be dangerous?” Tony asked.

“Because it probably is,” Sigyn shrugged. “They are both rather reckless.”

“Oh well,” Tony sighed. “Pliers?”

Chapter End Notes

Research Note: The Hessians are descended from a Germanic people the Norse called the Chatti or Chitauri, depending on which source you use.
Loki’s Day

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, some uninvited guests crash Loki’s birthday party

Loki awoke on the morning of his one-thousandth and forty-ninth Name Day as if it were any other day. Of course, it wasn’t as if this were a particularly important Name Day. It wasn’t like the day he had turned a thousand or even five hundred. When one lived five thousand years, give or take, Name Days became less important and one only really celebrated every hundred years or so. Every other year, perhaps a small meal with family or drinks with friends were customary. Of course, Loki had always enjoyed being spoilt a bit on his Name Day by both his mother and his wife, even if others sometimes forgot.

As he stumbled into the main rooms of their living quarters, Loki was pleased to see his wife had already prepared and laid out a large breakfast that included many of his favorites. She cheerfully plopped a cup of coffee in his hands, peppering his cheek with kisses as he took the first sip. Loki lowered his cup, stole a quick kiss from his wife, and then allowed her to lead him toward their dining table where she had laid out the various dishes prepared for him. Loki couldn’t help but preen a little as Sigyn escorted him to his seat and began passing him dishes. He did love being spoiled by his sweet little wife. Had they been on Asgard, Loki might have considered returning to bed after his delicious breakfast to spend the day enjoying his even more sumptuous wife, but, alas, it was not to be.

No one else in the Tower or during his daily duties of cleaning up the mess he had wrought in the city wished him a happy Name Day. Of course, Loki hadn’t divulged to anyone that this day was special at all, and, unless Sigyn had done so for him, none of them would have any reason to assume there was something important about it. He wasn’t honestly sure if he wanted to let the others in on the little celebration. Sometimes an evening spent with his wife in solitude was just what he needed to decompress.

Everyone seemed to be mainly focusing on the following day, some kind of national holiday where everyone dressed up and decorated their shops like the Captain’s uniform. The Captain had tried to explain to him and Sigyn the importance of the day - an anniversary of freedom from tyrannical overlords across the sea who the country was now close allies with after a mere two hundred years. Loki supposed Midgardians did not have time to hold grudges, unlike Asgardians. It had been around a thousand years since Asgard’s last major tiff with the Frost Giants and relations with Jotunheim were non-existent. Memories of the Aesir-Vanir Wars some seven thousand years ago still occasionally stirred up drama and skirmishes between the two mostly-friendly nations from time to time.

Loki had not paid much attention to the Captain’s lecture about independence, democratic governance and taxation without representation, though he normally did love a good story about politics, history and mischief like that caused by the group the Captain called the “Sons of Liberty.” Sigyn had asked most of the questions and though her curious nature was delightful to both Loki and Steve Rogers, the rapid nature of her questions seemed to fluster the Captain a bit. Once the Captain
had given up on trying to explain the Revolutionary War, he had left the pair a book that Sigyn had read but Loki had ignored completely. Perhaps he might pick it up later.

The talk on the ground as he worked with the Midgardian crew seemed focused on the holiday ahead. Best Loki could tell, the celebration was marked by grilling meats, swimming and setting off fireworks. It was just the type of thing Thor would enjoy. Loki idly wondered if the Captain enjoyed sharing his Name Day with a national holiday or not, especially it was a holiday that seemed to bring out all of the lummoxes and their varying attempts to drunkenly blow off their limbs with rocketry.

Luckily, the impending holiday prompted the work crew bosses to call the day early to allow themselves and others to get home in a timely manner given the holiday traffic. Loki worked hard not to nod off during the drive home, and upon his arrival in the Tower, willed the elevator to go as quickly as it was able so he could cleanse himself from the day’s work and grime. He was surprised to find Sigyn not excitedly greeting him in their suite upon his arrival back home, but decided she was most likely wrapped up in something in the library and its attached laboratory. Though Sigyn had come to love Midgard’s indoor waterfalls and used them often for cleaning, Loki still required a massive, long and luxurious bath for himself each day.

After thirty minutes, the water was cold and his skin was pruning, so the former Asgardian prince was forced to remove himself and dry off. Walking back into the bedroom, he found a pile of clothing neatly folded on the bed with a note from his wife, directing him to dress in the outfit she had prepared and meet her in the communal kitchen at a pre-ordained time. Realizing he had about fifteen minutes to make the appointment, Loki spent thirteen minutes trying to dry and coif his hair and then another three putting on his clothing and making it presentable. He was five minutes late by the time the elevator opened doors into the darkened communal area. For a moment, Loki smirked to himself believing his wife had gotten so wound up in her clever plans that she missed her own surprise.

That was until the lights flipped on and Loki found himself face-to-face with his wife, the Avengers, Pepper, Happy and the son of Coul, each wishing him a happy Name Day as loud as possible. When he was able to gain some semblance of awareness about what was happening, Loki looked around to find the room decorated in his signature gold and black with a veritable Asgardian feast laid out, a rather impressive green cake depicting an Asgardian dragon at the end. There was also a table with presents, which surprised Loki most of all. He wasn’t sure if Sigyn had gone overboard with her gift giving or if, perhaps and least likely, the others had given him presents for his Name Day.

“Are you surprised, my love?” Sigyn whispered to him before kissing his cheek.

“Yes,” Loki admitted. “You rather pulled the wool over my eyes on this one.”

“Good,” Sigyn grinned, dragging her husband over to point out the dragon cake and the various foods she had prepared for him during the day.

After offering his admiration for the meal and the dragon cake, Loki found himself being congratulated on his birth by the various Avengers, up until a lightning strike hit the Iron Man landing pad on the tower. While the rest of the assembled group seemed concerned - especially when the Tower’s lights briefly dimmed - Loki was incensed. Sigyn looked over at her husband worriedly and gave his hand a comforting squeeze. Loki could tell by the concern and slight annoyance on his wife’s face that she had no part in this. As the rest went out onto the launch pad to see what had hit it, Loki sighed and steeled himself. His Name Day was the one day a year, if any, that Loki felt things should always be all about him, but that had never stopped Thor from showing him up and stealing his thunder before. Honestly, Loki wondered why he wasn’t resigned to it by now.

It wasn’t just Thor who was present on the landing pad, however. Sif and the Warriors Three had
joined him, turning Loki’s grumblings from internal to external. It was just like Thor and his friends to ruin the one day that should have been Loki’s and Loki’s alone. As the group strode in from the landing pad to meet the Avengers, Loki stood back and bitterly watched. Sif and Fandral were both eyeing up the Lady Widow, Fandral for baser purposes and Sif to determine how best she could defeat her fellow female warrior. Volstagg was eyeing up the table of foods while Hogun, who Loki often considered the sole sensible one among Thor’s friends, at least seemed to sense that was both awkward and a little rude that their group had gatecrashed Loki’s party.

“I didn’t invite them,” Sigyn frowned, standing beside her husband.

“You know Thor is a notorious party crasher,” Loki snorted. “It’s just usually he does so on Asgard where everyone feels delighted and honored to have the golden prince randomly appear, eat their food, drink their wine and break their valuables with that violent twirling he seems to think is dancing.”

Instead of responding, Sigyn let out a squeal and ran toward Thor. Loki was miffed only momentarily before he noticed Thor was carrying something. Loki was used to seeing Thor carry his hammer, but Mjolnir was at Thor’s side and the object in his hand was revealed to be a bird cage. Inside were two twittering magpies who Sigyn instantly began chatting with in their bird language, drawing the attention of the Avengers. Thor looked sheepishly toward Loki and, ignoring the greetings from his fellow Avengers, walked forward to clasp his brother’s forearm in an awkward Asgardian handshake. With Thor seemingly lost for words, Loki sighed and decided he was going to have to get the ball rolling.

“I honestly doubt it takes five warriors to deliver two innocent magpies,” Loki snorted.

“Innocent!” Fandral said, offended. “What about that time they tried to use my hair as a nest!”

“Father… Odin asked they be brought to you and Sigyn,” Thor admitted. “They have been causing quite a stir in the rookery since you left…”

“And no one dares bother Odin’s precious ravens,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“They are mischievous as their master,” Thor pointed out. “I’m surprised you left them behind.”

“Skata and Skara were nesting,” Sigyn said defensively, letting the birds out of the cage over Tony’s protests. “It would be cruel to force them to abandon their fledglings who cannot yet defend themselves because we happen to be leaving for Midgard. I thought they would remain comfortable in your mother’s gardens until we returned.”

“I thought we agreed no animals in the tower,” Tony pointed out.

“You said no wild animals,” Sigyn pointed out. “I assure you, these birds are quite tame.”

“Tame by the standards of who trained them, maybe,” Sif snorted.

“You trained birds?” Clint asked Loki, impressed.

“A gift for my wife,” Loki said airly. “Raised Skata from a hatchling after his parents and siblings were killed. Sigyn found Skara in the woods as a young juvenile with a broken wing. They were both unable to dwell in the wild, but through training and a bit of magic, they are good pets. They are also useful for making deliveries…”
“And causing mischief,” Thor muttered.

“Like carrier pigeons,” Steve nodded.

“Oh no,” Tony frowned. “No one’s told him they’re extinct, have they?”

“Passenger pigeons, Tony,” Clint rolled his eyes. “Passenger pigeons are extinct.”

“Passenger pigeons were extinct before I was born, Tony,” Steve nodded.

“Sorry I’m not the resident bird expert,” Tony groaned before a lightbulb seemed to go off over his head. “Wait, you guys use birds to deliver messages in Asgard? Like the owls in *Harry Potter*?”

“Why would you send an owl to deliver a message?” Loki snorted. “They take forever because they are easily distracted. They’re also terribly full of themselves and awful gossips. An owl will tell anyone the contents of a private message.”

“Most prefer ravens,” Thor nodded.

“Only because the Allfather prefers ravens,” Loki snorted.

“Hawks and eagles are rather reliable,” Sif continued. “Especially in times of conflict.”

“Hawks reliable?” Natasha scoffed as Clint began tweeting at the birds along with Sigyn. “I doubt that.”

“So, I’m guessing magpies are a unique delivery system?” Tony asked.

“Extremely,” Volstagg smirked.

“They are mainly used to deliver things between my brother and his wife,” Thor grinned.

“Is there a story there?” Tony asked.

“Later, perhaps,” Sigyn said before turning on her brother-in-law. “What are you doing uninvited? Certainly you know this is Loki’s Name Day. I do not appreciate having five unaccounted for guests with large appetites. There will hardly be enough food now and you have delayed my plans for the evening by a good fifteen minutes!”

Thor and his compatriots seemed to look ashamed, focusing on the floor or other parts of the room while Sigyn expectantly tapped her foot, demanding an explanation. Loki had to smile in spite of himself. Despite the fact she had flowers woven in her hair, was donning an airy light blue dress and had a magpie perched on each shoulder, Sigyn looked rather indomitable and almost ready to rain fire down upon those who opposed her. Loki could feel his heart skip a beat at the sight of her.

“Mother sent us,” Thor finally admitted. “She wanted Loki to know he wasn’t forgotten by us on his Name Day, but she couldn’t come herself. Matters of state.”

“And I’m guessing the Allfather’s idea of the perfect Name Day present is to give me back my own birds,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I’m surprised the Allmother thought the five of you were the best bringers of felicitations,” Sigyn snorted, “given past events?”

“We wanted to come,” Fandral spoke up, gesturing between himself, Sif and his fellow warriors. “Thor was the one they were trying to get rid of.”
“What did you do, big guy?” Tony asked, with a laugh.

“The Jotun delegation came to visit… peace talks after the recent… troubles,” Thor winced. “The All Father thought it best if… I was not present.”

“And how long are you not to be present for?” Loki inquired, annoyed.

“The rest of the moon cycle?” Thor winced again.

“Fantastic,” Loki huffed. “For my Name Day I receive my own birds and an ungrateful brother at risk of causing an inter-realm incident.” Despite Loki’s furor, Thor grinned. Loki had called him his brother. “And how long will Sir Stark have to put up with your entourage?”

“Just for the night,” Sif said, attempting to smooth things over.

“Ah, I’m sure they can stay a couple days,” Tony said, “We’ve got a national holiday tomorrow. I’m sure you guys would like to help us celebrate.”

“Will there be food?” Volstagg asked.

“And women?” Fandral grinned.

“Sure,” Tony said. “And, Siggy Stardust, I’m going to order a couple dozen pizzas so our Asgardian friends don’t hog all of your delicious reindeer meat and smoked fish.”

“Fine,” Sigyn frowned. “You might want to order many with meat toppings.”

“Can do, Madame Mischief,” Tony saluted before convening with Pepper and Happy to help save the evening from their Asgardian intruders.

“We didn’t come empty handed,” Sif insisted to Sigyn. She reached into her bag and brought several parcels. “The Allmother and your sisters have written letters to both you and Loki. She does hope that the arrival of Skata and Skara means she will get some responses.”

“Of course,” Sigyn smiled, taking the bound letters and then dividing them between hers and her husbands. Sif then turned to the Name Day boy himself.

“Your mother also sent you this for your Name Day,” Sif said, producing a rather large tome from her seemingly bottomless bag. “The Allmother said you had been looking for a copy?”

“A Thousand Years Amongst the Snows by Aasmund Olavsson,” Loki nodded. “Yes. I will have to thank her.”

“I also brought a gift,” Thor announced.

“Gifts later!” Sigyn said to her brother-in-law, annoyed. “I have plans and we are going to follow them!”

“As you wish, my lykyng,” Loki grinned, kissing his wife’s hands. The magpies squawked in approval.

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Sigyn, as it turned out, had a very strict party schedule and was not keen on having to reorganize some of it while they waited on the pizza order to feed the rogue Asgardian visitors. So, Sigyn moved the group on to the party activities. Clint won the game of pin-the-tail on the horse, his
accuracy seeming to work even when blindfolded. Natasha came in a close second. Volstagg inadvertently pinned a tail onto Thor and Fandral attempted to pin his tail in Natasha’s chest area, only to find himself tossed across the room and nearly through one of the tower windows, much to Loki’s delight. Sigyn then made them move on to the kite decorating portion of the evening.

It was as this party activity was laid out that Loki realized the Captain must have had a hand in his party planning. While Sif helped Sigyn distribute supplies, Thor and his friends initially joked around about kite decorating as Vanir children’s activity. However, a look from the Captain silenced the male Asgardians and made them look a bit shamefaced. The pizza arrived amid the kite decoration, but most of the party goers continued their work until it was finished. Steve’s was hands-down the most artistic of the bunch with various ribbons and ties. Tony opted to just print off a picture of his face and overlay it on the kite while Natasha just drew black markers over hers. Clint decorated his with various large bird stickers Sigyn had acquired for the event and Bruce did the same to his with stickers of flowers he put on a background designed to look like a lawn. While Sigyn, Loki and Coulson worked to cover their kites with glitter, the Asgardian contingent seemed to design kites similar to heraldic shields, Thor’s with a large hammer and lightning bolt on it.

It was surprising to see Thor and his Asgardian guests completely ignore their native food and drink for the pizzas Tony had provided. Thor and Volstagg quickly demolished five pizzas each and showed no sign of slowing down. Fandral attempted to flirt with Pepper, only for Thor to subtly inform him she was the key-keeper and hearth-tender of their host. Sheepishly, Fandral returned to his ham and pineapple pizza - the only person in the room who seemed to enjoy such a creation. Hogun stuck to cheese pizza but also took a hearty helping of the fish dishes Sigyn had prepared. Sif took equal amounts of the meat pizzas and the vegetable pizzas Tony always ordered for Sigyn. The rest of the group divided their plates up equally with both Asgardian foods and pizza, save for Loki who piled his plates and bowls up with all of his favorite foods from home Sigyn had made for him.

Loki poked around at his braised lamb while Sif gave Sigyn all of the latest gossip from Vanaheim. Sif and Sigyn had become fast friends since Thor had started bringing her around with him. Despite their contrast in looks and the fact that many considered Sif a warrioress and Sigyn a homemaker, the two had much in common. Sif was full-blooded Vanir while Sigyn was half. They both had several siblings and were the youngest in their respective families. Both had been fostered out young, Sigyn to the queen and Sif to an Asgardian noblewoman in the hopes she would find a good match among the men of the Asgardian court. Both had defied expectations set before them - Sif by taking up the blade and Sigyn by inextricably linking herself to Loki. Both were also easily underestimated by most of those around them. While it was good for Sigyn to have friends and allies she could trust, Loki couldn’t help but feel a little neglected by his wife.

“Your grandfather, King Njörðr, is putting more pressure on your cousin, Prince Fjölnir, to wed,” Sif continued in her gossip. “Thinks it will help him mature.”


“So far, the Gudmardottirs seem to be the top contenders,” Sif replied.


“Who are these people?” Tony asked curiously.

“They are Thor’s former lovers,” Loki announced boldly, causing the room to fall silent of its chatter and his former older brother to turn as red as the Iron Man suit. Even the Captain, Clint, Natasha and Bruce who had been happily listening to Coulson talk about the happenings at SHIELD fell
silent and looked down the table to listen.

“Sisters, dude?” Tony said, extending his hand to Thor for a high-five. “Good job!”

“Not at the same time,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “Though he should have known better after things ended with Lorelei to welcome Amora into his arms.”

“Amora’s as mean as a viper,” Volstagg nodded.

“And twice as jealous,” Sif nodded. “It’s a wonder she sought him out after her sister did. But then again, the two of them have always had the strangest sisterly relationship I’ve ever seen.”

“Ah, but both sisters are quite lovely,” Fandral said dreamily, causing Thor to blush even harder. “And tales of their prowess are hardly exaggerated.”

“As if you would know,” Loki snorted. “I believe they knocked you over the head with a rock and then left you to rot in that cave with only mere visions of their carnal trickery to enjoy.”

“As if you don’t appreciate such tricks,” Fandral shot back.

“I appreciate the ability to use your oafishness against you,” Loki rolled his eyes. “However, I do not appreciate sorceresses like Amora who turn me into trees or, paralyze me, or ones like Lorelei attempt to use their powers of speech to remove my agency.”

“So… I’m seeing why you broke up with them,” Clint said to Thor.

“Oh no,” Loki snorted. “Amora, as you so eloquently put it, ‘broke up’ with Thor. Lorelei, too. Apparently, both sisters found him boring.”

“And also unwilling to let them into the Asgardian treasury,” Sif pointed out.

“It was three hundred years ago,” Thor rolled his eyes, “and I am apparently the only one here who has gotten over it.”

“I wonder, does your beloved Doctor Foster know there is a rampaging Asgardian sorceress with a wicked sister as a sidekick who would gladly take any opportunity to bring you to your knees?” Loki asked Thor. “It might be wise to inform her. Forewarned is forearmed, after all.”

“Loki, you know as well as everyone that both Amora and Lorelei are in that prison in Niðavellir for attempting to steal those gems from the Royal Treasury,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. She turned back to Sif. “And have you news of my other cousins?”

“Yngvi is finishing up his students at the astronomical university and is hoping to get work at the chancery,” Sif continued. “Sveigðir is with his father asea.”

“My uncle is no doubt avoiding having to deal with his eldest,” Sigyn snorted. “It’s a very Vanir solution, I suppose. When things on land get rough, take to the seas.”

“So… these guys…” Tony attempted to clarify. “Folgers, Ingi and Sven…”


“Right,” Tony frowned. “Are the sons of your uncle… the one with the magic folding ship Loki told me about?”

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded.
“And he’s… the prince of Vanaheim?” Tony continued.


“Your mother’s brother,” Tony said.

“Her younger brother,” Sigyn nodded.

“How close in age are these guys to you?” Tony asked.

“Fjölnir and Thor are around the same age,” Sigyn began.

“And have around the same amount of intelligence and restraint,” Loki snorted.

“Sveigðir is somewhere in between Loki and myself,” Sigyn continued. “Yngvi isn’t even six hundred yet.”

“So… young…ish?” Tony frowned.

“Enough talk of Vanir cousins,” Loki rolled his eyes. “We’ll be here all day.”

“Yes!” Sigyn jumped up excitedly. “It is time for cake!”

The Asgardians seemed more in awe of the dragon cake than the Midgardians. While there was no Asgardian Name Day song, Tony attempted to teach the visitors the words to “Happy Birthday to You.” Steve seemed bemused that a random song from a popular 1933 musical was now so ubiquitous, but the harder topic not to laugh at was the off-key and garbled way in which Thor and his friends attempted to perform it. When that was finished, Loki dubiously blew out his candles and made a wish as Sigyn instructed - despite Loki’s belief that this Midgardian attempt at magic was utterly ridiculous. Thor and Hogun both looked like they might cry when the beautiful dragon cake was cut into, but Sigyn had a feeling Volstagg would really sob if the pieces weren’t quickly distributed. Cake and ice cream consumed, Sigyn now directed everyone to present her husband with gifts.

Loki was actually surprised to find that the Avengers had brought him gifts. Steve had gotten him a chess set with pieces modeled on the Isle of Lewis pieces while Bruce had gifted him a chest of various sample teas from around the world. Clint and Natasha had gone in on a gift together, presenting Loki with a magic kit and accompanying instructional DVD. Instead of being offended, Loki actually seemed tickled at this chance to study Midgardian “magic.” Tony had unwittingly attempted to carry on the magic theme by giving Loki a hand buzzer and Magic 8 Ball, but Pepper had shored up the couple’s presents with a wide variety of books on Earth history and culture. Coulson had brought a gift of Norse mythology-themed playing cards as well as a book on Norse mythology he said was a gift from Fury. Inside, Fury had scribbled “I’m watching you” on the dedication page of the book.

Once all of the Midgardians had handed over their gifts, it was the Asgardians’ turn. Hogun, Fandral, and Volstagg had gone in together on a new sharpening and polishing set for Loki’s throwing knives. Thor then beckoned to Sif who produced a gift box out of her bag. It was larger than the average jewelry box, covered in gold with intricately carved symbols and runes all over it. Tony noted several of the symbols carved onto the box were similar to the ones Loki and Sigyn both wore on their armor. Loki used the attached golden key on a green ribbon to unlock it, unveiling the green velvet-lined interior of the box. Loki seemed a bit confused about the gift.

“It apparently has secret compartments?” Thor said nervously. “I couldn’t figure out how to open them, but Knut the Silversmith made it, and I know you are familiar with his work.”
“He is very skilled,” Loki agreed. He closed the box and considered his adoptive brother for a moment. “Thank you Thor.”

“My gift last!” Sigyn said excitedly, barely able to contain herself.

She burst forward with what seemed to be a rather large blanket. Instead, Loki unfolded it gently to unveil a beautiful embroidered green cloak with gold trim. Sigyn had used a Vanir fabric, popular because it was lightweight but always seemed to feel thick and warming on cold nights. Sigyn had also attached a gold brooch with inscribed runes on it to help keep the cloak pinned together.

“Sir Bruce helped me find someone to carve the brooch,” Sigyn announced. “I purchased it while still on Asgard, but the engravings were done here.”

“I only thought it was fair after the Other Guy turned your old cloak into a toga,” Bruce blushed.

“It is a fine cloak,” Loki said to his wife happily, standing up and giving her a kiss that sent Fandral and Volstagg hooting. Loki continued kissing his wife, extending a hand gesture toward his brother’s hooting friends the Midgardians realized must be the Asgardian version of flipping them off.

“All right, break it up,” Tony called after Loki had kissed his wife for an uncomfortably long amount of time. “I was promised party favors!” Sigyn broke apart from her husband, squealed and then ran over to the bags left behind on the present table. Bid by her waving hands, the two magpies flew over and began picking up the tiny party bags by their handles and then flying them to the various party guests.

“Party favors?” Thor asked Loki, confused. Loki shrugged.

“It’s a tradition,” Tony explained to them. “You know, giving your guests a gift as thanks for coming. Or, in the case of my childhood, a bribe for showing up to the birthday party of the weird kid who was four years younger than everyone in the class and whose dad just happened to be a zillionaire.”

“These are most excellent!” Fandral announced, blowing bubbles from his golden tuble.

“Such color!” Hogun agreed, turning around a kaleidoscope against his eyes.

Within fifteen minutes, Clint and the Asgardians had managed to cover the entire communal area with glitter from their party poppers while Natasha was instructing Steve and Bruce on making crowns with their glow wands. The Asgardians were delighted with the noisemakers, save for Thor who was pouting on the sofa. He had gotten his hands stuck in one of the toy finger traps and then, in frustration, had ripped the trap in half attempting to open it. Saddened to have broken the new toy, he didn’t seem to notice that DUM-E had gotten ahold of some of the bubbles and was blowing them directly into Thor’s head. Loki smirked and then turned back to watching Sigyn dance around with the pinwheels from her bag.

All in all, Loki had to admit it hadn’t been a terrible Name Day. He had acquired some rather useful and even pleasurable gifts, gotten to eat all of his favorite foods, and see Thor act oafishly in public. The fact that Sigyn had put her heart into planning the entire event for him was also pleasing and perhaps the best thing about the day. Having put all of his gifts away or aside for later, Loki returned to the living area where Sigyn was positioning the cage for their magpies and making sure everything for the two birds was comfortable. Once they were properly situated, the two birds nestled down, Skata tucking his wing over his mate protectively. Sigyn then turned back to her grinning husband as
he leaned against the doorframe to their bedroom.

“Were you pleased with your celebration, my love?” Sigyn asked hopefully.

“Of course,” Loki said, extending his hands for Sigyn to take so he could pull her closer toward him.
“You were very resourceful in hiding your plans from me. And I did thank the Captain for helping you with things. He is perhaps not as odious as I initially thought.”

“I believe he thinks the same of you,” Sigyn smirked.

“Well, tomorrow evening might change that,” Loki snorted. “I don’t know if he will be as keen on surprise Name Day celebrations as I am. Clever of you and Sir Stark, distracting us that way.”

“I learned from the best,” Sigyn grinned. Loki smirked himself and kissed her. When he pulled back, Sigyn seemed a bit worried. “You are not upset about Thor and his friends arrival, are you? I promise, I had no notion…”

“No, this has the Allfather written all over it,” Loki snorted. “I find it hard to believe he would want his precious firstborn off realm for anything, and I am sure somehow Thor’s presence here will become my fault somehow. Best not to dwell on things.”

“At least he remembered your Name Day and brought you a gift,” Sigyn pointed out.

“I suppose,” Loki shrugged. “However, I am not sure I find Thor’s efforts to repair our relationship are entirely sincere. It seems that Thor is doing this more to assuage his own guilt than to actually make peace. And I am tired of giving in to make others feel better. His warrior friends have always been that - his - and I do not think I will settle for second best any longer.”

“I have never thought of you as second best,” Sigyn pointed out.

“And that is one of the many reasons why you are my favorite,” Loki smirked.

“I hope I’m your favorite,” Sigyn replied. “I would be very cross if I weren’t.”

“Ahh, we wouldn’t want that,” Loki replied, slightly pulling Sigyn along with him as he walked backward toward the bedroom. “Now, how about we finish this evening the right way, hmm?”
Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, Asgardians get a crash course in American history and Steve tries to come to terms with his birthday.*

Loki had thought, it being a Midgardian holiday and all, that he would have a chance to sleep in. Being forced to wake up with the sun and then head off to work was far from how the princeling usually spent his time in Asgard. Up until the fiasco with Thor and Jotunheim, his schedule had pretty much consisted of waking around noon, eating a fine breakfast and lunch combo, doing princely duties or accompanying Thor on some badly planned outing in the afternoon, bathing and dressing for the evening meal, eating the evening meal and then reading or working on his myriad projects until it was very late at night and a sleepy Sigyn came to drag him back to bed. While Loki had hardly been on anything akin to a regular sleep schedule during his time with the Mad Titan, he wasn’t adjusting well to the Midgardian schedule of rising early, going to bed early and doing physical labor in between.

So, when Loki heard Sigyn banging around the bathroom as she readied herself for the day, he clutched his own pillow tighter and then threw hers over his head, hoping he could drown out the noise enough to get back to sleep. However, he realized that his attempts to continue sleeping were futile when he felt something tickling his left foot, which had been sticking out of the sheets. He instinctively drew his foot away from the source of the tickling, tucking it back into the sheets and forcibly pushing Sigyn’s pillow down further over his head. At least if he smothered himself it would be akin to sleeping. Despite this, his wife was determined to wake him and pounced on her husband, sending the pillow flying from his face and across the room as the weight of her landing on his stomach made him emit a loud “ooof.”

“Awaken, husband!” Sigyn called happily. “We have much to do!”

“I have much sleeping to be done,” Loki grumbled, attempting to hide his head under his remaining pillow.

“You must rouse yourself,” Sigyn gruffed, shoving on him, “before I am forced to do it for you!”

“I have something you can rouse,” Loki said, smirking into the pillow as he jostled his hips. The movement nearly made Sigyn topple over from where she was sitting on him.

“Alright,” Sigyn sighed, deciding to play her trump card, “I suppose it won’t be too terrible if Thor and Volstagg have eaten all of the bacon before we even arrive for breakfast.”

Like a shot, Loki was out of bed, dressed and dragging Sigyn out of their rooms toward the elevator. While her husband wasn’t a morning person, Sigyn knew there were two things she could usually count on to make him motivated: breakfast foods and the possibility of trickery to be committed. Sigyn was sure the possibility of sexual delights could be the third thing added to that list, but she had vowed to never use that as a weapon in her marriage - despite her fairweather mother’s insistence that sexual talents were the most powerful weapon in a woman’s arsenal. Besides, Sigyn was certain such suggestions would only give her husband more reason to seek out their bed rather than motivate him to leave it.
When they arrived in the communal dining area, Pepper was plating a brand new batch of bacon. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, muffins, sausage, and fruits were also available. Pepper had obviously been making Cap’s favorite foods as a way to start off the celebrations of his birthday. The Captain was already there, digging into his breakfast after being assured by Pepper several times he didn’t need to help. Natasha was also at the table, seeming to spend more time using a combat knife to slice up fruit than she actually spent eating. Lady Sif was also present and was querying Natasha about her preferred training methods. The two women actually seemed to be having a nice conversation. However, Tony, who was sitting across the table from them, seemed positively green following their discussion on disemboweling techniques. Cap was apparently too engrossed with the maze on the back of the Cheerios box to have heard anything.

“Good morn!” Sigyn called to everyone excitedly as Loki swooped over to the counter and began piling his plate up with sausage and bacon. “Lady Pepper, do you require assistance? I could take over so you might eat as well…”

“Thank you, but I already had a breakfast smoothie, some grapefruit and toast after yoga this morning,” Pepper smiled. “Though once you’ve eaten I might take you up on that offer. I’m guessing Thor and his buddies eat a lot.”

Loki made some kind of remark, but it was hard to make out with his mouth full of bacon. He took a seat next to Tony, leaving the one between himself and the Captain vacant.

“Happy Name Day, Captain,” Sigyn said as she began gathering her own breakfast of pancakes, fruit and whipped cream.

“Thank you,” Steve replied, blushing a little. Sigyn magically sent her plate to the table before focusing on making coffee for herself and her husband. When she laid his mug down, Loki lifted it up in thanks, his mouth still full of bacon.

“Morning,” Bruce said sleepily, stopping to curtail a yawn. “Happy birthday, Steve.”

“Thanks,” Steve blushed. Bruce gave him an awkward smile before thanking Pepper as he began loading up his plate.

“Hey, I think I figured out what’s wrong with the electroactive polymers, but I’d like you to give it a second look before I try to put it into practice because when I do math at three-thirty in the morning it has a fifty percent chance of being brilliant and a fifty percent chance of catching on fire,” Tony said as Bruce took a seat.

“And a twenty-five percent chance of it being brilliant and on fire, I’m guessing,” Pepper snorted from the stove.

“Hey!” Tony said, annoyed. “Sometimes things need to be on fire.” Pepper rolled her eyes.

“Good morn, all!” Fandral grinned, sending winks around to the ladies of the room, each of whom shut him down with a glare. Hogun fell in silently behind him, trying his best to keep his face from showing any hint of amusement at Fandral being shot down. The entire situation was sort of Fandral’s worst nightmare: being around a group of women who were either taken or completely uninterested in him.

“Morning,” Pepper greeted them warmly. “Just serve yourselves up.”

“I am surprised Volstagg is late to breakfast,” Loki snorted in between bites of bacon.

“We thought it best to come up here before he or Thor awoke,” Fandral replied. “Better chance of
The pair had settled into seats across from Sigyn and Loki when the door burst open and Thor thundered into the room with Volstagg on his tail.

“Happy Name Day, Friend Steven!” Thor bellowed. “And many felicitations on the mighty conception of your nation-state!”

“Thor, I you’re going to have to update that Allspeak charm,” Clint mentioned as he jettisoned himself out of the ceiling and in front of Thor and Volstagg in the breakfast serving line. “Not all of those phrases have the same connotation as they did back in the 900s.”

“The last thing we need is them speaking in modern-day slang,” Bruce pointed out.

“Or do we?” Tony grinned, wiggling his eyebrows.

“No,” Pepper said, waving a spatula at him.

“But…” Tony began.

“You just got the same look on your face the Grinch gets when he comes up with the idea to steal Christmas,” Pepper shook her head. “I’m shutting it down.”

“Thanks, Thor,” Steve said awkwardly.

“Big plans for the day?” Clint asked, pouring the entire carafe of coffee into a cup and then starting to make a second one.

“Well, we could make it down to the hot dog eating contest on Coney Island if we wanted,” Tony said, causing Volstagg’s eyebrows to shoot up.

“Eating contest?” Volstagg said happily.

“Sorry, man, but I think it’s Midgardians only,” Tony said.

“Did you guys know the reigning female champion is called the Black Widow?” Clint grinned.

“For the last time, Clint, stop trying to get everyone to believe that’s me,” Natasha rolled her eyes. “And also stop hacking into my SHIELD file and putting ‘eating forty hot dogs in under ten minutes’ in my special skills section!”

“Why? You’ve never proven that to be untrue,” Clint shrugged.

“I just think I’m going to go down to the cemetery…” Steve began.


“What’s wrong with it?” Steve challenged.

“The city does fireworks over the bridge,” Tony said. “People start lining up and getting their seats pretty early. And boats in the East River… traffic will be a nightmare. And of course, since it’s a holiday, there will definitely be a major subway route shut down for maintenance and possibly a cab driver union strike.”

“Is this how all Midgardian holidays are celebrated?” Sif asked curiously. “With explosives and blocked travel routes?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Tony admitted.
“We also swam and had roasted foods on the Day of Memories,” Sigyn informed Sif happily.

“What is this meat? It is delicious!” Volstagg said of his bacon before pouring half the bottle of syrup over his pancakes.

“I...uh… have some stuff to do in my room,” Steve said, getting up and hustling out of the room over the clatter of Asgardians dishing up. Finishing her breakfast, Sigyn used her seiðr to clean her plates and then help Pepper with the additional cooking needed to sustain the Asgardians.

“What’s eating, Cap?” Tony frowned.

“If you mean to ask what is bothering him,” Loki snorted, “I think it is rather clear.”

“Really?” Tony snorted.

“Not everyone is keen on their Name Days,” Loki shrugged.

“It is the first birthday Steve’s had since 1944,” Natasha pointed out.

“Yeah, and most of his friends and family are dead or in old folks homes spread across the planet,” Clint pointed out. “Dude probably doesn’t feel like he has much to celebrate.”

“But we’re throwing him an epic bash!” Tony protested.

“Did you ever stop to consider that maybe he isn’t ready for that?” Natasha pointed out.

“Well, I mean, it’s low-key,” Tony insisted. “It’s a low-key epic bash.”

“You never do anything low-key,” Pepper pointed out as she flipped over another set of pancakes on the griddle.

“Perhaps someone should talk to him,” Bruce suggested.

“Good idea, Doctor Bruce,” Tony nodded, slapping him on the back.

“You know I’m not that kind of doctor,” Bruce rolled his eyes.

“Well, then, Clint?” Tony asked.

“Do I get cheesy 80s synthesizer music while I do it?” Clint asked hopefully.

“Clint is no longer permitted to give heart-to-hearts without the express permission of Director Fury,” Natasha replied. “There was an incident.”

“Hey, it was one of my heart-to-hearts that got you to defect from Russia!” Clint pointed out.

“Please,” Natasha said airily. “As if I ever can be convinced to do something other than what I already want.”

“You know who has actually built a rapport with Cap…” Banner mentioned. Loki looked up to find all of the Avengers, save Thor, looking to him.

“Truly?” Thor said, in surprise. “Much has happened since my departure! How came this to be?”

“Unlike some people,” Loki hissed, “the Captain does not flip over the board and accuse his opponent of cheating every time he loses at hnefatafl.”
“You always win! You must be cheating somehow!” Thor thundered.

“Thor, did you ever perhaps consider that you might just be terrible at hnefatafl,” Sigyn mentioned off-handedly, mixing up another bowl of pancake batter, “and that you most likely won’t get any better if you refuse to be a good sport about the game. It is hard for one to improve their skills at hnefatafl when no one will play them for fear of being threatened and physically accosted for winning.”

“Is that why none of you will play me?” Thor asked, shocked. Fandral, Hogun and Sif suddenly became as interested in their meals as Volstagg had been all along.

“As entertaining as Thor’s absolutely shocking revelation has been,” Loki snorted sardonically as he stood from the table, “I would much rather set myself aflame, receive a gastrointestinal virus, or yes, speak to the Captain about his feelings before continuing on with this discussion.” He stalked forth from the room, wondering why Sigyn couldn’t have let them have a private breakfast.

Steve felt guilty.

Well, more so than usual. His Catholic upbringing had installed a slight smidge of guilt for something unknown in the back of his head his entire life. There was also the constant presence of his guilt over not being able to save Bucky and the associated guilt that brought him. It was more than knowing he hadn’t saved Bucky’s life and all that would have come to pass with it. He had also felt guilty that Mrs. Barnes and Becky were robbed of Bucky as well, that the women he had respectively regarded as a second mother and a little sister had also lost someone they held dear. Then, a whole new set of guilt arrived upon his reawakening.

He was guilty that he had been given a second chance that so many others he felt were more deserving had not been. He was guilty that he had made those closest to him go on fighting without his aid. He was guilty that they had all grown old, many of them dying, believing he had died a self-sacrificing hero. He was guilty that they felt guilty that more hadn’t been done to save him. He was guilty that he would never be able to apologize to so many of those who had gone on fighting in his name, risking themselves and their loved one for this idealized concept of what Steve Rogers would have done. He was guilty for all the promises he had failed to keep to Bucky, his mother, Peggy, and himself.

And now there was a new thing to add to his list of things that made him feel guilty. Steve’s new friends wanted to help him celebrate his birthday, but Steve didn’t much feel like celebrating himself. He was feeling too guilty and self-pitying to treat the day of his birth as if it were something worth celebrating, and the fact that his friends would probably be put out by that made him feel more guilty. It was a swirling vortex of guilt and regret. Steve had only ever counted on his mother, Bucky, and Peggy to make him snap out of those spirals, and none of them were here to do so.

Hearing a knock on his door, Steve bade the person on the other side enter. While he wasn’t exactly in the best mood for company, he was a bit curious as to who had drawn the short straw to come see him and what had him in a funk. He expected Tony or Pepper. Maybe Natasha. Seeing Loki on the other side of the door was a genuine surprise he hadn’t counted on. Sure, he and Loki had gotten to know each other recently, and Cap had to admit he admired Loki’s zeal for knowledge and quick wit - albeit he found it a bit more brash and impolite than necessary in some occasions. Still, Loki wasn’t exactly the type of person you pegged for being good at heart-to-hearts.

“I suppose you have already deduced why I have been sent here,” Loki said, casually leaning up against the door frame.
“Everyone’s worried about me because I’m not exactly thrilled about my birthday,” Steve nodded.

“Name Days can be odious, particularly the more of them one has,” Loki nodded. “Unfortunately, celebrating them doesn’t always get easier the older you are.”

“My last birthday was spent in a trench in Europe,” Steve admitted. “And none of the people I celebrated it with are here to celebrate with anymore. Well, Peggy’s in England, but I’m not ready to head down that road just yet. And I know everyone wants to help me celebrate, but that kind of just makes me feel more guilty about the whole thing. I mean, one day I’m four months from turning twenty-five and now I’m staring down the barrel of ninety-four? All in the span of what feels like two months.”

“I understand there is a Midgardian adage about the flight of time,” Loki said.

“I guess, when it comes down to it,” Steve sighed, “I just don’t feel like celebrating myself.”

“What an awful concept,” Loki said, finally sweeping into the room.

“Yeah, well,” Steve frowned. “It’s how I feel.”

“You know, I am one of the most clever people I know,” Loki mentioned, drawing a sarcastic glare from Steve. “I am usually the smartest person in any room I occupy. Save for when Sigyn is around. I have come to accept over the years that my wife has a wisdom beyond mine, even if I don’t always agree with her.”

“Are you trying to make some kind of point?” Steve asked curiously.

“Once, when I was in a mood similar to yours and did not wish to celebrate my Name Day, Sigyn said something rather poignant to me,” Loki said. “She said that while she understood I did not feel like celebrating myself that sometimes the most important time to celebrate oneself was when one did not feel like it. She also believed that being with others who wanted to celebrate my life might make me feel better about things. Of course, the choice is ultimately yours. If you wish to remain here for the rest of the day and sulk, I shall not stop you. Though I may get blamed for it…”

“You’re not… you’re not very good at pep talks, are you?” Steve said with a single raised brow.

“I can make an inspiring speech when I so desire,” Loki replied, miffed, “but I also know that you are not the type of person to be easily persuaded into doing something he doesn’t already want. So, why waste my breath and my eloquence on futility?”

“Is it weird that I kinda want to celebrate my birthday now just to spite you?” Steve asked.

“I’ve been told I have that effect on people,” Loki shrugged.

To get everyone out of the Tower while his caterers set up for Steve’s surprise birthday party, Tony used his vast wealth and personal plane to take the group on what he dubbed “Tony Stark’s Tour of America.” The group buzzed the Statue of Liberty, Grant’s Tomb, Governor’s Island, the Morris-Jumel Mansion, Federal Hall, City Park, and several other sites. Of course, the fact that Tony had rarely paid attention in history class meant his commentary on the sites was limited to “some historical shit happened here.” This then sent Steve into overdrive explaining the significance of each site. Finally, Tony had the plan set them down in Battery Park and then proceeded to take everyone to lunch at Fraunces Tavern.
As the place was crawling with tourists and people dressed in Revolutionary Period gear, it was a
good thing Tony had the foresight to book a party room for the Avengers. What he hadn’t expected
was the entire thing turning into a mini-Captain America autograph session. As a bewildered Steve
greeted his fans, Sigyn and Loki had talked some of the reenactors into styling and powdering their
hair like a weird cross between George Washington and Marie Antoinette. While Sigyn managed to
pull off some semblance of a coiffure à l’enfant, Loki’s hair just looked like it was sort of unwashed
and then covered with flour.

By the time Tony had gotten Steve away from his patriotic admirers and Loki and Sigyn away from
the Revolutionary dandies, Thor had started challenging soldier reenactors to arm wrestling matches
and while Volstagg was starving, Fandral was flirting with a woman dressed like a sexy Martha
Washington, and Lady Sif was making inquiries about the model rifle one of the reenactors had
brought. Hogun, Natasha and Clint were drinking from a bottle of 20-year-old Cognac they had
ordered on Tony’s tab. It was only when Pepper and Happy arrived after opening up some Stark
Industries charity event that morning that everyone was finally corralled into the party room Tony
had booked.

“This place is delightful,” Loki said happily. “Why are there not more Midgardian places like this?”

“It’s a tavern from the 1700s,” Tony pointed out. “I mean, it’s a little under 300 years old.”

“Has Midgardian architecture declined so much in 300 years?” Loki huffed.

“They have oysters!” Sigyn chimed in happily.

“It’s mainly period food,” Tony nodded.

“So all of Midgardian culture has declined in the past 300 years,” Loki surmised.

“Be nice, Powder-Puff Boy,” Tony snorted. Loki rolled his eyes.

“I must say, Midgardian fare is different than I expected,” Volstagg mentioned. “The knowledge of
flavoring and spices has certainly come a long way.”

“What is a steak?” Lady Sif asked. Steve politely began explaining the menu to her and the other
Asgardians who had thankfully taken up most of the far end of the table. Only Loki and therefore
Sigyn had taken seats among the Midgardians near Tony and Pepper.

“So many ales to choose from!” Thor said reverently. Volstagg agreed as Thor moved so they could
share a beer menu.


“That’s Scotch whiskey,” Steve frowned. “I’m Irish.”

“The Irish stuff’s on the back,” Natasha pointed out. Steve instantly flipped over his menu and
seemed deep in thought.

“Who let Canada start making whisky?” Clint frowned, turning his menu over as well.

“Don’t get too drunk,” Tony pointed out. “We still have to tour the museum here. And I really don’t
think it would be good for the whole Avenger’s image if we destroyed something in a Revolutionary
War-period tavern on the Fourth.”

“Well, at least Thor left Mjolnir at home,” Pepper pointed out.
“I’m pretty sure he could have it here in about five seconds,” Bruce replied.

“Besides, if we break something, we can just get Steve to sign something for them instead,” Clint pointed out. “Hey, is it true that story about the crazy guy dressed like Uncle Sam who tried to challenge you to a duel after one of those USO shows?”

“What? No!” Steve said. “He challenged Carl. Also lost pretty bad. Good thing Carl wasn’t in costume, or it would have looked awful.”

“Who?” Tony asked.

“The guy who played Hitler in the show.” Steve shrugged. “Sad too. Carl was a pretty decent guy who had an awful run of luck. Couldn’t get into the Army ‘cause he had flat feet and then when we were on the road his wife Velma left him for a traveling salesman. I think he wound up with one of the dancers from the show, though. Not sure. I’ll have to look into all that.”

“Really? People actually left their spouses for traveling salespeople?” Bruce said sounding slightly impressed. “I thought that was just something that happened in books or movies.”

“I thought it was just part of a dirty joke about farmers’ daughters,” Tony admitted.

“They also have wings as in the tavern in the Place of Black Snakes!” Thor thundered happily, startling the waiter who had just come into the room to take drink orders.

All in all, the Asgardians seemed to prefer historical tavern fare over modern bar cuisine. Volstagg ordered two reubens and a steak while Fandral settled for a steak, cobb salad, and flirting with the waiter. Sif and Hogun both got fish dishes and didn’t seem to have the penchant for multiple entrees that their Asgardian-born friends seem to had. Tony guessed big portions and red meat must be an Asgardian thing. Tony had also never believed the hogwash that oysters were some sort of aphrodisiac, but the way Sigyn and Loki split their oyster appetizer made him wonder. Sigyn had gotten some sort of salmon dish with a side of homemade coleslaw and a beet salad while Loki had opted for a steak. Thor and Steve each got three burgers, Thor ordering three different kinds of burger while Steve stuck to his roots with three Gaelic burgers. Bruce and Pepper both got salads while Tony went for the grilled cheese and tomato bisque - even if it was burning hot outside. Clint had ordered all four types of French fries a la carte, a jumbo pretzel, and a giant meatball. He was also trying his best to sneak bites of Natasha’s giant pot of stew.

The museum tour even went off with barely a hitch. It took Steve and a museum guide several minutes to try and explain George Washington to Thor. Fandral flirted with a museum docent until Lady Sif discovered her age and forcibly removed Fandral from the area then returned to lecture the young woman in question about predatory older men. Hogun and Volstagg both quietly listened to the guides before asking several pertinent questions. Loki seemed too intrigued with the Revolutionary officer’s spontoon on display while Sigyn asked rather erudite and exact questions about its creation. When they left, Sigyn had the contact information for the New York City Park’s Department’s official blacksmith as well as a few blacksmiths from Brooklyn. While Steve was pleased to know there were still blacksmiths down in Red Hook, Tony was trying to convince Pepper to hold some kind of metalworking exhibit at the Tower so he could watch Sigyn befuddle someone other than himself about what she called the “sad state of metallurgy on Midgard.”

It was too early to go back to the Tower and begin the birthday/Fourth of July party that was being set up for, Tony realized he was going to have to do something to keep the group entertained and rallied them back to Battery Park. Steve found himself attracted to the World War II memorial and Tony had a brief moment of panic when he remembered the memorial was dedicated to all the soldiers who had died in the waters of the Atlantic. Certainly enough, Steve’s name was on the wall.
and various well-wishers and had brought flowers and various items. However, the painting of his
shield with the words “CAPTAIN AMERICA LIVES!” written on it left at the base of the
monument with Steve’s name on it seemed to cheer Steve up. He continued reading the memorial,
pausing momentarily at a few names he seemed to recognize, and then looked longingly across the
river at Brooklyn.

When Cap had his fill of the memorial, he helped Tony guide the rest of the group as they
meandered around the park. Loki was a bit annoyed that Castle Clinton didn’t live up to these standards
though Steve regaled the group with tales of the various people from his old neighborhood that had
immigrated at Castle Garden. The American concept of immigration had to then be explained to the
Asgardians who apparently came from a country where borders were mostly and magically closed.
In order to freely pass between the borders of realms, one had to be a citizen of both as Sigyn was, a
member of a royal family as Thor and Loki, have direct permission from a king of said realm and/or
the Allfather, be a part of an invading army, or one of those who could afford the huge visa sums and
bribes to the necessary officials checking for contraband - usually those of the upper merchant class.
There were also a few secret magical paths known as “ways,” though only those with extreme talent
could safely use them. Loki acted disinterested as Thor relayed this information.

Sigyn was delighted by the new urban farm in the park and the sea glass carousel. She even coaxed
Loki into riding it with her. Tony took several photographs of Loki and his wife on the various
glowing fish. Volstagg and Fandral also seemed to see the humor in the pair while Sif determinedly
decided she must ride one of the “sea-borne mechanical steeds” as well. Sif’s tough exterior seemed
to melt somewhat after she got on the glowing seashell and she even let out a bit of girlish laughter
before the ride was over. By the end of it, even Banner had taken a turn on the carousel, coaxed on it
by the joint efforts of Sif and Sigyn. Tony had a feeling the two women could be bigger
troublemakers than Loki when they joined forces. Loki surprised most of the Avengers in the way he
seemed not only fine with but actually delighted in the camaraderie of Thor’s warrioress friend and
his own wife. When Tony brought this up later, Thor would inform him that Sif and Sigyn were
“totes besties,” as Barton had told him the term for a deep, meaningful friendship was on Midgard.

Around two-thirty Pepper got a call from the caterers announcing everything had been set up on the
party platform at the Tower. After corralling Sigyn, Thor and Steve away from petting a group of
patriotically dressed dogs out with their various owners and a couple of dog walkers, the group
headed back into the Stark helicopters and to the Tower. Tony was still a little apprehensive about
how Steve might react to the entire thing, to the point he had ordered JARVIS and the bots to
quickly and sneakily dispose of the birthday cake if Steve protested.

When the group arrived back, Tony directed everyone to the party deck which was, quite literally, lit
up like the Fourth of July. There were more banners, flags, and buntings than Steve had ever seen
before - including during the swirl of patriotism the War and the USO shows had brought out. Tony
went around distributing Uncle Sam hats and red, white and blue sunglasses. Gift bags had also been
provided including patriotic glitter tattoos; rope bracelets; flag pins; inflatable red, white and blue
beach balls; plastic frisbees shaped like Cap’s shield; PEZ dispensers; noisemakers; silly straws;
various candies; playing cards; and super soakers.

While they waited for meal time, Tony had also set up various games for the group to play including
“hit the Justin Hammer standee dressed up to look like Hitler with your Cap shield frisbee,” a sack
race, three-legged race, watermelon seed spitting contest, and indoor bowling. Thanks to some
research by the party planners, Tony had them incorporate some games Steve might have also played
in his youth including marbles, skeeball, hopscotch, and jacks. Pepper had shot down the idea of
creating an indoor shooting gallery despite all of the ads for guns and indoor shooting events the
party planner had uncovered from the 1920s and 1930s. Likewise, Pepper had vetoed something called “flagpole sitting” because of the grin that spread across Tony’s face when the planner mentioned it.

“Wow,” Steve said to Tony, a bit surprised. “You went all out.”

“Yeah, well happy birthday,” Tony shrugged.

“This… this isn’t all for me is it?” Steve asked, surprised and slightly touched.

“No. At least half of it is for America,” Tony snorted.

“What smells delicious?” Volstagg asked as he drifted over toward the area where the food had been set up. In a moment of inspiration and because of the high metabolism of Asgardians, Tony had the caterers create a couple of buffet style serving areas for salads, entrees, side dishes and extra desserts.

“Games first!” Pepper called, causing Volstagg to sigh but relent.

Tony insisted on the shield assaults of Hammer Hitler first, right up until Loki’s frisbee toss actually decapitated the standee. Loki had, without anyones knowledge, managed to tape one of his throwing knives to his frisbee for an extra advantage. With the standee no longer able to stand up, Pepper suggested they move on to some other games. With furniture gone, the indoor sack race, three-legged race and hopscotch went off without a hitch - though with mixed results. Hogun won the sack race mainly because he was the only one not falling all over himself with laughter after Clint face planted into Steve, leading to a domino effect knocking over Thor, Loki and Fandral. Sigyn and Loki narrowly beat the team of Natasha and Sif for the three legged race. Fandral and Clint came in dead last and were still trying to untie themselves from each other when the hopscotch event began. Natasha easily won that with her ballerina’s grace.

Pepper had not been told of the watermelon spitting contest and was not pleased that Tony was encouraging people to spit across the floor. However, it had proved pointless when it was discovered Volstagg had misunderstood the purpose of the game and had eaten the entire watermelon prepared for the event - rind and all. After checking to make sure he was okay, it was decided to move on to the next game. It took about fifteen minutes to explain to the Asgardians why American bowling had ten pins when Asgardian bowling had only nine. Thor, Volstagg and Fandral were both hung up on the fact that the game was referred to as “nine pins” on their homeland. In the end, Volstagg proved to be the best bowler in either realm even though his method was something akin to Fred Flintstone’s.

It had been quickly deduced after the sack race that two of Thor’s major character flaws were his over competitiveness and the fact that he could be a very sulky loser. When it became obvious he was growing frustrated with not placing highly in the contests, Steve was kind enough to take him aside and teach him how to play jacks - mainly because it was the type of game where one was competing against themselves. As Thor played jacks, Tony and Clint explained the fundamentals of skeeball to Sif and the Warriors Three while Steve explained the basics of marbles to the rest of the group. Sigyn was entranced by the colorful glass balls while Loki was very interested in Steve’s description of the half-Vegas, half-stock market-like exchange of marbles on the school playground, particularly how children would assign arbitrary amounts of worth to various marbles. Thor attempted to learn the game, but found his fingers to thick and stubby for it. He returned to playing jacks with Mjolnir by his side. Loki came very close to literally winning all the marbles before Clint stuck his nose into the game at the last second and used his preternatural talents to win, leaving both Odinsons sulking.

To prevent the Asgardians for becoming more depressed and possibly leading to actual bloodlust,
Pepper decided to start off dinner. Asgardians seemed to delight in eating buffet style and only a few dishes had to be explained to everyone - save Volstagg who didn’t care what he put in his mouth as long as it was tasty. It took several minutes to explain to the Asgardians that corn on the cob was not eaten whole but instead with the tiny holders Thor, Volstagg and even Hogun seemed to have difficulty mastering. Once mostly everyone had their fill and the food supply was starting to dwindle, it was decided Steve should open his birthday gifts.

Tony had gotten Steve a bunch of kids science books as a bit of a joke, though Steve did really appreciate the books for helping break down some of the things he was still trying to figure out. Pepper had tempered Tony’s gift with several memberships in Steve’s name to various art museums across the city. Bruce had continued the art theme with some art history books to help Steve catch up on some of the things he had missed in the art world as well as a coffee table book of “America’s Greatest Paintings.” Clint had gotten Steve a copy of the campy 1990s movie made about Captain America as well as a collection of various retro candies from the 1920s and 1930s. Natasha had presented Steve with a new Swiss Army knife. Coulson had sent over a copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and coffee table book on the illustrated history of Brooklyn. Fury sent over a list of some of Steve’s former USO friends and other Army support staff who were still alive with their contact info as well as the official notice that his military back pay was approved and being transferred to his bank account.

It was easy to tell who among the Asgardians were good gift givers and who were not. Lady Sif - possibly on the advice of Sigyn or one of the Midgardians - had purchased Steve a tie with the Declaration of Independence on it from the tavern museum gift shop. Sigyn and Loki had gifted him a build-your-own Brooklyn Bridge kit, which instantly made Tony furious he hadn’t thought of it himself. The other Asgardians were not as on point with their gifts. Volstagg, Fandral, and Hogun had apparently all purchased their gifts from the Duane Reade across the street. Volstagg had come back with an entire frozen turkey, Fandral with an odious smelling cologne and Hogun presented him with a couple of Chia pets and a Snuggie. Thor had gifted Steve with an enormous bear skin rug he had brought with him for his stay.

“Where did you get this?” Tony gaped. “This bear must have been huge!”

“I killed him myself!” Thor beamed happily.

“Um, thanks, Thor,” Steve said, not sure what to do with the massive thing.

“Pepper, feel it!” Tony encouraged her. “It’s soft!”

“But… it used to be a teddy bear,” Pepper whimpered.

“This is the softest thing I’ve ever felt,” Tony said, continuing to feel up the rug. Clint reached out and started feeling the rug too. He then pulled Natasha’s hand over and used his free hand to make her hand stroke it.

“Furs are a typical Asgardian Name Day gift,” Sigyn explained to Steve.

“It can be crafted into many things,” Thor nodded vigorously. “Perhaps new boots or a vest for the colder months.”

“That’s… very thoughtful of you,” Steve nodded.

“I don’t think Midgardians wear much fur, Thor,” Loki finally pointed out, seeing as no one else was going to.
“A rug then, perhaps,” Sigyn interjected before Thor could be upset. She turned and glared at her husband. “We have quite a few ourselves.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed walking predatorily around his wife before pulling her back against his chest. “They are rather comfortable. Especially when spread out before a fire…” He pressed a kiss to an exposed part of Sigyn’s neck. “... basking in the naked afterglow of…”

“Hey!” Steve interjected, embarrassedly. “I guess I should blow out the candles on my cake, huh?”

“Good idea, Cap,” Tony agreed, gagging a little at the sight of Loki and Sigyn staring into each other’s eyes, seeming to sway with each other.

The Asgardians seemed to have gotten better at performing “Happy Birthday” this time around, though the performance was still a bit off key and not always with the right words. Sometime in between the cake being served and DUM-E coming out to collect the empty plates, Sigyn and Loki disappeared off on their own only to reappear about thirty minutes later both giggling like mad and with their clothes somewhat askew. Tony secretly asked JARVIS to pinpoint wherever they had gone off to and have the bots hose the entire room down, but not tell anyone which one it was. Tony was afraid he might not ever be able to walk into whichever room it was again without worrying what exactly Sigyn and Loki had done there.

The group then set themselves up on the viewing area of the party deck to watch for the fireworks over the East River. Volstagg had eaten much of the rest of what food remained from the buffet, though there were still a few dessert items left. Most of the group set toward the edge of the balcony with the leftover cake and cupcakes provided for dessert. However, Sigyn and Loki set further back on Steve’s bear rug, feeding each other strawberries and cream. Tony did his best to remain looking forward and hoped if the couple had any inclination toward exhibitionism it would be drowned out by the fireworks.

Even the Asgardians seemed impressed by the fireworks display, oohing and aahing a bit over the larger explosions. Tony had to admit that the explosive nature of the Fourth of July had waned somewhat for him since the entire thing in Afghanistan. He sometimes worries the memories of that harrowing firefight would be triggered by fireworks. Cap also seemed to be having a hard time to enjoy the display with niggling memories in the back of his mind. Seeing this, Tony suggested Cap help him bring out some more drinks for everyone outside. If the two of them took their sweet time doing so, no one said anything about it.

After the fireworks, the party continued well into the early morning hours for most of the assemble group. Sigyn and Loki retreated back to their rooms and Bruce to his lab, having had enough social engagement for the day. The rest continued to hang out on the party deck, watching various parts of the country ringing in the Fourth via TV. Around four in the morning, Lady Sif reminded her companions it was time for them to return to Asgard. The grand finale of the Stark Tower Fourth of July came as Sif, Volstagg, Fandral and Hogun were evaporated via Biforst back to their homeworld, promising to pass on the story of their revels on Midgard. Loki and Sigyn reappeared to see them off and Sif promised to wish the best to the Allmother and Sigyn’s sisters on behalf of Sigyn and her husband. His friends gone, Thor realized it was the perfect time to call Jane who was currently in Japan on her lecture tour. Tony helped him set up a Skype call in his room and then retreated once he heard the excited voice of Dr. Foster. Tony returned to the elevator to find Cap inside it, heading down to his own rooms.

“Hey, Cap,” Tony grinned. “Hitting the hay?”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “Maybe I can manage a few hours of sleep before we have to head out tomorrow.”
“This is why I having holidays in the middle of the week,” Tony agreed.

“Thanks, Tony, by the way,” Steve said. “For the birthday party. I was a little nervous about it at first, but I’m glad you did it. I mean, you didn’t have to go to so much trouble…”

“You haven’t had a chance to celebrate in seventy something years,” Tony shrugged. “It was the least I could do.”

“Still,” Steve said as the elevator doors opened to his floor. “You’re a good guy, Tony.”
Looking back, Tony Stark would always wonder if Nick Fury’s oh-so thoughtful birthday gift to Loki of The Collected Norse Myths and Sagas was the one-eyed master spy’s method of punishing Loki, Thor, Tony or some combination of the three. Of all the books Loki had been gifted for his birthday, it was this tome that promised to enlighten readers on the “escapades of figures including Odin, Thor and Loki” that had most interested the younger prince. While some might consider reading a book about oneself a bit egotistical, Tony had to admit he would put a biography of himself high on his list of things to-read as well, mainly just to see if they got things right.

Shortly after his death, there had been an unauthorized tell-all biography of Howard written by a former employee about the elder Stark’s laundry list of sexual conquests and suppositions about his myriad vague and borderline unethical science experiments during the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Despite her initial refusal to even touch the book, Tony had somehow cajoled his Aunt Peg into reading it and then telling him if anything in it was accurate. The fact she had grumbled “oh, Howard,” sixty times before the end of the first chapter was all the answer Tony needed. Tony had later said on a talk show, when interviewed about the tell-all, that he wasn’t bothered so much by the book but that there was just something about knowing your father had slept with an old Hollywood bombshell that made her not as attractive any more. Still, it had explained that time when Tony was ten and found a signed and rather risque photo of a woman who turned out to be Jayne Mansfield in the bottom drawer of his father’s desk. Howard had given him a caramel and made him promise not to tell anyone.

At first, Loki seemed to be enjoying Midgard’s view of Asgardian happenings with as much interest and hilarity as Tony had enjoyed the early story of Howard bringing his own women to an elite Los Angeles men’s only club. While he could have started at the beginning of the book and moved forward, Loki had immediately noticed the word “Lokasenna” in the table of contents and skipped to that particular chapter. After he got over trying to figure out the identities of characters who did not actually exist - “Thor, do you know if Odin has some bastard son named Vîðarr tucked away somewhere? What about one named Baldr?” - Loki seemed entertained by the depiction of his own rap-battle-style insulting of the guests at the fictional feast. However, as the story progressed, he seemed to grow less entertained and more confused.

Loki had finished the Lokasenna part of the book during dinner. The group was smaller than normal, Cap and Natasha down in D.C. for some mandatory field agent training week. Clint allegedly had gotten out of it because of his guarding Loki duties and something about a bet with the agent in charge of this year’s planning. As Loki laid down the book next to his plate, Tony felt a little worried as to how the godling might react. Of course, Tony was also surprised Pepper had allowed him to read while eating dinner. He thought she would be more strict than that. After all, he wasn’t allowed to work on blueprints, construct jet repulsors or check his phone while they were having a group
meal.

“I do not understand these Midgardian tales,” Loki finally said, closing the book. “Many of these people do not exist and much of these things have not happened. And how would those of Midgard know our identities anyway? Thor and I were not even out of the nursery the last time Asgard intervened in Midgard.”

“Maybe Odin mentioned you guys to someone?” Tony theorized.

“Yes, here is my big fat son Thor who cannot walk more than five feet without falling on his ass and my stolen relict child Loki who I haven’t actually confiscated yet so how would I tell you about him,” Loki pouted.

“They also had tales of Mjolnir,” Thor nodded.

“I thought you didn’t read these tales,” Loki pointed out to Thor, angrily.

“My friend Erik Selvig knew of them from his boyhood,” Thor replied.

“Was there at least anything pleasurable from your book?” Sigyn asked sweetly, hoping to avoid disaster at the dinner table.

“I did pick up a few new good insults for your mother,” Loki grinned.

“Well,” Sigyn sighed. “As long as you’re happy.”

When Sigyn came in for breakfast on Saturday morning, it surprised the other denizens of the tower that she was alone. On the rare occasion that she and Loki had breakfast outside of their rooms, they always came together. Sigyn explained that Loki had spent the entire night finishing up his mythology book and would therefore probably be sleeping until late afternoon. She then proceeded to take some tea from Bruce, spread some jelly on toast and queried Thor about various Asgardian acquaintances and what they were up to.

Breakfast was nearly over when a fuming Loki appeared in the elevator, a furious snare on his face and his brand new cloak draped across his all-black attire as if he was hoping his fashion sense would make the scene more dramatic. As he strode forward, Tony and Clint both independently thought he would have smoke coming out of his ears if he were a cartoon character. With all the force of Thor launching Mjolnir into the air, Loki threw the mythology book down on the table, making it slide nearly off the other end.

“This book is a pack of lies and I shall not stand for it!” Loki roared.

“What happened?” Sigyn asked worriedly, jumping up to console her husband.

“That rubbish… that filth,” Loki shouted. While the rest of the group stared at the book as if it was cursed, Thor actually picked it up and opened it. Confusion crossed his face.

“Why have they misspelled Mother’s name?” Thor asked, confused.

“That is one of a myriad of slanders and mistruths perpetrated by that book of lies!” Loki fumed. Thor gasped at something and rapidly closed the book.

“Why is there an image of mother naked and riding a cat?” Thor said, worriedly.
“That isn’t the worst of it,” Loki muttered, beginning to pace.

“I am sure this book is not that bad,” Sigyn said, attempting to soothe her husband.


“What?” Thor said, dropping his Pop-Tart onto the plate below. Tony was trying so hard not to laugh. Clint wasn’t trying at all.

“Well, yeah,” Bruce mentioned. “The story about Sleipnir?”

“Our father’s mighty steed?” Thor said, even more confused.

“You Midgardians take this as truth?” Loki shrieked, flying into a rage as if he were about to strangle Bruce, Sigyn managed to pull her husband back.

“Husband, please,” Sigyn said. “I cannot help if you do not explain these things.”

“Oh, yes, certainly,” Loki huffed. “Let me regale you with the tales of my humiliation at the hands of Midgard!”

“Husband,” Sigyn soothed him.

“What slander is Loki speaking of?” Thor asked.

“In the story Freyja… Sigyn’s mother, I guess, asks a craftsman to do some work for her,” Bruce said. “She doesn’t want to pay for it, though…”

“Accurate,” Loki coughed.

“So she tells the man that if he finishes it in an impossibly short amount of time he can marry her or have sex with her one,” Bruce continues.

“Also accurate,” Loki huffed.

“But when she realizes the guy has a magic horse that is finishing the work for him easily, she panics and asks Odin for help,” Bruce said. “And somehow, this situation is Loki’s fault? So they ask him to fix it.”

“Also accurate,” Loki nodded.

“So… Loki turns himself into a female horse and distracts the male horse,” Bruce winced, “and then nine months later... baby horse?”

“BLASPHEMY!” Loki shouted out, rattling the windows of the room. Clint was now on the floor rolling around in laughter.

“So, where did this Sleipnir come from if you didn’t…” Tony began, looking for the right words, “make him yourself?” Loki let out a ferocious shriek and Clint momentarily stopped laughing to make sure he hadn’t peed himself before resuming his laughter.

“We were hunting on Vanaheim,” Thor said. “It was an overnight trip. Suddenly, this wild horse colt appeared and started following Loki around because he had apples in his bag. We noticed immediately he had far too many legs. We thought either he was cast off from his herd for the deformity or was the result of some magical experiment gone wrong. Perhaps his owner had dumped
him because she was afraid of getting in trouble for what might be misconstrued as illegal experimentation. At any rate, he followed us and Loki’s bag of apples back to the palace and Father took him in. Was the only one who could train him.”

“I did NOT give birth to a horse,” Loki hissed.

“So… the snake and the wolf and Hela…” Bruce began.

“I HAVE NEVER GIVEN BIRTH TO ANYTHING!” Loki hissed. Clint was physically wheezing on the ground, tears leaking out of his eyes.

“This is the best day ever,” Clint grinned, before pulling himself back into his chair and taking a sip from his carafe of coffee.

“The book alleges I had relations with a frost giantess and she bore a snake, a wolf and the Lady of Helheim!” Loki said, starting to pace again. “I rather think I would remember sleeping with a frost giantess. I would have found out my true heritage much sooner!”

“A snake? A wolf… you don’t mean?” Sigyn said, surprised.

“Yes, the creature on your wrist and the one who is most lazing beside the fireplace in your sisters’ rooms are allegedly my children here on Midgard,” Loki said angrily. “And they believe that I once tied my testes to a goat for entertainment purposes!”

“I mean, I do know of a really eccentric guy who gets off on that sort of thing,” Tony muttered.

“And it postulates me as a mass murderer!” Loki hissed.

“If the scepter fits,” Clint shrugged.

“Jor was bought at a market stall and Fenrir was a gift!” Loki fumed.

“So, how are you related to the Goddess of Death?” Bruce asked curiously.

“I think she’s our father’s cousin?” Thor frowned. “She isn’t exactly someone you stay and have long chats with. Very rarely leaves her realm and usually then only to collect a soul or two she has been salivating over.”

“Well, at least it describes you as ‘pleasing and handsome,’ though I can’t quite imagine you with red hair,” Sigyn said, having picked up the book from where Thor had sat it down. Loki then instantly snatched the book from her.

“It also insists I ate a human heart - which I have never done - and that I enjoyed it!” Loki huffed. “When would I have had time to do such a thing as I had never been to Midgard until this year!”

“Well, I mean we did have a lot of downtime on our way to Germany,” Clint mused, “but as I recall all you ate were Belgian chocolates and bacon-wrapped shrimp so…”

“Wait… that’s all in there?” Tony said, surprised.

“Yes,” Bruce nodded. “The translation may be different in some versions, but those are the generally accepted tales.”

“I really need to read more,” Tony said.

“And how in the Nine did these Midgardian storytellers know I was the son of Laufey before I did?”
Loki fumed. He turned to his brother. “Did you at least attempt to read any of this while you were banished here or were you too busy making eyes at that woman?”

“Have a care how you speak of Jane!” Thor shot back. He then added more contritely: “and no, I did not read these tales.”

“They are a pack of lies!” Loki hissed.

“So, you never got your mouth sewn shut by dwarves for insulting them?” Banner asked curiously.

“Parts these tales may have more grains of truth than others,” Loki gritted out.

“Technically that was Thor’s fault,” Sigyn sighed. “He insulted their craftsmanship.”

“They were overcharging!” Thor insisted.

“And by trying to get Thor out of trouble…” Sigyn began.

“As per usual,” Loki interjected with a mutter.

“…he ended up making things worse. So, they demanded punishment. I think my father was also a little sore to find out Loki and I were secretly courting that way,” Sigyn shrugged with a sigh before turning to her husband. “Besides, you healed up nicely, and I think the people of Niðavellir respect you more now for taking the punishment as bravely as you did. I know Father certainly does.”

“And it was much quieter around the palace for those three months,” Thor smirked.

“What about the part about Sif having blonde hair before you shaved it all off?” Bruce asked. Loki, Thor and Sigyn exchanged looks before Loki sighed.

“Alright, that one might be slightly true,” Loki admitted. “But in all fairness I did set things to right. And she humiliated me in front of the entire training grounds, so I think she deserved it.”

“If Sif had her head shaved every time she humiliated someone she would be permanently bald,” Sigyn pointed out. “Though, I do think she looks better with darker hair anyway. Brunettes are rather unique on Asgard and in Vanaheim.”

“Yes,” Thor agreed. “She said many of the guards tend to take her more seriously now. What hair color has to do with that I will never understand…”

“The book also insists that Sif is not a warrior but a farmer. And that she and Thor are married with children!” Loki snorted.

“Jane won’t like that,” Clint smirked.

“Sif won’t either,” Thor admitted nervously.

“You don’t have kids with Sif, though, right?” Tony asked.

“Of course not!” Thor said, annoyed.

“What does it say about me?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“You are hardly mentioned,” Loki said quickly.

Bruce seemed the most knowledgeable of the myths, so Loki glowered at him with a piercing stare,
silently ordering him to not reveal any of the tragic tales involving Sigyn in the book. Bruce, for his part, didn’t care to bring them up around the happy-go-lucky goddess who always seemed to smooth over her husband’s terror with her own kindheartedness. It was too sad a tale to repeat to the sweet woman who had always shown him kindness, even in his most hideous and frightening form.

“Hmm… considering the inaccuracies you have detailed, I doubt I would enjoy being mentioned in this book of yours anyway,” Sigyn shook her head.

“This book is blasphemy!” Loki insisted.

“Don’t take it so hard,” Clint snorted. “I’m sure no one outside of Scandinavia reads it save for scholars and Neo-Pagans.”

“Neo whats?” Thor asked curiously.

“It’s a long story,” Tony sighed.

“I...uh… actually read them as a kid,” Banner admitted nervously. “But, you know, I just thought they were stories…”

“I would like to call one of your public speaking announcements to denounce these dreadful lies and accusations against my person,” Loki informed Tony. “Prepare one immediately.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Tony pointed out. “Namely that you are technically supposed to be in Asgard and that revealing your presence here on earth would not only create a mob of angry New Yorkers ready to rip off your head but more importantly get me in trouble with SHIELD?”

“Since when have you ever worried about being in trouble with SHIELD?” Clint snorted.

“Come now brother,” Thor said cheerfully. “You always lecture me about being quick to temper. I believe you are now guilty of the same thing. These Midgardian myths are harmless and have no bearing on how we are thought of here.”

“Oh, really?” Loki smirked. “Have you read the one about how you lost your hammer?”

Loki then proceeded to read out loud and in extremely dramatic fashion the tale from the Thrymskviða about how a giant stole Mjolnir and Thor was forced to dress up as a woman and pretend to marry the giant in order to retrieve it. While Thor seemed relieved that he at least got to bash the giant’s head in with his hammer at the end of the tale, he was not pleased with Loki’s characterization of what his brother would look like in a wedding dress. While everyone was attempting to cover their laughter from Loki’s dramatic reading, Thor was pacing back and forth in a fury, especially when it got to the part about how his ravenous eating and drinking nearly blew his cover as a beautiful woman.

“I demand recompense for these slanders! I would not be the bride of a giant!” Thor roared. “Do not worry, brother. I shall hold the public speaking announcement and set to right these treacherous lies about the sons of Odin!”

“Pepper is going to hate me,” Tony sighed.

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When Tony initially told Pepper that Thor wanted to throw a surprise press conference as soon as possible, she had been delighted by the idea of the Asgardian prince working on his image and trying to reach out to the public. However, she was less than thrilled that the purpose of Thor’s press
conference was to set straight the mythological rumors that he cross-dressed to marry a giant, ate his pet immortal goats repeatedly, or that he essentially abducted two lost children and made them his personal servants on a whim. Still, Pepper understood why Thor might not want centuries of mythology to taint his public image now that it was known he actually existed. She tried to get the PR team to work with Thor on issuing a statement, but was informed by Sigyn that even with magical translation of the statement from English to Asgardian runes Thor was never good at sticking to written down speeches.

For most, the main news seemed to be that Thor was back and hanging around Stark Tower. It didn’t take long for media crews and spectators to start showing up once Stark Industries sent out a press release for a press conference starring Thor in the Stark Tower lobby. To keep the focus on Thor and what he had to say, Pepper had ordered the other Tower residents to hang back and watch the announcement on the big screen in the communal living area. Sigyn and Clint had made popcorn for the event while Loki angrily continued pacing back and forth. Tony was concerned Loki was going to drag a bigger hole in the floor than the one Bruce had left during the battle.

Initially, Pepper had convinced herself there was no reason to be nervous about helping Thor out with his first press conference. The guy was a natural public speaker and charming as could be. And after all, Pepper had handled her fair share of embarrassing press conferences. Working as a personal assistant to Tony Stark often meant becoming a veteran of the disastrous press conference quickly. On multiple occasions it had actually been suggested Pepper write a PR how-to book based on her awful experiences with Tony and how she had managed to spin everything from a drunken promise Stark Industries would colonize the moon to Tony challenging a conservative talk show host to pistols at dawn in Central Park to a paternity suit allegation Tony called outrageous because he and the woman in question “only did backdoor stuff.”

Pepper gave a brief introduction, claiming that Thor had some issues he wanted to address and clear up. She also made it clear he wouldn’t be taking any questions - mainly because she wasn’t sure if Thor could handle a full media bombardment. Pepper then stepped back and allowed Thor to take over at the podium. With a grin and a few waves, Thor waited for things to settle down. Pepper let out a breath she had been holding, feeling things were going to be all right.

“My friends, it has come to my attention that there has been some grave misinformation spread about the nature of myself and the other residents of Asgard resulting for these tales of so-called mythology,” Thor began. “I understand these tales were passed down generation to generation from the last time Asgard intervened on Midgard, and thus have changed and taken shape over the years. However, some of these tales are hurtful to me and those closest to me. I am to set the record straight.”

Pepper smiled and relaxed a bit. This was going well. Perhaps Thor should do more speaking engagements on behalf of the Avengers.

“First off, my mother is Frigga. - - - - - ,” Thor said, his anger starting to build. “Not some strange giantess my father laid with and then cast aside! And Loki and I are his only children! The Allfather Odin is not a man who quickly dallies with numerous women then abandons the children he has spawned. Neither I nor any of Asgard engage in slavery! Nor do we believe in human sacrifice. In fact, such practice has been outlawed in most of the realms for several years now.”

“Oh no,” Pepper said, realizing she probably should have honed up on her Norse mythology before agreeing to this.

“The Lady Sif is a nice person and my good friend, but we aren’t married…And she is a mighty warrior, not a farmer,” Thor continued. “We also do not have children together. Nor do I have
children at all. I do not believe Sif has children. At any rate, I also have never grown crops and while I believe having a goat-drawn chariot would be delightful, I do not possess one. Though I would like to. Perhaps I shall buy one. I will have to ask if goats can be taught to fly.”

“I’m going to kill Tony,” Pepper muttered under her breath.

“While I do enjoy smashing heads in why Mjolnir from time to time,” Thor continued, “I have learned there is a time and a place for such dealings…”

Pepper continued keeping the fake grin plastered on her face while thinking of ways to get back at Tony as Thor again began rumbling out some slight against him featured in mythology texts. Halfway through his rant about why Midgardians thought ritual dismemberment and drinking the blood of dwarves were in any context acceptable, Pepper decided things had to be wrapped up before they got even more out of hand. She began signalling to Thor to cut things short and, fortunately, he seemed to see her. Thor started to step away from the podium, but then, as though it was an afterthought, he returned to the microphone and added:

“Oh, and also, my brother Loki has never had sexual relations with a horse, nor has he tied his testicles to a goat,” Thor said hurriedly. “And he has never given birth to a horse, a snake, a wolf, nor the Lady of Helheim, who is, in fact, my father’s cousin. And he says he has never eaten a human heart. Thank you!”

Thor turned and cheerfully strode from the podium, raising Mjolnir over his head triumphantly. As he departed, the news media were still clamoring to ask questions as a shocked and stunned Pepper attempted to regain control of the briefing. Thor, for his part, seemed exceedingly pleased with how things had progressed and had moved on to taking selfies with non-media members who had gathered to watch the press conference.

“Okay,” Pepper said, trying to stay calm as she retook the podium. “Well, that was everything. No further questions.” Pepper then walked over to where the other Stark Industries lackeys were attempting to corral Thor away from his adoring public. Once he was safely returned to the upper rooms of the Tower, she was going to kill Tony.

“Sir,” JARVIS announced to Tony, “you have seven voicemails and 22 unread messages from a blocked number I assume is Director Fury. Shall I play them?”

“No,” Tony shook his head.

“He forgot the part about me not having relations with a frost giantess,” Loki fumed, continuing the pacing he had done throughout the entire press conference.

“I think that is the least of our worries right now,” Banner sighed.

“What was that?” Pepper demanded of Tony as she stormed into the room, a slightly chastised Thor on her heels. “What did you send me into?”

“To be fair, I would have thought you would do a little more research before going out into a media feeding frenzy like that,” Tony said.

“Bullshit, Tony,” Pepper said angrily. “You told me we had to do this ASAP, that it couldn’t wait. I think more preparation was needed in this case.”
“Ha!” Clint laughed from where he was channel surfing on the couch. “Fox News has talking heads debating whether or not Thor’s press conference was a false flag. They think he might be trying to throw people off his scent. You know, make them feel comfortable so they won’t see him coming to steal children so he can crush their bones and eat them.”

“That’s what frost giants do!” Thor thundered, angrily.

“They do not!” Loki shrieked. “You know nothing about them! I have never eaten a human heart!”

“I shall challenge this talking fox to a duel of honor!” Thor said, beginning to swing Mjolnir. “These slanders shall not continue! I will crush their bones!”

“And eat them?” Clint grinned. Thor roared and Loki let out another strangled protestation he had never consumed human flesh.

“Hold up, Big Guy,” Tony sighed, managing to get Thor to put the hammer down. He couldn’t believe Cap was missing an opportunity to explain the American media and free speech to someone. “I know they’re saying things you don’t like, but they’re allowed to.”

“You allow the figures on your talking boxes to slander you?” Thor said, aghast.

“It’s an opinion show,” Tony shrugged. “Well, at least that’s what they say when they get in trouble for repeating outright falsehoods. See, in America, we have this right that allows people to say and think what they want about things. Doesn’t mean they’re always right. Doesn’t mean they’re always nice. And it doesn’t mean that other people can’t tell them they’re stupid and where to go. But because people aren’t afraid to say what’s on their mind, we can oftentimes be honest with each other.”

“This is because you elect your leaders!” Sigyn said, happily she could put the American history book Steve had loaned her to use. “If you elect your leaders, being able to say things that are true without repercussion keeps these leaders honest. As opposed to our realm where the leader is autocratic and slanders are a crime, even if the accusation is true!”

“Well, I mean, slander and libel aren’t crimes but you can still sue people and get financial compensation for doing them,” Tony shrugged, “but you can’t get in trouble for saying something mean if it’s true. And, if you like a public figure like the president or a movie star or an Avenger, it is a little harder to prove slander and libel.”

“But it is not true!” Thor said mournfully. “And now I fear more will believe these falsehoods.”

“What does it matter?” Clint asked curiously. “What people believe about you?”

“I will not have their favor,” Thor pouted.

“So?” Clint shrugged. “Why do you care what someone who never met you thinks about you? The way I see it, it only matters what you and the people who are important to you think about you. If swinging that hammer around and helping people aren’t going to make people like you, then screw ‘em. You don’t owe anyone anything.”

“Besides, Blondie,” Tony pointed out, “I don’t think your fan base really cared about these rumors. I mean, some of them probably believed these things before and still liked you.”

“It’s hard,” Bruce admitted, “people thinking you’re something you’re not. But sometimes, you have to let it go because it burdens you to the point you can’t do anything. Just focus on what good you can do and not on the negative.”
“In my experience, the reason it seems like so many people are negative is because the negative ones always talk the loudest,” Tony agreed. “The people who think you’re a good guy are a bigger group, they’re probably just quieter about it. And let’s face, the people who really don’t care about you either way are probably the largest group because I seriously doubt most people really spend that much time thinking about us unless we rescued them from a bus fire or something.”

“Thank you for your friendly words,” Thor smiled.

“They still think I had relations with a horse!” Loki screeched as a Fox News headline popped up reading: ‘Loki: God of Bestiality?’

“Clint, will you turn off Fox for all that is holy?” Tony grumbled. “The last thing we need right now is Thunderstruck and The Horse Whisperer facing off against Rupert Murdoch.”

“I don’t know…” Clint shrugged. “It could be entertaining…”

“Clint,” Tony cautioned.

“If it makes you guys feel better,” Clint said, clicking through some sports channels, “CNN is just focusing on how Thor turned the entire Norse mythology studies field on its head again and MSNBC seems to think Loki should be the new spokesperson for Planned Parenthood or the Humane Society. Oh, and apparently they think we don’t teach enough mythology to our kids because most people have never heard of those stories before. So, good job on spreading the word.”

“Don’t worry about it you guys,” Pepper insisted. “Tomorrow Johnny Storm will show up to court naked or one of the X-Men will get arrested at a human rights protest and we’ll be yesterday’s news. Well, I’m off to go do damage control.”

“Spin us something good, baby!” Tony called after her.

“You are both acting ridiculous,” Sigyn agreed from where she and Clint were sharing kettle corn on the sofa. Apparently, the popcorn made pre-press conference had turned into Clint educating Sigyn about all of the varieties of “popped corn” Midgard had to offer. “I was not even in that book, and I am not offended. And so a few Midgardian stories about you have mistruths in them. These tales are no more ridiculous than palace gossip and neither of you pay such a great mind to it. Midgardians believe many false things. Why, some still think their realm is flat and that certain numbers are unlucky and that the shape of one’s head can determine criminal inclinations. Loki, you yourself have repeated again and again how little you care for what Midgardians think. What has changed now?”

“Perhaps you didn’t hear me, Sigyn,” Loki said furiously. “They believe I had intimate carnal relations with a horse! And that, as a lady horse, I gave birth to a foal! A foal, Sigyn!”

“I’m sure any baby horse you would produce would be darling,” Sigyn shrugged. “Besides, Sleipnir really did follow you around like a baby would follow its mother for a while. And you do take such good care of Jor and Fen. I suppose, in a way, you are like a father to them.”

“You are missing the point completely! And what would those of Asgard say if they heard Midgardians delighted in spreading such salacious rumors about my personage?” Loki fumed.

“Perhaps that you have finally had your comeuppance?” Sigyn shrugged before eating a fistful of kettle corn.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Thor pouted. “Midgardians didn’t even know of your existence!”
“Alright,” Tony said, corralling his two Asgardian interlopers, “I think what the two of you need is to just bitch a little bit about how angry this makes you feel. Let’s grab some booze, hit up the dartboard and complain, huh?”

“I feel as though we should tell the Allfather of these slanders, but I also fear how he will take the news,” Thor grumbled. “He does not enjoy being spoken of with such ridicule.”

After a mere shot of the Asgardian ale Thor had brought with him, Tony had passed out on the library couch. Loki and Thor had then continued consuming stein after stein and playing darts against the board on the wall. While Thor actually used the darts provided, Loki had picked up his throwing knives. Both brothers were ratherly equally matched - though Loki did have a slight edge at this game - but were spending much more time complaining than caring who was winning. The break for their normal competitiveness to just complain was almost a relief.

“You may tell him, but do so when I am far away,” Loki grumbled. “I do not wish this to become my fault as well.”

“I am still confused how Sigyn managed to escape such mockery,” Thor frowned. “I do not understand how she was left out of these stories when there are those who do not exist included in them. Especially as the two of you are so close.” Loki paused for a moment and Thor looked at his brother. While Loki’s face was emotionless, Thor could tell from years of practice that Loki was hiding something. “What is it brother?”

“She is in the books,” Loki said. “I did not wish her to know.”

“Why not?” Thor asked confused. “It cannot be more horrible than…”

“It is,” Loki said harshly. “It is far worse.”

“What?” Thor asked worriedly. “What could be worse?”

“Thor…” Loki began.

“What if these are things that have not happened yet, Loki? What if some Midgardian skald had insight into our futures?” Thor asked. “You always say forewarned is forearmed. Let me know so I may protect my sister.” Loki paced for a bit and then sighed.

“In the book, we had children. Sigyn and I,” Loki began. “Two boys. And at the Allfather’s command, one was enchanted into a wolf and then ate the other as a means to punish me. The entrails of our dead son were then used to bind me as chain. And Sigyn, my ever faithful Sigyn, went with me to protect me. They tied me below a snake that dripped venom onto my eyes and she did her best to spare me. Even after it was I who lost and condemned our children.”

“No,” Thor shook his head. “That would not happen. I would never allow it.”

“You see now why I cannot tell her?” Loki sighed. “The fear and worry would consume her. She would never have a moment’s peace fearing such things could happen to those she loves.”

“Loki, that book may have had the odd truth or two, but the majority of it was falsehoods,” Thor said, putting a gentle hand on his brother’s shoulder. “We should pay it no mind. We have already spent too much time worrying over that tripe.” Loki wavered, seeming to be weighing his options. “I promise,” Thor continued, “nothing shall happen to Sigyn. We will protect her.”
“Thank you,” Loki nodded.

“And I want you to know, I do not believe the Allfather would ever do such a thing to you as punishment, especially not to children he and mother would consider their own grandchildren. And we both know Mother would give her own life for us and her family if need be,” Thor said. “But if I were wrong about that, I would not permit such a thing to happen. Not to your family. Not to my own family. Of course, whomever told such a tale must have known little of your wife. She would never allow such a thing to happen to those she loves, even if she had to destroy all of Asgard to prevent it. And she might possibly be able to do that.”

“I suppose,” Loki admitted. It was oddly comforting to think of Sigyn rampaging against the Allfather to protect him and fictional children.

“But, I agree,” Thor nodded, “Sigyn should never know. And, on my honor, I will not tell her.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed gravely, closing his eyes and thinking of his smiling wife. “Sigyn must never know.”

Chapter End Notes

Thor’s dialogue was somewhat inspired by this scene:
IT SEEMS OUR PROFITS HAVE DROPPED 37%.
I'M AFRAID WE HAVE A BAD IMAGE, SIR.

MARKET RESEARCH SHOWS PEOPLE SEE YOU AS SOMETHING OF AN OGRE.

I OUGHT TO CLUB THEM

AND EAT THEIR BONES.
Sibling Rivalry

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, ladies don’t start fights but they certainly can finish them.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ever since Tony had known them, Loki and Thor got along about as well as Edison as Tesla. Not to push the metaphor, but Loki was always complaining about Thor stealing his thunder and Thor sometimes had a penchant for taking sole credit for what was in fact a group efforts. When he was younger, Tony had always wanted a sibling - someone to commiserate with and possibly boss around. While being the sole heir to the Stark legacy and empire did have its perks, it could be lonely at the top. However, Loki and Thor didn’t exactly paint the most glamorous picture of a sibling relationship.

To be honest, Tony wasn’t sure if any of the Avengers had been part of a successful sibling relationship. He, Bruce and Steve were only children. The only women Natasha had ever had a sisterly relationship with were the other Black Widow initiates she had been forced to kill in order to assure her own survival. If Barton had siblings, he never brought them up. Even Pepper was an only child. The only one of them who came somewhat close to witnessing a somewhat successful developing sibling relationship was Steve, who had watched Bucky Barnes and his baby sister Becky grow up together back in the 1920s. So, even though Steve tried to assure Tony the constant bickering between Thor and Loki was normal for siblings, Tony had a hard time believing it.

Because of his developing friendship with Steve, Loki was actually spending more time outside of his private quarters without Sigyn accompanying him. Despite his past, Steve and Bruce had both come to admire Loki for his quick thinking and intellectualism. Tony adored his snark. While Barton was still furious for all that Loki had made him do, Barton had to admit Loki’s actions hadn’t necessarily been his own. Tony had to admit the archer was coming to terms with Loki and seemed to be coming around to him as well. However, Thor’s presence seemed to make Loki more agitated and, the more time Thor spent with those Loki had been developing a friendship with, the less nice Loki was to be around.

When Pepper announced she, Natasha, and Sigyn were meeting Maria Hill for a Saturday brunch at the Central Park Boathouse, the guys decided to go out themselves to a Mexican restaurant. Steve had been delighted there were more Mexican and Southwestern options than back in his day, though Tony insisted you still had to head out west to better tasting, more authentic cuisine. However, Tony soon found himself not able to discuss Tex-Mex cuisine and how far it had come because he was too busy policing the Odinsons. For the first time, Tony felt guilty for every time he had made his mother or one of his many nannies chastise him for making a scene in public.

The complaints from the two brothers seemed inane at best and ludicrous at worst. Thor is taking up too much of the booth. Loki shot his straw at me. Thor double dipped a chip. Why does Loki get his own bowl of queso? Thor won’t let me out to use the bathroom. Loki stepped on my foot while leaving the booth. Thor’s plate is touching my plate. No, Loki’s plate is touching my plate. Thor is kicking me. Loki made me drop my fork. Thor stuck his tongue out at me. Loki got hot sauce on my
napkin. No, you got your napkin on my hot sauce. The two brothers only shut up after Steve announced Tony wouldn’t be purchasing any dessert if they kept it up. Tony didn’t think either one of them particularly deserved dessert, but he also knew they could probably both drop kick him across the East River.

Things seemed to have calmed down only to flare up again in the private elevator up to the living quarters. A stench suddenly filled the elevator that was so terrible, so odious that Tony momentarily thought it was an act of bioterrorism. There were another dozen floors to go and someone had cut the mother of all cheeses in the elevator. Tony looked around, wondering if he was the only person who had smelled it, only for Thor to put voice to his thoughts.

“What is that foul odor?” Thor grimaced.

“Worse that nerve gas,” Cap muttered.

“Come on, guys,” Tony groaned. “Be professional, here.”

“I believe, according to the rules of Midgard,” Loki informed Thor, “that he who hath smelt the odor dealt it.”

“Seriously, Clint?” Tony groaned. Clint took another bite out of his burrito nonchalantly.

“That is a most heinous lie!” Thor thundered at Loki. “A prince of Asgard could never produce such an unrefined stench!”

“Well, Volstagg is not present,” Loki shrugged, “and I believe the second Midgardian rule is that he who hath denied it hath supplied the odor in question.”

“You taught them that?” Tony grimaced at Clint as Thor began shouting at Loki about slandering him. “Did you also teach them to ask people to pull their fingers?” Clint didn’t reply, finishing off his burrito.

“Unhand me, you foul smelling beast!” Loki said as Thor tucked him into a headlock.

“Not until you recant your slanders!” Thor yelled.

“Maybe we can just get off on the next floor?” Bruce suggested. “Give the elevator some time to clear up?”

“Good idea,” Tony agreed, pushing the button.

“Punishing me will not cause your crimes against the atmosphere to go away!” Loki shouted as Thor began doing what Tony could only assume was the Asgardian version of a noogie.

“You know the pollution is not mine!” Thor thundered angrily.

“That one was pretty silent but violent,” Clint nodded, causing Thor to shout in anger again.

“Seriously, guys,” Tony said, “Cap here is an old man. All your potty humor is going to give him a heart attack.”

“Oh yeah,” Cap deadpanned. “It’s a well known fact that flatulence wasn’t invented until 1948.”

“Did you just crack a joke?” Tony asked as the elevator finally opened, sending the group of them gasping for fresh air into one of the lab floors.
While the rest of the group seemed just relieved to be getting fresh air into their lungs, Loki and Thor were rolling around on the floor, punching and jabbing at each other. Bruce backed away instinctively, worried that he might be drawn into the fray. Tony tried his best to herd the pair of them from the glass windows into the lab. Steve finally managed to pull Thor off of Loki and drag him away from his brother, only for Loki to use the opportunity to kick at Thor’s crotch. Steve managed to jerk Thor away at the last second, Loki’s foot coming into contact with Thor’s knee instead, while Barton and Tony worked to pull Loki away in the opposite direction.

“Fiend!” Thor shouted at Loki.

“Lummox!” Loki shouted back.

“Alright, I think some people need a time out,” Tony mentioned. “Seriously, how did your mother not kill the both of you as kids for carrying on like this?” Both Thor and Loki managed to look a bit sheepish. Loki let out a huff and shrugged off Barton and Tony.

“He started it,” Thor insisted.

“I was not the one who polluted such a small, confined space,” Loki pointed out, brushing himself off.

“I think you guys should apologize to each other,” Steve announced. Loki and Thor both looked at each other furiously and then to Steve as if he was crazy.

“Thor started it,” Loki insisted. “He should go first.”

“I started nothing!” Thor bellowed. “I shall not apologize! Not now or ever!”

“Fine,” Loki hissed. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my chambers.” Loki stormed off, back into the elevator and disappeared behind the steel doors.

“How about we go get rid of some of that excess energy in the training rooms,” Steve suggested to Thor. The prince’s face lit up instantly and, as soon as the elevator returned, the two of them were off.

“Seriously though,” Tony said. “who farted in the elevator?” Bruce shrugged as Barton grinned and then parkoured himself up into the ceiling.

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Even a full afternoon of brooding for Loki and training for Thor did not seem to quell the animosity between the brothers. Neither of them spoke much during supper in the communal dining area, but they certainly spent a lot of time glaring at each other over their plates. Tony thought about pulling Sigyn aside to ask if this was just normal squabbling or if there had been some sort of event or altercation between the two brothers that had set off this latest round of fighting. However, Sigyn had quickly bundled her husband out of the common area and back down to their rooms once the meal was complete, perhaps sensing it would be best if Loki and Thor spent some time apart.

A few minutes after Loki and Sigyn disappeared, it was time for one of Thor’s twice-daily Skype calls with Jane. He set up in the library off of the communal living room, chatting with her for about an hour before returning to finish up the movie the rest of the group had selected. Thor seemed in a much more jovial mood as he headed to bed, and the rest of the Avengers just hoped it had been an off day between the two brothers. Mostly, Thor and Loki avoided each other the following day.

Things finally came to a head after supper the next evening when Cap and Thor went to the training
rooms for some sparring practice. While Tony didn’t think sparring while digesting was a good idea, neither man could be persuaded out of it. Tony sighed and followed them, deciding it would be as good an opportunity as any to work on some of the projections and training algorithms he had been trying to perfect for the team. Cap and Thor were the two non-Hulk hardest hitters on the team and one of Tony’s goals for his training project was to help the team push their limits. Things were going well until Cap knocked Thor into a pillar.

The pillar wobbled from the force and when Cap caught the look of terror on Tony’s face, he assumed Tony feared for the structural integrity of the building. Cap followed Tony’s gaze only to see - as if in slow motion - a giant metal bucket emitting about five gallons of water, goop and what appeared to be fish odds and ends on top of Thor’s head. Thor seemed ready to charge back at Cap until he stopped to sniff the air. Thor looked up just as the container of fish guts smacked into him, covering his entire body with gloop. Tony started to laugh, but stopped after the rapid ingestion of air his laughter required forced him to inhale the stench of dead fish and moldy laundry Thor was now covered in.

“I. WILL. HAVE. VENGEANCE!” Thor thundered. The next thing Cap and Tony knew, Thor had Mjolnir in hand and his Asgardian wardrobe over his fish-gut-covered self. Before either man could calm him down, Thor flew right up through the walls and toward whomever he seemed to think was responsible.

“My Tower!” Tony gasped in horror.

“I think we’ll have more to worry about than construction if Thor kills someone,” Steve pointed out.

“Right,” Tony frowned. “JARVIS, where did Thor go?”

“He is currently in the communal living area, Sir,” JARVIS said. “Attacking Prince Loki.”

“Great,” Tony muttered.

When Steve and Tony made it up to the communal living space, they found party platter of cheese, crackers and salami and an entire vegetable platter sitting on the kitchen counter next to a giant kettle of tea. A pattern of shattered glass in front of the counter led to a Thor-shaped hole in the window directly across from the kitchen area. Moving towards the sounds of tussling, they soon found Loki and Thor rolling around on the floor, throwing punches in all directions and smearing fish guts into the carpet. Steve and Tony both attempted to pull them off each other, but even Steve’s science steroids and the use of an Iron Man gauntlet were not enough to pull the two apart. Tony’s threats to blast them both all the way down to the human resources department on the twelfth floor didn’t merit any response either. Tony and Steve then looked at each other, trying to figure out how to stop this sibling fist fight without calling a Code Green.

“I may have a solution, Sir,” JARVIS announced then went silent as Tony began to ask him what they should do.

The two brothers continued rolling about the floor, punches and curses flying in every direction. Tony was jumping up and down excitedly, yelling at both of them about getting blood on his rug or knocking into the expensive furniture. The elevator doors opened and Sigyn stormed into the room, having been tipped off by JARVIS that Loki and Thor were fighting. Glancing at the two brothers fighting on the floor, she grabbed Steve’s shield straight out of his hand, causing a slack-jawed expression to come across the super soldier’s face. Before he could protest, Sigyn had used her seiðr to fill the shield with icy water and then dump that water over both men. Stunned, both Thor and Loki looked upward from the floor into the eyes of a fuming Sigyn.
“Get off me,” Loki said, using the distraction to push his brother off of him and stand up. He looked as though he was ready to thank his wife when Thor jumped up as well.

“You don’t understand, Sigyn!” Thor said angrily. “Loki caused a calamity in the training rooms…”

“I did not!” Loki interjected.

“Cease your lying, foul cur!” Thor shot back, sticking a fist toward his brother’s face.

“Stop it, Thor. Loki speaks the truth!” Sigyn hissed at her brother-in-law. “I have been at his side every moment. I believe I would have noticed him getting up to any mischief.”

“You’ve been with him every moment for the past thirty-six hours?” Tony asked, skeptically. “You weren’t here when we got here.”

“I was returning to our rooms to bring tea cups,” Sigyn replied, gesturing over to the party tray and tea on the counter. “Loki forgot them for our snack, and he’s very picky about what is drinks are placed in.”

“The mugs here often have spots on them after Barton does the dishes,” Loki huffed.

“At each other’s side for a full day and a half?” Thor snorted in disbelief. “What, pray tell, could have kept you occupied so long?

“I did spend a great deal of that time between my wife’s thighs,” Loki shot back. Sigyn used the shield to smack Loki over the head and then tossed it back to Steve, who caught it effortlessly despite trying not to laugh. Loki rubbed the back of his head in annoyance, and Steve was actually surprised the hard-head godling hadn’t dented the vibranium. Tony for his part, just threw his hands up in the air.

“I’m out. This is getting into TMI territory,” Tony said, stomping out of the room. “Call me if we find the culprit so they can get started cleaning up the training room. And you’re paying for both the windows, Thor!”

“Someone caused a rain of sewage upon my person during training exercises, and I will have vengeance!” Thor demanded.

“I was wondering why you smelled more… odious than normal,” Loki scoffed, brushing imaginary lint off his clothing.

“What has happened?” Sigyn demanded to know.

“Thor and I were sparring with Tony using our moves to set up some training programs,” Steve explained. “All of a sudden, a big bucket of gloop came down and covered Thor with… I’m sure at least part of it was fish guts.”

“And you blamed my husband for such a childish prank?” Sigyn snorted.

“Without his seiðr, I assumed Loki had to stoop to such tactics,” Thor replied.

“Yes, my husband would do this,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “Not the very skillful, stealthy archer who spends much of his time in the ceiling and has been complaining constantly and rather loudly about you eating all of the pickled herring he has purchased. You remember? He left the evening meal last night muttering ‘If Thor wants fish, I’ll give him fish?’” Thor’s face paled in realization. “It is a good thing the strategy is left to Captain Rogers and not yourself, Thor.”
“Yes, well,” Thor said, suddenly very interested in the lacing of his boots.

“Well, if I am no longer needed as a punching bag…” Loki began.

“Thor,” Steve said, hating how much he sounded like his mother after he and Bucky had gotten into a scrape. “Don’t you have something to say to Loki?”

“Yes,” Thor nodded, meeting his brother’s gaze. “I am sorry I falsely accused you and then attacked you instead of allowing you to defend yourself from my accusations. Had I listened I would have known you were not at fault. I am sorry.”

“I’m more insulted you thought I was responsible for such shoddy and juvenile work,” Loki snorted. “With all of the equipment around here, you really think I would resort to something so simple as a bucket of fish heads?”

“Yes, well,” Thor shrugged.

“I would expect better than that of Barton as well,” Loki snorted. “When you seek him out, do tell him I am disappointed in his meager efforts. He has much more potential.”

“I think ‘I forgive you’ is the response Captain Rogers was seeking,” Sigyn said, elbowing her husband.

“Fine,” Loki snorted looking at his brother. “What Sigyn said.”

“Close enough,” Sigyn sighed. Thor extended his hand and, after a moment’s skepticism, Loki grabbed his brother’s forearm and shook it. Thor then headed out of the room, thundering after Barton.

“Is there anything else, Captain Rogers?” Loki asked, noticing the soldier was looking at him rather intently.

“Not really. I just noticed that you’re a pretty scrappy fighter when you have a bigger opponent and just have your fists to rely on,” Steve said.

“Well, when one has an oaf of an older brother to contend with, you have to learn more devious ways than relying on pure strength,” Loki snorted. “I’m sure you disapprove of such underhanded tactics.”

“I’m pretty sure there are a few bullies from Brooklyn that would disagree with that statement,” Steve smirked. “Well, I better go get your brother before he electrocutes Clint.”

If the Avengers thought the Loki-Thor brotherly feud had reached its climax, they were wrong. The two brothers seemed to have reached an uneasy accord following the fish guts incident, but it became quickly apparent the uneasy peace wouldn’t last long, especially after Tony and Pepper found themselves awoken by a concerned-sounding JARVIS just before six the next morning. JARVIS abruptly announced that Thor and Loki had gotten into an argument that led to Thor electrocuting the communal stove before excusing himself to further monitor the unfolding situation. Tony groaned, only for the fire alarm to start going off.

Steve was already in the kitchen by the time Tony arrived, Natasha hot on his heels and Sigyn right behind her. What they encountered was Loki standing on the kitchen counter, yelling at his brother while Thor yelled back before sheepishly watching as the sprinkler system doused the flaming stove.
Someone had pulled the giant afghan from the living area and draped it across the stove, as one might put a blanket over a dead body. The parts of the blanket draped over the stove eye had been burned off, leaving a circle of burnt yarn all around where the eyes were. One of the stove eyes clearly had a completely burned pot on it. In fact, the pot had gotten so hot it was melted to the stove.

“What happened?” Pepper demanded loudly, forcing the two brothers to stop yelling at each other and focus on her.

“It’s Thor’s fault!” Loki announced.

“You were the one who turned on the device!” Thor pointed out.

“And you were supposed to be watching it!” Loki shot back.

“From the beginning!” Pepper ordered in her take-no-prisoners-CEO voice.

“I wanted a poached egg,” Thor began.

“What?” Tony grumbled.

“Let him speak,” Pepper interjected.

“I wanted a poached egg,” Thor explained, “but since the mishap where…I, uh…”

“Nearly burned down the Tower trying to use the oven to heat up your room?” Tony prompted.

“Yes, that,” Thor nodded, “Sir Stark had unplugged the stove in my quarters and turned it about so I would not be tempted to use it. But I wanted a poached egg for the morning meal, so I went to seek out Sigyn to see if she could help because she has learned much of Midgardian cookery…”

“But Sigyn was asleep, and I was not about to let Thor disturb her for something so trivial,” Loki harrumphed. “And I knew the two of us in my kitchen would only awaken her. So Thor suggested we attempt our cooking experimentation here in the common area where we would be least likely to disturb anyone.”

“Yeah, not a great plan,” Tony huffed.

“I have made poached eggs before,” Loki said, “albeit with the aid of seiðr, and I did not think it would be difficult to operate your Midgardian cooking device. Things were going well, until I had to step away… to relieve myself… and left Thor in charge of the operation.”

“It was cooking too slowly,” Thor tried to apologize. “I attempted to increase the heat so it would cook faster, but the cooking did not seem to accelerate. I do not know why. All four of the cooking sensors were blazing as hot as Muspelheim. Before I knew it, the water began to bubble and overflow. I panicked and…”

“Summoned lightning?” Pepper concluded.

“Well,” Tony said, maneuvering over to the stove. “You certainly cooked something. You melted the pot onto the stove.”

“Where did the blanket come in?” Steve prompted.

“The cook in the palace of Asgard often talked of smothering fires,” Thor shrugged.

“That is for oil fires, you imbecile!” Loki huffed. “I arrived back just in time for Thor to toss the
blanket upon the stove and set it alight as well.”

“It was taking too long!” Thor bemoaned.

“If you had lasted another minute more things would have been fine!” Loki shot back. “Why must I forever be suffering for your impatience and impetuousness!”

“You shouldn’t have left me alone with the cooking devices!” Thor shot back.

“Oh, I am sorry,” Loki snorted. “So silly of me. I thought I could trust a grown man to be patient enough to watch an egg come to a boil!”

“You think you know everything because you have seiðr!” Thor glowered. “You are not as clever as you think!”

“You think it is perfectly acceptable to bash the head in of anyone who doesn’t agree or supplicate to you!” Loki hissed. “And you never take credit for your own mistakes!”

“Says the man who is purposefully cruel and harmful to others!” Thor snorted.

“I have never played a prank on someone who didn’t deserve it!” Loki shot back.

“What about when you turned me into a frog?” Thor shouted.

“It was an accident!” Loki shouted back. “I was a child! You got better!”

“Yes, after I was attacked by a gang of unruly mice in the palace kitchens!” Thor shot back.

“You provoked them!” Loki pointed out. “You must always have a quarrel with someone!”

“Now look who’s talking!” Thor laughed derisively.

“Barbarian!” Loki shouted.

“Wretch!” Thor yelled at Loki.

“Oaf!” Loki yelled at Thor.

“Coward!” Thor shouted back.

“ENOUGH!”

Tony had thought Pepper’s boardroom voice could be scary, but there was nothing to compare to the absolute fury of Sigyn standing before the group in her glittery pale pink nightgown and messily braided hair. As she strode forward toward her husband and brother-in-law, her eyes narrowed and an icy chill seemed to go up the spines of everyone in the room. Even the typically stoic Black Widow seemed a tick unnerved - even if the larger part of her looked impressed. While Sigyn’s battle-cry-like yell had draw the attention of the room, she next addressed the two embarrassed me standing before her in a tone so even, so low and so cold Tony was certain it could cause the Tower windows to frost over even in the middle of July.

“I do not know what sort of insipid escapade or mismanaged machinations the pair of you have gotten into this time, nor do I care to know,” Sigyn said evenly. “But this utter nonsense must stop. You have caused no small amount of calamity. You have destroyed the property of our host and others. And you have forced your friends and comrades to intervene on your behalf in order to set things to right instead of being responsible and doing the thing yourselves!”
“But he started…” Loki began.

“I don’t care who started anything,” Sigyn cut him off. “All that matters is that I am finishing this. The two of you are going to be kind and civil to each other for the remainder of Thor’s stay here and any future stays he has while the two of us are serving our time here on Midgard. And when we return to Asgard, the two of you will remain so.”

“Even if everyone thinks there must be something wrong with us because we are being nice to each other?” Loki snorted.

“Even if he turns my goblet into a rat and blames me for setting fire to Mother’s drapes?” Thor frowned.

“Even if I have to curse you both to only say kind things to each other. Even if it kills you both,” Sigyn said coldly. “We might even bury you side by side. Holding hands if that is what it takes.”

“I think she is serious,” Thor staged whispered to his brother.

“What gave it away?” Loki harrumphed. “The tone of voice or the fact she threatened to curse us?”

“Now, the two of you are going to clean up this mess you created,” Sigyn said. “You are going to apologize to Sir Stark and Lady Pepper for what you have done to their home and then you are going to apologize to everyone for your behavior as of late. Then, you are both going to write letters to your mother for me to send with my next batch explaining to Queen Frigga why, despite her best intentions and the best possible upbringing she provided for you, the both of you insist on acting like spoilt toddlers any time you are left alone for more than a moment. And then you will apologize to her for all the time and effort she wasted trying to turn both of you into respectable gentlemen.”

Rather than respond, both Thor and Loki stood awkwardly and became very focused on their feet or anything in the room they could look at rather than Sigyn.

“Well,” Sigyn said, finally breaking the tense silence. “Get to work.”

Loki and Thor were suddenly both toppling over each other trying to find a way of cleaning the kitchen. When Thor asking where cleaning supplies were located caused Tony to shrug, Pepper decided he better help to learn how to clean up the area on his own. Cap was left to supervise to ensure no overflows of bubbles or further mishaps prevented the area from being cleaned. The stove, as it turned out, was a complete loss due to being electrocuted by Thor, and it was a wondering the rest of the room’s wiring hadn’t suffered as a result. Once cleaned completely, Tony had the stove sent down to his workshop to see if he could reuse spare parts. He asked JARVIS to order a new, better stove for the room - claiming all the while he had intended to do so soon anyway. As the men continued cleaning, the three women stood off to the side.

“You might have to teach me that,” Pepper said to Sigyn as the guys finished up scrubbing the floor. “I’ve never seen anyone jump into action that quick. And that floor might be soon clean you could eat off it, even with Tony involved in the whole thing.”

“You might be able to give Fury some lessons,” Natasha agreed.

Thor and Loki’s mess having been cleaned up and the mess from said cleanup having been cleaned up, the guys suddenly found themselves assembled in a military-like line before the women, as if they were waiting for some kind of inspection. Of the four of them, Steve was the only one who actually seemed confused why they were standing like soldiers at parade rest.

“It’s clean,” Thor finally said. Sigyn seemed to give him a bit of a nod.
“Now that this is settled,” Sigyn said, raising her nose slightly as if daring any of the men before her to offer any contradiction, “I am returning to my chambers to dress for the day. When I return, I should hope the two of you are well into your apology efforts. And I will expect those letters tomorrow morning. And I will read them before sending them and be rather cross if I think anything inappropriate is included.” She then swept out of the room in her nightgown, Pepper and Natasha trying to hide their grins as they followed her out of the room.

“That was some dressing down,” Steve finally said with a low whistle.

“No offense,” Tony said to Loki, “but I’m kind of afraid of your wife now. Possibly more than I’m afraid of you.”

“Then,” Loki said with a sigh, “you are a very wise man.”

Chapter End Notes

Sigyn later provided Tony with a blanket she had woven herself on her loom to replace the Thor had destroyed. Almost like a medieval tapestry, Tony and Pepper thought it was too nice to use as a couch throw blanket and instead, hung it up on a wall.

Sigyn’s dialogue inspired by this comic panel where Marvel Sigyn defends her husband. Notice, this was during one of the times in the comics they were chained together. Ironically, in early Thor comics, Loki lost all his powers if he got wet.
Tony Stark wasn’t exactly sure what he had done.

All he really knew was that Pepper was mad at him and everyone around him seemed miffed as well. Happy looked at him with a shake of his head, as if to indicate Tony had gone too far this time. Even the bots were acting disappointed in him. Tony wracked his brain to see if he had said or done anything that could even be misconstrued as inappropriate and came up with nothing. Until JARVIS showed him the footage of a board meeting earlier that week. Taking a page out of Loki’s book, Tony had decided to give Pepper a “just because” gift. However, the delicate nature of the gift he selected made him order that the gift be put in Pepper’s hands and only Pepper’s hands. How was he to know that the delivery guy would take him so literally and cause Pepper to unwittingly open a package of very slutty lingerie in a room full of grumpy old men.

After being lectured - by JARVIS of all people - about how this was not an appropriate time or place to give such a gift, Tony managed to slink off to his lab in the hopes of concocting something that would help Pepper forgive him. He initially thought about ordering some giant stuffed animal of sorts, despite the shipping fees being more than the creature itself, but balked when he found out how long it would take for delivery. Tony was mentally debating if underwear was a suitable forgiveness gift when he was startled by Loki, who was ominously standing over him.

“What is that?” Loki asked, poking the screen.

“First off, don’t touch screens. You get fingerprints on them,” Tony groaned. “Second off, how did you get in here? This room is secure!”

“The doors opened and I walked in,” Loki snorted.

“JARVIS,” Tony said, “what happened to your security protocols?”

“Sir, according to my protocols, His Highness is allowed within these labs so long as he is accompanied by a member of the Avengers Team,” JARVIS intoned. “As you were here already…”

“Okay, from now on, Loki here has to ask permission to come in so we know he’s in here,” Tony said.

“I like that your haunted building has a subtle sense of the technicality,” Loki informed Stark.

“The building’s not haunted it’s just…” Tony said, wanting to repeatedly smash the StarkPad he was holding up against his head. “Forget it. I am not trying to explain artificial intelligence again.” Loki smirked and Tony groaned again. “You get it don’t you? You just like calling it haunted because you know it bugs me.”

“Perhaps,” Loki simpered.
“You might be the second most infuriating being I’ve ever met,” Tony said.

“Only the second?” Loki said, picking at his nails.

“Well, my old man would have annoyed even you,” Tony said.

“You have not answered my query,” Loki pointed out.

“Huh? Oh, this is a giant stuffed bunny rabbit I was going to order for Pepper,” Tony said, “but apparently, it can’t be shipped for two weeks.”

“It doesn’t look like any stuffed rabbit I ever saw,” Loki said, peering at the screen. “It looks like a toy.”

“It is a toy,” Tony said. “What? Don’t have plush toys on Asgard?”

“Well, most parents do not give taxidermied creatures to their children, no,” Loki said. “Though Odin did once attempt to decorate our childhood room with a stuffed stag head. It gave me nightmares but it was only removed after seeing the silhouette of the creature during a thunderstorm caused Thor to wet himself in the night.”

“Yeah, remind me to tell you about the time Howard thought it would be good for me to celebrate my birthday by having a sleepover in the display room of his hunting lodge with the kids of a bunch of his business colleagues,” Tony shuddered. “And that one is still better than the birthday where I got left at the Grand Canyon. Surprisingly, one of my better birthdays was the one where I got kidnapped and held for ransom. At least the kidnappers let me have pizza.”

“Quite,” Loki nodded. “So… these stuffed creatures for children are not real creatures?”

“No,” Tony said, pulling up the Toys R Us website and introducing Loki to a virtual zoo of stuffed plushies. “They’re cutey animals with fabric stuffing that kids and sometimes older people can play with. They’re apparently good for cuddling. Not that I would know. And I definitely don’t keep a stuffed tiger from my childhood in my room. And it definitely doesn’t sleep on the bed with me when Pepper is gone.”

“Yes,” Loki said, looking up and down the list. “And these animals may be delivered here?”

“Well, yeah,” Tony shrugged. “Thinking about getting Sigyn a teddy bear or something?”

“Perhaps,” Loki said. “Since I am no longer allowed to present her with live creatures…”

“And you’re lucky the birds are well behaved and the snake bracelet thing is only technically not alive most of the time,” Tony reminded him.

“…perhaps these stuffed creatures would be a happy medium,” Loki finished. “Tell me, what type of Midgardian creature is an Elmo?”

“Okay, I am officially ordering some of those David Attenborough DVDs so you, the wife and High Voltage can learn what are real animals that live here on Earth and what are fictional characters and/or puppets,” Tony announced.

“Make sure your video recording includes footage of platypuses,” Loki smirked. “Sigyn is quite fond of them.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony said, waving Loki off so he could Google where in Manhattan to find a human-
In retrospect, Tony should have realized what would happen after he explained to the so-called God of Mischief how to order things online with overnight delivery. The next day, Tony was donating some of his time and expertise to helping with the rewiring of some of the damaged buildings when he got an annoyed call from Happy demanding to know why so many deliveries were being made to the Tower. Initially, Happy thought the boatload of boxes were Tony’s, but Stark insisted he had ordered anything and he would especially remember ordering in bulk, upon closer inspection, Happy realized the boxes were all addressed to one Loren Olsen.

“Uh, I think I know what those are;” Tony admitted sheepishly.

“You did not give the biggest super villain this town has ever seen the ability to order weapons online,” Happy groaned. “Please tell me you did not.”

“No,” Tony insisted. “They’re probably just toys for his wife…”

“If this is some perverted sex thing…” Happy began.

“I don’t think so,” Tony shook his head. “He came down to the lab last night, and I may have shown him what stuffed animals are.”

“Jesus, Tony,” Happy groaned. “We are going to have to go through every single one of these boxes and cut open all these toys to make sure he’s not smuggling something in them.”

“No, no don’t cut them open,” Tony said. “I have a feeling that would send Prince UnCharming into a rage faster than anything. Use the X-Ray machine in Bruce’s lab. Tell him you have my permission.”

“That could work,” Happy nodded. “And can you tell your bulk-order buddy to in the future give us a heads up if he plans on making us go through this again. Or maybe just take away his ordering privileges? I’m not sure I feel safe knowing that guy could have all of the materials used to make a bomb overnighted to him.”

“He wouldn’t need them overnighted,” Tony huffed. “I have most of them in the labs.”

“That comforts me less,” Happy sighed.

After disconnecting the call with Happy, Tony hung his tools on his tool belt and set off to go find Loki. He found him across the street helping Steve of all people sort debris into dumpsters of recyclables, recyclable material that could be reused for building, and plain refuse. Someone had lent Rogers a copy of *Silent Spring* - Tony would bet money it was Bruce - and now Steve had taken to the environmentalist cause. Unfortunately, the only person who both understood Tony’s Captain Planet references and found them funny was Clint. Thor seemed to think Steve had received some sort of promotion afterwards, and Tony had been tasked with explaining the joke to Thor, which ruined it.

“Hey Voldemort!” Tony called out to Loki.

“Are you talking to me?” Steve asked curiously.

“No,” Tony groaned. “I’m talking to tall, dark and creepy.”
“What is a Voldemort?” Loki asked.

“I’m not sure,” Steve admitted.

“Okay, I might make those pop culture classes Lewis suggested mandatory,” Tony groaned before turning to Loki. “I just got a call from Happy. Apparently the twenty million stuffed animals you ordered arrived.”

“Splendid,” Loki nodded. “Sigyn will be going out with Lady Pepper this evening. I understand your key-keeper is cross with you and needs someone to commiserate with. I will hopefully have time to make the proper arrangements before Sigyn returns to our chambers for the evening.”

“What proper arrangements?” Tony frowned.

“This must be why you are in perennial trouble with the Lady Pepper,” Loki rolled his eyes. “The giving of a gift isn’t just about plopping something down in a woman’s lap. One must assure it has the proper presentation. You need to construct the appropriate mood, atmosphere and arrangement. No woman wants to be given a gift as though it were a few coins being left on a nightstand at a whorehouse.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony snorted, “I wasn’t aware you had to throw a woman a party to give her a gift.”

“Norns, Stark,” Loki huffed. “I didn’t realize you knew so little about females.”

“What did you do this time, anyway?” Tony asked.

“And here I thought you had learned,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Sometimes, it is best to just present your paramour with gifts for no reason, to remind her that no matter what is happening she is appreciated. Sigyn deserves to be treated like the princess she is. Therefore, I devote time and efforts into reminding her of that fact, such as arranging my gifts in a manner befitting her.”

“How exactly does one make proper arrangements with stuffed animals?” Steve asked curiously.

“No, nuh-uh,” Tony interrupted before Loki could respond. “I am not letting you get dating tips from Snivellus over there.”

“Who?” Steve asked.

“You really need to read *Harry Potter*, man,” Tony shrugged.

“I’m sorry,” Loki snorted, “but I know you do not think yourself better suited for explaining courtship rituals than I. Between the two of us, who has been successfully married for more than two hundred years and who has only recently entered into a courtship that only seems successful because one or both of the partners are rarely in the same country?”

“That is not why my relationship is successful!” Tony insisted.

“Absence does make the heart grow fonder,” Steve pointed out.

“And I don’t know if I would say all two hundred-odd years of your marriage have been successful,” Tony said. “What about the last year and a half?”

“Well, I’ve certainly been more successful than you,” Loki snorted.

“Which is why you’re bribing your wife with stuffed animals?” Tony retorted. “And idea, I might add, you stole from me.”
“And improved upon,” Loki replied.

“What? No!” Tony insisted.

“Besides, what business is it of yours if I purchase a gift for my wife?” Loki snorted.

“Because Happy is now having to scan all of them to make sure there aren’t any weapons being smuggled in through them,” Tony replied. “It would have been nice too to get a heads up that you were ordering an entire toy store. Not to mention I thought JARVIS took away your ordering online privileges after the Incident that Shall Not Be Named?”

“You only specified ordering for live creatures, I thought,” Loki huffed. “And if you revoke my ability to acquire things over your talking picture boxes I will have to do so in person. What is really more of a risk to you: having to inspect packages or having me wandering about your city looking for particular goods?”

“He might have us there,” Steve said to Tony gently. “I for one would be more comfortable if he was just buying things from the safety of the Tower.”

“Alright, but I’m telling JARVIS that he has to alert me before you purchase anything, and I get an ultimate override on anything I deem dangerous,” Tony said.

“As if I couldn’t create danger with the materials you have on hand in your precious Tower,” Loki huffed.

“How are you affording all this stuff, anyway?” Steve asked curiously. “I mean, have you seen the price of milk lately?”

“I am royalty,” Loki replied haughtily.

“And Odin promised he would pay me back for the keeping and care of our Asgardian friends,” Tony said. “Still not sure what Asgard’s exchange rate is. Pepper is actually concerned that the influx gold and silver might actually upset the economy, too.”

“Yes,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Blame me for the fact you are getting more money.”

“Just hold off on the bulk ordering, okay?” Tony said. Loki made a non-committal mutter, which Tony decided would have to do.

“Look at all the miniaturized stuffed creatures!” Thor said happily as he stood in Loki and Sigyn’s living area.

Loki grumbled under his breath about Thor but remained sitting on the floor with the creatures and analyzing each and every one. Someone - a.k.a. Steve - had told Thor about Loki’s online shopping excursion, so instead of going out to eat with the rest of the clean-up crew following the a hard day’s work, Thor returned to the tower with Tony and Steve to see the results of Loki’s latest mischief. Happy had greeted them, informing Tony that there was thankfully nothing dangerous in or about the toys. The one exception might have been the motion-detection teddy bear that said “I love you” in a high-pitched voice every time someone moved near it. At least one security officer had screamed like a small child when it inadvertently went off. Happy had debated detaining the toy just because it was creepy but decided he didn’t want to keep it around. However, right before it was set to be returned, it had started another security guard, who ended up shooting the thing several times, thinking it was a noisy intruder. Happy hoped Loki wouldn’t notice its absence or that he at least
wouldn’t care.

Now Loki was poking around the pile of toys in a manner that reminded Thor of how their father’s ravens poked and prodded whatever strange trinkets they had brought back to their nests after their travels. Loki seemed to have started sorting the creatures by color but then stopped halfway through and began sorting them again by type of animal or creature. Or at least what he assumed were the same creatures based on their appearances. Tony tried to explain that koalas and pandas technically didn’t belong in the bear pile, but Loki didn’t seem to care. The wolf also got grouped in with the dogs, and Tony had to explain to Loki that while related, giraffes and llamas were not the same type of creature.

At Tony’s final count, Loki had eighteen bears (including the koalas and pandas), thirteen dogs and what was probably a wolf, five monkeys (including a purple orangutan), five cats, four rabbits, three dragons, two snakes, two horses and two platypuses. There were also several creatures that were on their own including an armadillo, unicorn with rainbow hair, a pig, a cow, a sloth, an elephant, a blue whale, a giraffe, a peacock, a tiger, a seal, a penguin, a lion, a sea turtle, a fawn, a frog, a llama, and a mother kangaroo with baby in its pouch. During Tony’s initial count of the creatures, he noticed Thor had grabbed one from the yet unsorted pile. However, it wasn’t until Loki was finished sorting the creatures and counting them himself that he realized at least one was missing.

“Thor! That goat is not for you!” Loki hissed at his brother, who seemed to be cuddling the smiling, big-eyed toy.

“It is adorable!” Thor pronounced. “Please, allow me to have it for my Lady Jane! Sigyn has more than enough here.”

“You should acquire your own,” Loki huffed.

“But Sigyn is not even that fond of goats!” Thor insisted. “Besides, Jane and I so rarely see each other. I want her to have a token to remember me by!”

“Then you should have thought of that beforehand and put some thought into acquiring her a gift rather than stealing one from me,” Loki hissed.

“You have acquired Sigyn dozens of presents,” Thor pointed out. “Would she truly miss one?” Loki grumbled, pausing from where he was now artfully arranging the toys on one of the sofas.

“And what would I receive in exchange for this?” Loki asked his brother curiously, turning away from where he had just repositioned a stuffed bear three times. Thor seemed to stop and think for a moment.

“I have coins…” Thor began, reaching into his pocket.

“Yes, Asgardian currency. Worthless to me here on Midgard,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Might as well offer someone a wet towel to dry off with.” Loki turned back to arranging the toy bears by height while Thor tried to think of something else he could offer.

“You may have the rest of my tarted pastries when I leave,” Thor suggested.

“Why would I want your leavings?” Loki snorted. “Besides, the toasted strudels are much preferable to your tarted pastries.”

“They are not!” Thor insisted.

“Are too,” Loki replied.
“I can’t wait to tell everyone about this argument,” Tony murmured to himself.

“I can have something sent to you from Asgard when I return,” Thor suggested, finally.

“You honestly believe I did not take everything I needed when I came here?” Loki snorted. “Some of us take time to pack and prepare ahead rather than just grabbing a hammer and flying off, hoping they have whatever we need wherever we are going.”

“There is really nothing that you… or perhaps Sigyn… would desire from Asgard? Or one of the other realms that I might be able to procure?” Thor said with a raised brow. Loki paused in his efforts to get one of the toy dragons to sit up properly and turned to face his former brother.

“You may keep the goat in exchange for a favor to be named at a later date,” Loki decided finally. “I will hold you to this.”

“Thor, I don’t think…” Steve began.

“Done!” Thor proclaimed. “My Lady Jane will be most pleased.”

“I don’t think that was a smart decision, Thunder Thighs,” Tony shook his head. “What if he asks for you to cut out someone’s tongue or worse?” Thor waved off Tony, instead making goat-like noises at the toy as if he expected it to respond.

“Now that you have acquired your aim, I would appreciate it very much if you were to bugger off,” Loki informed them. “This arrangement must be done just right, and it is very distracting to do so with a conversation happening around you.”

“We’ve got our eyes on you, Prince Humperdink,” Tony informed Loki.

“Tell me, Stark, who in the Nine Realms convinced you that lacy underthings are a suitable gift for a woman?” Loki asked, still focused on arranging the toy dragon’s wings. “Everyone knows a man only gifts a woman such things because he is thinking of himself, not her preferences. And to have such a gift delivered to her place of work no less!”

“How did you know about that?” Tony gaped.

“Seriously, Tony?” Steve asked incredulously. “I haven’t been on a date since the Forties, and I know better than that.”

“The other womenfolk have explained to Sigyn the so-called art of ‘texting’ via your hand-held talking picture boxes,” Loki explained. “And Sigyn then explained things to me. It is handy for keeping in communication, especially when I cannot use magical abilities to do so. Oh, and the Lady Pepper is not speaking to you and asked that someone convey that so she didn’t have to speak to you.”

“You mean cell phones?” Tony groaned, trying to ignore the fact he had just made things with Pepper go from bad to worse. “And Sigyn’s been texting you at work? When did you get a phone?” Loki pulled a StarkPhone out of his pants pocket and waved it around.

“Apparently, it is standard issue for all Tower residents to have one,” Loki explained.

“I have one too!” Thor said, displaying his phone proudly. “Brother! We must exchange numerical codes for our devices!”

“Is that how you ask for a phone number in Asgard?” Tony said to Steve who just shrugged.
“I do not wish to be in possession of your numerical code,” Loki snorted.

“What numbers do you have, exactly?” Tony asked worriedly.

“Sigyn’s,” Loki shrugged. “And I have been added to something titled the ‘HBIC Group Chat,’ which I believe consists of Lady Jane, Lady Darcy, Lady Pepper, the Lady Widow, Sigyn and the Hawk.”

“How is Clint in a Head Bitches in Charge group chat and not me,” Tony said, offended.

“The what?” Steve sputtered.

“Brother, you must have Lady Darcy send you her moving images of the Meow-Cat, a most magnificent beast with a body of tarted pastries who travels through the Bifrost!” Thor proclaimed.

“Are you talking about Nyan-Cat?” Tony asked.

“Yes!” Thor smiled. “Meow-Cat!”

“Oh, right, AllSpeak translates everything,” Tony groaned.

“Will you all vacate these premises before I am forced into drastic action?” Loki huffed as the pig he was positioning fell from its place onto the floor. “Were it anyone else, you would leave their quarters at the first request!”

“Okay, okay,” Tony sighed as Thor began showing Steve one of his many gifs of Nyan-Cat. “We’re heading out. Just try not to burn the place down if you try to seduce the wife with scented candles and rose petals.”

Loki gave a non-committal grunt and Tony herded Steve and Thor out into the hallway. Thor then directed them to his own chambers so that Steve could learn more about meme culture. Tony sighed, knowing whatever Thor said would probably be far off the mark and he would have to correct it later. Together, Thor and Steve were sometimes like two senior citizens trying to apply their vague understanding of youth culture to everyday situations. The fact that he was probably in a lot of trouble with Pepper didn’t exactly make him want to head upstairs either. As Thor and Steve watched another video, Tony sent a text out to the Science! Group Chat to ask why he wasn’t in the HBIC chat. Darcy and Jane both responded instantly, sending him forty poop emojis each followed by ten question marks from Bruce.

Thirty minutes and several beers later, Clint and Bruce had arrived at Thor’s rooms with a bunch of takeout boxes. They were just in time to find Tony giving Thor and Steve a very ridiculous lecture about meme culture, which had basically devolved into Tony just trying to get both blond men to pronounce the word “meme” correctly. He had a feeling one or both of them was trolling him without even fully understanding the meaning of the term. Clint soon had everyone listening to the Hamster Dance via his iPod, and Tony had a feeling Thor was about to bring techno music to Asgard.

Around the fifth time Thor had demanded Clint replay the song, a happy shriek came from across the hall, indicating Sigyn had arrived home. Within a few minutes, several loud thumping sounds were coming from the room across the hall, leading everyone to politely excuse themselves back to their own rooms for the evening. Tony had to admit, despite being a megalomaniacal narcissist with a penchant for sadism, Loki did seem to know what to do to make his wife happy.
By breakfast the next morning, it was apparent Sigyn adored her new gifts. Somehow, Clint had gotten backed into the conversation with Sigyn about her new toys. It was easy to forget how relatively young the Asgardians were when you saw Thor electrocuting people and Loki aiding and abetting alien overlords bent on universal domination, but Tony could clearly see something of a fifteen-year-old girl in Sigyn’s face as she talked about her new animal friends. In Sigyn it was perhaps easy to see the duality of someone who was ancient and wise beyond her years by Earth standards yet still a teenager by the standards of her own people. Of course, listening in on Sigyn’s conversation with Clint would make it hard to believe Sigyn was a nearly thousand-year-old sorceress highly capable in striking more than just fear into the hearts of those that crossed her.

Sigyn had apparently named each one of the stuffed creatures, and had developed intricate backstories for each. She had also moved her new friends into the bedroom she and her husband shared. By the annoyed look on Loki’s face whenever Sigyn brought up her animal collection, Tony was able to deduce that Sigyn had forbidden any hanky panky where her creatures could see. The same thing had happened the weekend Tony had gone to visit Pepper’s childhood home and found he wasn’t allowed to make out with her where her beloved childhood toys might watch. Had Pepper not also been eating breakfast in the common room, Tony might have surveyed the other guys to see if stuffed animals put a damper on sex for everyone. At least Tony took some solace in the fact that Loki’s stuffed animal presentation had backfired on him spectacularly, preventing any marital relations beyond the initial ones he had experienced.

Pepper, of course, was still not speaking to Tony after the massive miscalculation that had been delivering sultry underwear to her place of work. The silent treatment probably meant that Pepper was too angry to yell at him, which could possibly give him enough time to figure out something that would melt away her anger. Tony had resolved that he was definitely not going to go to Loki for relationship advice, but he quickly found none of the other men in the Tower seemed to have good ideas about patching things up either.

Thor suggested procuring a sword for Pepper while Clint’s brilliant idea was getting Pepper a cookie cake. Steve’s whole “make her something so she knows it’s from the heart” speech actually uplifted Tony briefly until the combined efforts of JARVIS and Bruce convinced him that Pepper did not need high heels with thrusters in them to make her more efficient in the boardroom. Bruce then gave him a rehash of the same speech Cap had, only this time suggesting putting together something outside the lab - like a romantic picnic or a coupon book Pepper could exchange for massages, dinner and a movie of Pepper’s choosing, or breakfast in bed. Tony dismissed that idea as lame, even though Happy seemed to agree with it. Tony even texted Rhodey to ask for advice, only to receive twenty-odd laughing until you’re crying emojis back. Finally, Rhodey responded with some actual advice.

“I dunno, man, why don’t you ask an actual woman what you should do.”

It seemed like a good idea on the surface, but Tony quickly realized that all of the ladies he instantly thought to ask were on Pepper’s side in things. He called Jane during a break in her conference and ended up getting a lecture about how he needed to appreciate Pepper more before he lost her, and that the best gift he could give Pepper would be to take an active approach to modifying his behavior so he wouldn’t upset her so much. Lewis then grabbed Jane’s phone suggested he duct tape his mouth shut for a whole month to see if his relationship improved.

Once he was able to hang up, Tony made the mistake of seeking out Natasha for help. He found her sitting on the communal couch, watching the stocks report and painting her nails a shade of blood red. Tony didn’t even have to open his mouth before she informed him she wasn’t going to help him out because he would just ruin any idea she gave him. Tony couldn’t exactly argue with that and started to slowly back out of the room for his own personal safety.
Tony then noticed his potential salvation in another corner of the common room, petting a rainbow-haired unicorn sitting on her lap. Sigyn had the dual benefits of probably getting the type of advice Loki could give without actually having to ask Loki for help, and probably wouldn’t belittle him for coming to her for help. Tony was also pretty sure that Loki had gotten himself into enough trouble over the past couple hundred years that Sigyn would have some pretty awesome tales about ways he had made things up to her. Tony sidled up to Sigyn, was writing some strange runes in one of the Lisa Frank notebooks Darcy had gotten for her before leaving.

“You come seeking my advice,” Sigyn said as he approached her, not once looking up from her work.

“Yeah,” Tony shrugged, scratching the back of his neck. “I have really screwed things up with Pepper.”

“I am aware,” Sigyn smirked.

“I’m kind of stumped about how to fix it,” Tony admitted. “And everyone I have talked to has given me terrible advice.”

“So, what do you think you need to do?” Sigyn asked him curiously.

“I don’t know,” Tony said, beginning to pace. “Something big, maybe? I don’t know… Maybe I can call the Hershey people up… see what size chocolate bunnies they make… I mean, it’s not Easter yet, but I’m sure they could pull something off…”

“You do not need a grand gesture,” Sigyn shook her head. “I know you and my husband are both fond of such things, but sometimes, all a woman really needs is something simple to remind her she is loved and important. Perhaps it would be best if you found something for Pepper that showcases your love in a personal way, something that is meaningful to you.”

“Okay,” Tony frowned. “I will have to think about that.” He got up to leave.

“Sir Stark?”

“Yes?” Tony replied.

“I also believe it might behoove you to think about your gifts in the future,” Sigyn smirked at him. “Perhaps before you purchase them.” Tony rolled his eyes, but grinned as he exited the room.

Pepper was packing her suitcase for an upcoming conference in Europe when Tony arrived back at their rooms that night. She obviously heard him enter the room, stiffening as his footfalls echoed on the tile, and then continued with her work. Tony said nothing, walking toward the bed, crouching down and producing an old shoebox with childish handwriting on the side. He opened up the box and pulled out a very well-loved stuffed tiger. Despite wanting to seem indifferent to Tony, Pepper couldn’t help but peer over at what he was doing. Tony looked at the toy for a moment and then stood up.

“I know you aren’t talking to me right now,” Tony said. “But I hope that doesn’t mean you aren’t listening either.”

Pepper said nothing, going on with her packing.

“So, you’re going to be gone for the next week,” Tony continued. “And I thought it might be nice
for you to have something to remember me by while we're gone.” He held out the toy tiger to her.

“Who is this?” Pepper asked finally, taking the toy and cuddling it a little bit in spite of herself.

“He was one of my best friend’s growing up,” Tony replied. “His name is Tony.”

“Tony the Tiger?” Pepper said with a groan. “Please tell me he’s named after the cereal mascot and not that you were just that narcissistic as a kid.”

“Tony was the name he came with,” Tony explained. “Jarvis got him for me because both of our names were Tony.”

“JARVIS ordered you a stuffed tiger?” Pepper asked incredulously.


“Your family’s butler,” Pepper realized.

“Have I ever told you about my seventh birthday?” Tony asked. Pepper didn’t respond, and Tony continued. “So, my parents had promised me this big shindig. They were going to invite my entire class out, rent the Central Park Zoo and there was going to be this big bash. I was super excited. That was when I went through my zoology period. Anyway, it was Memorial Day weekend 1977, and that Friday, I come home from school only to find my parents were gone. Mom at least left a note. Dad had been invited to some super swanky industry thing out in Malibu - that was before we moved back permanently - and they had to go for the whole weekend. She didn’t even mention my birthday party.”

“They forgot your birthday?” Pepper said, surprised.

“Totally Sixteen Candles, I know?” Tony smirked. “Not really. Apparently, Mom had been too stressed out to plan things that year. She had major clinical depression - possibly just because she was married to Howard Stark - and was using cocaine and alcohol to self-medicate. She didn’t get sober until I was about ten after a couple of months at a top secret rehab facility. Anyway, Dad decided to help Mom out by letting his secretary plan things. And he had told his secretary my birthday was in June. Had she bothered to check with Jarvis or anyone else at home, she would have realized it was the wrong day.”

“Of course,” Tony continued, “this wasn’t Jarvis’ first rodeo with a sad little kid whose parents had forgotten something important. I can’t tell you how many holidays the folks missed, especially in those early years when they were both hot messes. So, on Sunday, Jarvis gets me up, lets me eat birthday cake for breakfast and takes me to the zoo. And then he gave me this stuffed tiger named Tony like me, and promised that no matter what, Tony would always be there when I needed him. Then we went out and saw this new movie that had just hit theaters called Star Wars. It was hands-down the best birthday I had before I discovered alcohol.”

“Tony… that’s heartbreaking,” Pepper said.

“Nah, what’s heartbreaking was the next year when the folks decided they’d make it up to me,” Tony shook his head. “I was in a geology and cowboy phase and so Howard decided to fly us out and do a day trip to the Grand Canyon in one of his planes. Mom got this summer flu and couldn’t go. Flash forward to Howard getting distracted and making it halfway back to Malibu before realizing he left me at the South Rim Visitor Center. That was traumatic.”

“Tony…” Pepper began only for Tony to wave off her attempts to return the stuffed tiger.
“Anyway, I’ve kept Tiger Tony with me all these years because, in a way, Jarvis was right,” Tony shrugged. “He was always there. I took him to every boarding school I was ever kicked out of, MIT, and everywhere I felt like I needed some backup. Good thing he stayed behind in Afghanistan, huh? But, I still do take him some places when I travel. And now, I’d like you to have him...”

“Tony…” Pepper said choking back a sob.

“Because he can be there when I can’t,” Tony continued. “And I’m pretty sure he’s a much better listener than I am. I think when it comes to cuddling it’s a draw but…” Tony was cut off by Pepper kissing him.

“I promise I’ll take good care of him,” Pepper smiled.

“See?” Tony smirked. “I can be thoughtful.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and kissed him again.
Sigyn’s Midgardian Garden

Chapter Summary

Or, in which the Princes of Asgard become the biggest Whovians this side of the Nine Realms

Bruce Banner had never been one for team projects. As a kid, he preferred to do things solo rather than be grouped up with his classmates. Since his transformation, the fear that the Other Guy would hurt someone made him isolate himself even further. However, there was something calming about the Asgardian princess that made him through his usual caution to the wind. The Other Guy seemed to like Sigyn and, even in his regular form, Bruce found himself calmer and more clear-headed whenever she was around. The fact that she was made of the same sterner stuff as Thor and Loki also gave him reason to believe the Other Guy might not hurt her as much as he could a mere mortal.

Now that Jane and Darcy were off on the lecture tour and Natasha was back in the field, Sigyn was deprived of the normal companions who helped her pass the day as her husband worked. It was the combination of her kindness to him and the lonely figure she cut that had him invite her into his lab that first day. It proved to be a good decision. Sometimes, Sigyn would help him out if he requested. Other times, she would brew a rather relaxing tea for him to drink while he was working. There were times he worked in silence while Sigyn read a book or took notes on something she was researching herself. Sometimes, they had conversations while he worked, the melodious tone of her voice relaxing him the way his mother’s lullabies had as a child. After four days of Sigyn serving somewhat as a lab assistant, Bruce’s curiosity finally got the best of him and he asked what had been on his mind since her first day in his lab.

“I’m sure all this lab work is boring to you,” Bruce mentioned. “I kind of feel like I’m wasting your talents. I mean, you were really helpful to Jane with all her astrophysics work.”

“I don’t mind,” Sigyn shrugged. “At least here I can do something useful sometimes. A lot of time on Asgard I feel useless.”

“Why’s that?” Bruce asked, surprised. “You seem very smart. And Loki said you work as a healer…”

“When I can,” Sigyn admitted. “Before I was married, I was allowed a lot more leeway with my time and could work in the healing rooms more frequently. However, there are certain expectations of a prince’s wife. Often, my days are spent with Queen Frigga entertaining foreign dignitaries, their wives and the ladies of the court. It is hard to have time for oneself with such duties.”

“So, what do you do in a typical day on Asgard?” Bruce asked. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Well, I usually wake up, eat breakfast, dress, head to the queen’s chambers to help her and members of the palace staff with planning and preparation for the day’s events or any other large upcoming celebrations, and finally accompany her and the other ladies on the morning walk around the gardens. Then we have to head to the throne from for the morning audiences with the people,” Sigyn said. “After standing around for a few hours while Odin solves grievances that usually have no
business make it all the way to the king, there is usually some form of morning entertainment the
courtly ladies must attend. Sometimes it is a bard’s performance or military exercises or a showcase
by local merchants. Then there is the noon-time meal. The queen usually has a brief meeting with the
head of household afterwards to see that things are still progressing smoothly, which I usually must
attend. I may have half an hour or an hour to myself to work in the healing rooms, in the gardens, or
with my seiðr. Then there is tea with the court ladies in the queen’s chambers followed by a session
of weaving or embroidery. Then I have to return to my rooms to dress for whatever festivities are
taking place each evening along with the evening meal. Afterwards, there is usually some sort of
entertainment as well, but I often find that is the only time I have to spend with my husband. We
usually retreat to our rooms or the laboratory to work until it is time for bed.”

“You… only get an hour to yourself every day?” Bruce said, surprised.

“If I am fortunate enough and things are not running behind schedule,” Sigyn shrugged. “Although,
sometimes that hour is spent with my husband, working with him or listening to whatever is
worrying him. Of course, I can usually work in the gardens or on my potions and such while
listening to him. Something about grinding things with a mortar and pestle has a calming affect on
Loki.”

“Do you ever get a day for yourself?” Bruce asked, surprised.

“Sometimes,” Sigyn shrugged. “More often than not it is because my husband sees that royal duties
are weighing on me. So he whisks me off for a day of fun. Everyone blames Loki for being his
usual, chaotic self and so I never get in trouble for shirking my responsibilities. He knows no one
will think badly of me if they believe I was just going along with the will of my husband. Sometimes,
Loki insists he needs me to accompany him on his travels, whether it is a diplomatic mission or he’s
just going to another realm to look for ingredients or to research something. I usually have more
freedom when I’m traveling.”

“So, you can’t just say you want a personal day or something?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Sigyn shrugged. “I am the highest ranking princess in Asgard and the second highest ranking
woman in the court, and therefore must be at the queen’s beck and call. She has many duties - too
many for one person - and it is my role to help her with them. A princess of the blood would rank
higher than I, but Thor and Loki have no sisters and neither does the Allfather. Were Thor married
these tasks would fall to his wife, and I would have more time to myself as only the second-highest
ranking princess. However, until such a time as Thor is wed, I am bound by duty and tradition.”

“So, if you didn’t have to do anything and could just spend your time however you wanted,” Bruce
asked, “what would you do?”

“I think I’d like to spend it in the garden,” Sigyn said thoughtfully. “The Queen’s is the largest, but
Loki and I have our own private one off of our chambers. We mainly grow ingredients we need and
the like, but there are a few plants I have that are just ornamental. Loki likes to bring me back
specimens from his travels if he thinks I will like them. When I’m not working in the garden itself, I
always find it a peaceful place to relax.”

“It sounds nice,” Bruce smiled.

The next day when Sigyn came into the lab, Bruce presented her with a pot of blue lobelias. They
had been his mother’s favorite flower and she cultivated several of them in the backyard of Bruce’s
childhood home. To this day, seeing a pot of them always made Bruce smile. Sigyn had thanked him
for the plant and taken it to her rooms. What Bruce didn’t realize was that his simple gesture had
opened the floodgates for a most unusual garden in Stark Tower.
Sigyn’s delight with her gift prompted Thor to question Banner about why he had given Sigyn flowers, not necessarily because he thought Bruce was trying to seduce Sigyn but rather because she had been so delighted by the gift. Bruce simply explained to Thor that Sigyn thought gardening would be a good way to spend her time on Midgard. When all he received in reply was a gentle nod from the Asgardian, Bruce realized he probably should have gone with his instincts and told someone Thor was up to something.

Instead, Bruce kept to himself as Thor went out to the nearest garden supply store he could find and bought out their inventory. Tony was actually more shocked to learn there was a Home Depot that close to his Tower than he was to see the plethora of plants Thor had dragged back and brought up into Sigyn and Loki’s room. JARVIS had alerted Tony, Clint, and Natasha to the fact that a brawl between the two brothers was eminent in Sigyn and Loki’s rooms, and when the trio arrived, they had to wander through a forest of potted plants and saplings just to get where all the commotion was coming from. Tony began whistling “Welcome to the Jungle” as he parted two large potted evergreen plants and stepped through into what had once been the center of the apartment’s living quarters.

They found Sigyn sitting on the couch, the two magpies perched on either of her shoulders as she sorted various seed packets into flowers, fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Beyond that, Loki and Thor were loudly arguing. The trio arrived just in time to see Loki hurl a package of seed starter at Thor, who seemed to be protecting a box labelled “Mushroom Mini Farm.” While the argument had been muffled through all the plantlife, it was now apparent what the brothers are arguing about.

“And you expect my wife to grow you food like she’s some peasant!” Loki huffed.

“No I do not!” Thor insisted. “I just bought every seed I could find! You know Sigyn can make anything grow!” Loki didn’t seem to be buying into Thor’s attempt at flattering his wife.

“And what else are we supposed to do with these… tomatoes are they?… that you’ve purchased? And who other than Volstagg could consume this many squash?” Loki pointed out. “You realize that it will probably be I who Odin makes pay for all of this?”

“Sorry,” Thor sighed. “And I suppose it was a mistake to go shopping for seedlings whilst hungry. But I also purchased roses and moonflowers! I remember Sigyn likes those.”

“At least you had enough common sense to purchase some useful herbs,” Loki admitted.

“So, I see you guys are redecorating?” Tony chimed in to make his presence known. “I must admit, not exactly the way I would go, but if you feel more comfortable living in the home and garden section, who am I to judge?”

“Yes, Thor,” Loki turned to his erstwhile brother. “Where exactly did you think we would put all of these things?”

“Well… I…” Thor said, thinking for a moment. “I know many Midgardians grow things on their roofs!”

“And where would the quinjet land?” Tony asked curiously. Thor seemed stumped.

“You’re not honestly suggesting that we have to carry these plants all the way back to the store, are you?” Clint asked, horrified at the thought of all the physical labor involved. Clint’s comment caused Sigyn to stand up instantly, a fury on her face Tony hadn’t seen since the Chitauri attacks. Or when
Thor had electrocuted the stove.

“You will not take my plants from me,” Sigyn said sharply, a deadly glint in her eyes. Her two magpies squawked as if in agreement.

“I mean, I’m not sure I know where there is enough room…” Tony said, trying to reason with her.

Ignoring Tony, Sigyn strode forward to the wall of the living quarters between the bedroom and the kitchenette. She placed her hands on the wall and seemed to concentrate her energies there. Runes began appearing and soon, a door started to seemingly grow out of the wall. The door grew larger and larger until Sigyn was at least satisfied with it. Then she pressed her hands to the knob, making it glow and shoot out bright green sparks. When she was finally finished with that, Sigyn smiled and opened the door to reveal a massive greenhouse on the other side, a greenhouse that by all rights should have been sticking out of the Tower and dangling over Park Avenue. Instead, the building had strange clouds surrounding as if it was just hovering in mid air somewhere. Tony stepped into it to continue gawking and figure out what had just happened.

“Did… did you just make another room in my tower?” Tony gaped. “How did you do that?”

“Asgardian interdimensional interior decorating,” Loki responded with a roll of his eyes.

“But that defies the laws of physics… space… time… hell, science as a whole,” Tony snorted.

“It’s seiðr,” Loki pointed out.

“Magic is just science we haven’t discovered yet,” Tony insisted for the upteenth time since their arrival.

“Wait… so Asgardians have bigger on the inside technology?” Clint asked.

“Of course,” Thor snorted. “How do you think we fit so many people and things into our realm? Asgardians are the masters of optimizing our utilization of space.” Clint looked at Natasha with a wicked grin. The former KGB agent sighed in return.

“Clint don’t say that having ‘bigger on the inside technology…’” she began before Clint cut her off.

“Does having bigger on the inside technology mean Asgardians are time lords?” Clint asked.

“Who is this Lord of Time?” Loki asked intrigued.

“Most people know him as the Doctor,” Tony grinned, playing along.

“That green goliath is a master of time?” Loki asked horrified.

“Not Dr. Banner,” Tony shook his head.

“Then my brother’s paramour?” Loki asked, even more confused.

“Jane would delight in such a title,” Thor said proudly.

“Not a doctor, The Doctor,” Clint snorted. “And he’s British.”

“I am intrigued,” Loki admitted.

“Yes, we would hear more of the exploits of this The Doctor,” Thor nodded.
“But…” Tony began.

“Come now, Friend Stark,” Thor said. “I am sure Sigyn’s conservatory will he here later.”

“Yes,” Sigyn said, ushering the men away. “I have much work to do. Go find some entertainment.”

“This is ridiculous,” Tony groaned as Clint happily lead the group out of the room, recounting his favorite adventures of The Doctor to an intrigued Thor and Loki.

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Clint had not counted on the fact that Banner and Stark were “Doctor Who” Purists. While he had it in mind to start the Odinsons off around 2005 revival, the horrified gazes on the faces of the two other men let him know that wouldn’t be happening. Naturally, Tony Stark had the complete box set of every Doctor Who ever made, including the two previously unaired pilots, all the Christmas specials, both of the 1960s feature films, and the 1996-made-for-TV movie. Some so-called lost episodes of the show may have even made it into Stark’s hands, though whether those hands had originally been Howard’s or Tony’s was still unverified. Clint was pretty sure Tony had various novelizations and box sets of all the spinoff series hidden somewhere in the Tower as well.

By the time the first serial was over, Loki was happily discussing show theories with Banner while Tony found himself trying desperately to explain to Thor that the show was not a documentary and that its characters did not need rescue. By the end of the second serial, Thor was willing to accept the fact that the show was not a documentary, but he still seemed to think it was a reenactment of something that had actually happened on Midgard. Thor also seemed to think that Daleks were a real threat and that Asgard needed to prepare for them. When the Cybermen were introduced in the fourth season, Thor seemed to think them just as a great a threat to the safety of Asgard while Loki engaged Banner in a fierce debate over whether or not the Doctor’s regeneration ability meant he was a shapeshifter.

When Tony awoke the next morning, he found Loki ranting about the portrayal of Ice Warriors - whom he were certain were a thinly veiled jab at Jotuns - while Thor was announcing he intended to contact the Thals and Time Lords to see if they would be willing to become allies of Asgard. So far, Voords, Sensorites, Krotons, and Dominators had also been added to the list of fictional alien races that Asgardian should prepare against or go to war with. At least Loki had the good sense to realize everything was fictional, though he was taking the reptilian-looking Ice Warriors a bit harder than need be.

The group spent a lackluster day at work, having stayed up most of the night watching the first six serials. When they returned that evening, Thor and Loki immediately set themselves before the large TV in the common room. The first fifteen minutes were spent explaining the transition from black and white to color television to Thor while Loki shushed anyone who talked. The next morning, Tony again awoke in a pile of junk food in front of the couch. This time, he had a series of angry texts from Jane Foster demanding to know why Thor was asking her all sorts of questions about the location of Gallifrey and expressing her fury that she had not been present for Thor’s introduction to Dr. Who. Loki, meanwhile, spent his breakfast bemoaning the loss of the Third Doctor, who in the princeling’s opinion had also been unfairly punished by his race. Eventually, Tony noted, Loki did develop a begrudging respect for the fourth Doctor.

Following the fourth night of Doctor Who binge-watching, Tony fell asleep while helping sort through various mechanical and electrical equipment to see what could be salvaged or what had to be recycled or destroyed. When he awoke, he found Steve Rogers standing over him, the patented Captain America eyebrows of concern focused in his direction. Tony looked around, taking a moment to realize he was surrounded by rubble because he was on the clean-up site, not because of...
Avenging business. He had a feeling this was how Bruce felt a lot.

“Tony,” Steve said to him, concerned. “I think you need to go back to the Tower and get some rest.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Tony shook his head. “Had a nap this morning.”

“In your breakfast cereal,” Steve nodded. “You shouldn’t be working when you can’t focus, and you can’t focus if you’re trying to not fall asleep.”

“I’ve gone longer than this without sleep,” Tony scoffed.

“Tony,” Steve said. “Look, I’m sure whatever you and Bruce are working on in the labs at night is important, but getting sleep is important too. If you run yourself ragged trying to help out all day and then working in the lab all night, you end up not helping anyone - especially not yourself.”

“Bruce and I aren’t up in the lab all night,” Tony replied.

“He spends all day sleeping because he has been up all night,” Steve said. “If you aren’t in the lab, what are you both doing?”

“We’re catching the Asgardians up on Dr. Who,” Tony admitted, a little embarrassed.

“What?” Steve frowned.

“No, Who,” Tony laughed to himself. “It’s a television show.”

“Oh,” Steve said. Tony saw a flash of disappointment on Steve’s face. Suddenly, it dawned on Tony that someone who lived on Earth full-time might benefit more from being caught up on TV than two aliens.

“You could join us, if you want.” Tony suggested. “I mean, we’re like sixteen seasons in, but if you start with the Fifth Doctor I’m sure we could go forward from there without you missing out on much. Bruce and I would gladly get you caught back up on the first part after that.”

“I don’t know…” Steve began.

“I find it hard to believe that the living science experiment is not a sci-fi fan,” Tony snorted.

“Yeah, but if you and I are up all night watching television then we’ll both be sleep deprived,” Steve said.

“Come to think of it, how are Thunderstruck and Dirty Deeds not falling all over themselves,” Tony said.

“Something about how time passes differently on Asgard and they don’t need as much sleep as we do,” Steve rolled his eyes.

“Lucky bastards,” Tony grumbled. “It’s like they don’t even need coffee.”

“They still drink a lot of it,” Steve said. He paused for a moment. “Speaking of which, I might have accidentally broken the coffee maker in my room somehow. I tried to fix it, but all it does is beep at me and shoot steam. Loki’s advice on how to fix it was to ‘reverse the polarity of its neutron flow,’ but all of Thor’s laughing made me think he was just trying to play a prank on me. Then Thor asked me if I wanted a jelly baby?” Tony then laughed for a good five solid minutes as well. When he recovered, he stood up and clapped Steve on the back.
“I’ll take a look at your coffee maker,” Tony replied. Steve glared at him and Tony held his hands up in surrender. “After I get some sleep.”

“Thanks,” Steve nodded.

“And in the meantime,” Tony said, “I would take any Asgardian advice about modern appliances. Thor still doesn’t understand to use the thermostat to increase the heat in his rooms instead of the oven, and Loki seems convinced if you don’t get food out of the microwave before it dings your food will be teleported somewhere else.”

“I can’t blame them,” Steve admitted. “The future is strange.”

“Don’t call this the future,” Tony rolled his eyes. “It’s the present. And hell yeah, it’s strange.”

It hadn’t taken long for Sigyn to arrange and plant her garden in the new conservatory room she had made within the Tower. In addition to the entire contents of a Home Depot, Loki apparently acquired a few plants for his wife as well, though Tony was a bit nervous when he found out what the Prince of Lies was requesting for his wife. In his sleep deprived state, Tony had apparently approved Loki’s purchases of nightshade, snakeroot, rosary pea, oleander, doll’s eye, desert rose, calla lily, angel’s trumpet, monzhkhood, and foxglove for Sigyn’s new garden. By the time Tony realized what they were and was able to inform Thor, Sigyn had already planted them. Tony suggested everyone make their own food or at least watch it being prepared until they could prove Loki wasn’t trying to use plant knowledge to kill anyone.

However, it was the plants Sigyn asked for that turned out to be the most worrisome. Loki and Thor had both mentioned that Sigyn had a penchant for adopting ugly, unruly and often dangerous animals but no one mentioned she felt the same way toward her plants. Through JARVIS, she had received shipments of monkey cups, bastard cobas, birthworts, brain cactus, skunk cabbage, baseball plants, stinky squid mushrooms, elephant foot yams, stinkhorn mushrooms, pelican flowers, monkey-face orchids, protea pinwheels, Voodoo lilies, spider chrysanthemums, Devil’s hands, lobster claws, elephant’s trunk trees, desert peas, black batflowers, black hollyhocks and some kind of bleeding mushroom.

In addition to the weird types of plants Sigyn delighted in growing, there was a special section of the garden devoted to plants that smelled like rotting flesh or meat and another section for the carnivorous plants she had acquired. Sigyn had easily cultivated the largest patch of Venus fly-traps either Tony or Bruce had ever seen. While Tony, Pepper, Bruce and even Thor attempted to coax her into adopting some more normal Midgardian plants, Sigyn seemed hellbent on only the ugliest, most dangerous and occasionally smelly flora. It was finally Clint who introduced Sigyn to various cacti, succulents and yuccas, allowing her to have some more interesting and prickly plants without Tony fearing the U.S. Department of Agriculture was going to come knocking on his door. She also planted a few more regular plants to help provide the atmosphere her ugly ones needed to grow. Sigyn’s garden became like something out of a horror movie with nice, normal and common plants toward the front but frightening and occasionally carnivorous plants the further back one went.

Sigyn was surprised to find that hardly any of the Tower residents were comforted after she happily informed everyone at dinner one night that her plants mainly ate insects and so she was not in violation of the “live creature” rule for the Tower. Sigyn also liked to let Jor out of his enchantment to slither around and have some fun. For his part, Tony was glad that no one was magically luring creatures to their deaths in Sigyn’s garden of horrors, but there was still something upsetting about the entire thing. He reasoned with himself that it wasn’t like the plants weren’t eating people.
Yet, knowing the weirdness that was life in the Tower, Tony slightly feared these plants would mutate and develop a taste for human blood. He briefly considered revoking the “no small creatures” rule just in case the plants did turn dangerous. That way, Sigyn’s carnivorous flora could they could fill up on the smaller creatures first - like breadsticks at an Italian restaurant. He briefly voiced his concerns to Clint only for the archer to respond by performing the entire “Little Shop of Horrors” soundtrack.

While Tony had let the combined power of Sigyn and JARVIS have pretty much anything delivered to the Tower, the time finally came when Tony had to man up and put his foot down. After being alerted to a large, rare and somewhat pricey order that had just come from the pair’s quarters, Tony sighed, threw down his wrench and headed upstairs. He arrived in the garden and walked through the normal section at the beginning, which was filled with the regular type of plants Thor had bought. As he headed deeper down the garden path, however, the plants seemed to take a strange turn. He took a sharp curve in the path and almost stumbled over Loki, who was reclining with a book on a bench, seemingly unaware that the thorny vining plant wrapped around the bench’s legs seemed to be growing at an alarming rate. Sigyn would later inform Tony it was called catbriar before actually petting the thing without even cutting herself. Stepping further into the magical greenhouse, Tony found Sigyn pruning and talking to some of her plants with none other than the Black Widow herself offering assistance with a watering can.

“Oh, hello Sir Stark!” Sigyn smiled, petting the leaves of an orchid that looked like a little dancing man. “Have you come to see my garden?”

“I actually need to talk to you about something you asked for delivery,” Tony said. Sigyn sat back, waiting for him to continue. Tony could also hear Loki shifting on the bench behind him, ready to listen in on the conversation as well. “You’ve purchased a corpse flower?”

“Yes,” Sigyn said happily. “JARVIS said they are notoriously difficult to grow, but I do so love a challenge. He also said their blooms are rare - I suppose once a decade is rare for Midgard…”

“I’m also guessing he told you that they smell like death?” Tony sighed.

“How else would it attract pollinators?” Sigyn frowned. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Did JARVIS also tell you this is one of the rarest plants in the world?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded.

“Look, I know you love your… unusual plant life,” Tony said, “but I don’t know if having a corpse flower in the Tower is the best idea…”

Sigyn’s eyes widened and her lower lip began to tremble. Two perfectly shaped tears fell from each of her eyes and over her perfectly angular cheeks just as Tony felt Loki’s form stealthily approaching him from behind. Tony wasn’t sure what would kill him first: Loki quite literally stabbing him in the back for upsetting Sigyn or the painful roiling in his gut from seeing how heartbroken Sigyn looked at not being able to acquire another ugly, stinky plant. She wasn’t exactly sobbing, but the slow trickle of crocodile tears from the Asgardian princess reminded him of a big-eyed anime character. He looked at Natasha for help only for the Black Widow to shoot him a “good luck getting out of this one” smirk. Tony sighed, deciding to try and calm Sigyn down before things got more out of hand.

“Sigyn… why do you want this plant so much?” Tony asked.

“I have to save it,” Sigyn replied.
“What?” Tony asked.

“I have to save it. All of them,” Sigyn responded. “I read about the change in Midgard’s climate that it is killing plants and creatures. We cannot have creatures in the Tower, but you permitted the plants. These plants are rare and many people do not like them, so they do not want them to grow. But all plants deserve to live, even if no one appreciates them or cannot see their beauty. I am good with these plants, and I can help them survive.”

Now it was Tony’s turn to look like he was about to cry. How was he supposed to tell her she couldn’t “save” these plants now? Even if she hadn’t fixed him in place with her tragic tears, Tony would have felt like a jerk for telling her that she couldn’t rescue plants that his own kind had so easily neglected, especially not when he was Mr. Environmentally Conscious Billionaire these days. He could almost see the disapproving looks on the faces of Gates, Buffett, and Musk if he recounted this story at the annual secret billionaires retreat in California. Who was he to decide that certain plants should go extinct just because they weren’t conventionally attractive? Loki, for his part, curved around Stark, tucking something discreetly back into his robes, and then extending his arms to his wife to embrace her.

“How cruel of you, Stark,” Loki said, smirking at Tony as he tucked Sigyn’s head under his chin in a calming and protective gesture. “My lykyng just wants to protect what you Midgardians have taken for granted.”

“Okay, okay,” Tony said, throwing his hands up in the air. “You can have the corpse flower. Did you get a male or female one? I’m sure JARVIS could help you find one of the opposite gender so you can make them flourish and create more giant death stink plants.”

“Thank you, Sir Stark!” Sigyn clapped happily. “I will make this flower the envy of the Nine Realms!”

“Alright,” Tony said lamely. “Just be careful with it, I guess.”

Now that he had risen from his reading, Sigyn pushed a gardening trowel into Loki’s hands and made him get to work weeding with her. Natasha stealthily put down the watering can she had been using and stalked over to Tony, who was embarrassingly sauntering out of the indoor greenhouse room. Tony was trying to figure both how Sigyn had magically created a room tall enough for trees and non-magically convinced him to give her free reign over the Tower’s plant life when Natasha’s voice broke into his thoughts.

“That was nice of you,” Natasha mentioned, not betraying whether or not she was sincere or sarcastic in the statement.

“Do you have any idea what just happened? Because I’m pretty sure there are a large amount of plants that eat meat, smell like death and look like something out of a horror movie growing in my Tower and I am doing nothing about it,” Tony sighed.

“I don’t know,” Natasha said, looking around. “I don’t think it’s that bad of a garden.”

“Yeah, but you of all people should be comfortable in a garden that can quite literally kill people,” Tony snorted. Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. Tony sighed again. “Loki is right about one thing. His wife totally has a savior complex. Saving all of Earth’s ugly plants? I mean, where did she ever get that idea?”

“I don’t think this is just about plants,” Natasha pointed out.
Tony looked over his shoulder where Natasha had inclined her head. Loki was helping water some weird flowers that looked like Darth Vader’s mask when in bloom while Sigyn had her hands stuck in the dirt, no doubt using her seiðr as some kind of magical Miracle Gro. Instead of focusing on the ground, however, Sigyn was looking up at her husband, positively beaming. Loki was also looking down at his wife, a rare sincere grin on his own face. Tony suddenly had an image of the two of them back on Asgard wearing twin garden aprons and big floppy hats to block out the sun while they tended their own garden together. Tony let out a sigh.

“So I’m guessing I shouldn’t buy Pepper stink flowers as a sign of my love for her,” Tony said.

“I would also avoid the orchids that look like anatomically correct men,” Natasha agreed.

“Any suggestions for rare plants that might be more up my alley?” Tony asked.

“Might I make a suggestion, Sir?” Jarvis piped in. He opened up a view screen to a picture of a plant that made Tony grin widely. “This is *Psychotria elata* otherwise known as the Hot Lips or…” JARVIS let out a brief shudder, “Hooker’s Lips plant. They grow in the understory of rainforests in South and Central America and are quite endangered, despite being a popular St. Valentine’s Day gift in their usual localities. It is known for attracting butterflies and hummingbirds. It may also contain trace amounts of the drug DMT…”

“I want a dozen for Pepper,” Tony grinned.

“Of course, Sir,” JARVIS said tiredly.
A perfectly normal Sunday morning brunch was underway in the Tower when Sigyn strolled in, accompanied by a strange woman. Bruce, Tony and Pepper all paused to watch the woman take a seat next to Sigyn only for Thor to look up, nod to the two women as if nothing was amiss, and return back to tackling the puzzle on the back of the cereal box he was currently working on. The woman was wearing what appeared to be one of Sigyn’s Asgardian dresses, though it was a little short. The woman was a bit taller than Sigyn, a little curvier and slightly more well-endowed. Her black hair was twice as long as Sigyn’s golden blonde and seemed to almost have natural purple highlights in the right light.

Tony had a feeling asking Sigyn about her mysterious houseguest and where the woman had come from might cause more of a scene than he was currently prepared to handle, but the security risk posed by this strange interloper couldn’t be ignored. Clint was asleep so Tony covertly snapped a picture of the woman, sending it to Natasha in the hopes of getting any SHIELD intel on who she was. Natasha responded that - for some reason - the face trace was identifying this as Loki. She then announced she and Steve would be heading back to the Tower pronto as a result of this uninvited guest. Sigyn and her female companion began nonchalantly digging into their breakfast, seemingly oblivious to the fact that everyone was staring at them.

“Is there anything for us on the schedule today, Sir Stark?” Sigyn asked him pleasantly, her companion keeping her head down and her eyes focused on eating.

“Um… uh… no,” Tony sputtered, “not that I’m aware of.”

“Splendid,” Sigyn nodded. Trying to ease the situation, Pepper asked Bruce a question about his work and then used her hand to not-so-subtly raise Tony’s dropped jaw. After finishing their meals, Sigyn announced she and her companion would be in their rooms if anyone needed them. They headed to the elevator only for it to open and reveal Clint, staggering about without his coffee. He eyed up Sigyn’s companion as the two women got into the elevator and then turned around as the door shut.

“Who’s the chick?” Clint asked. “Can’t be one of Sigyn’s sisters. Any relation of Sif’s?”

“What do you mean, friend Barton?” Thor asked, confused.

“The woman who was just in here with Sigyn,” Pepper prompted.

“Yeah,” Tony grimaced, “why didn’t she tell us she was having a visitor? You know how SHIELD is about clearance and things… I also don’t really appreciate having a stranger invited into my home without at least being given a heads up.”

“I do not understand,” Thor said. “That was Loki.” The room fell silent enough to hear a pin drop.
“I’m pretty sure that was a woman,” Tony said at the same time Clint panicked:

“That was your brother?” Clint gawped. “But she was hot! Oh shit, he’s got his magic back! We have to tell SHIELD.”

“No, no, no,” Thor insisted. “This does not mean he has regained any seiðr. Loki is a shapeshifter.”

“So is Bruce, but he’s never grown tits,” Tony pointed out, earning a head whap from Pepper.

“Thanks,” Bruce said to Tony sarcastically.

“It is one of my brother’s… peculiarities,” Thor shrugged.

“Isn’t he technically your sister right now?” Clint giggled, earning a harsh glare from Thor.

“Since he was young… Loki was never confined by his natural sex,” Thor explained. “From what I understand, actually, it is not uncommon for seiðr wielders, particularly ones who are already powerful shapeshifters, to change their sex. I’m not the best one on the theory, but the best it was explained to me, first by my mother and then by Sigyn, seiðr itself is sexless. Well, perhaps not completely. Sometimes it leans more toward the male spectrum of things and sometimes more toward the female spectrum of things. There are some aspects of it that prefer a male hand and some a female. Seiðr is often associated with being female because the majority of those who utilize it are, but it is far more complicated than that. Seiðr is also notorious for binding those that use it to its will. And those with the most developed shapeshifting abilities are sometimes more subject to its whims than others. As mother explained it, sometimes Loki’s seiðr makes him feel like a boy and sometimes a girl. Sometimes it is in between. Unfortunately, it is one of the reasons people can be harsh to males with magic.”

“So, does Sigyn turn into a man?” Clint asked.

“She never has - at least that I am aware of,” Thor said. “But then again, Sigyn strongest magical ability is her fettering and both she and Mother are skilled with healing and plants. Those types of magic do not lend themselves to such experiences. However, Female-seiðr users who are also powerful shapeshifters experience something similar, but for some reason a woman acting masculine or genderless is less noticeable to most than a man. I have known female seiðr users can experience issues with growing excess facial hair, but from what I was told it is impolite to mention it. Especially if the possessor of the facial hair is of dwarven ancestry and rather sensitive.”

“Sigyn grew a beard?” Clint said, intrigued.

“Var, actually,” Thor frowned in remembrance. “Of Sigyn’s sisters, she is most in touch with the masculine side of her seiðr and is known to occasionally grow hair that would rival those of her brothers. It tends to upset her, though. Especially since she was oft teased for it as a child…”

“By yours truly?” Tony nodded. Thor blushed in embarrassment.

“On Midgard we call that being genderfluid,” Bruce said. “It being associated with magic actually makes some sense. A lot of cultures around the world associate changing genders or being able to easily slip between genders with someone who is in touch with magic or a sense of spirituality.”

“You’re an expert on the interplay between gender and magic?” Tony asked, surprised.

“A lot of Indian religion believes in a third sex. Hindus, Jains and Buddhists all have mentions of three genders in their literature,” Bruce explained. “The Kama Sutra also spells out three genders and the concept appears a lot in Sanskrit literature. Shiva is considered to be half male and half female.
There is even a special group in India known as the Hijras who have supernatural powers to bless and curse people. They are often invited to bless marriages, though they don’t always have a safe place in society. A lot of North American indigenous tribes had spiritual people known as Two-Spirits, a person who was said to inhabit both genders in their bodies. Some of these indigenous groups also believed there were as many as four genders. Some African, Meso-American and Polynesian cultures have similar concepts. A lot of these people were believed to have shamanistic or religious powers.”

“Wait,” Clint frowned. “So, you’re telling me that sometimes your brother just wakes up and he’s a woman?”

“Do you have a problem with this?” Thor asked threateningly.

“Dude, I used to work for the circus. I’m cool with just about anything,” Clint snorted. “What you do in your bedroom or anywhere else for that matter is your business as long as it involves consenting adults. I just want to know how I am going to explain to SHIELD that your brother went to bed a man and woke up this morning a woman. You know Fury is going to want to know what is behind this and if it is a threat. And then I’m going to have to explain it to Stilwell at least three times before he pretends he actually understands things. Guy’s a prick. It doesn’t help that most of these SHIELD higher-ups are of the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ generation.”

“While he can change at will, his body will occasionally change for him at different intervals. While this type of change is typically unconscious, there can be predictive signs in the days coming before the change. Usually, that gives the person enough time to prepare,” Thor admitted. “Father did leave behind the barest amount of seiðr in case Loki needed to defend himself. There is potential that such a small amount was enough to create this change unconsciously. His lack of seiðr might have made it harder for those signs to make an appearance. If Loki was unable to make the change through his own seiðr Sigyn may have used her seiðr to help him. Though, from what my mother told me, it is far more difficult if the change does not occur internally and instead requires external aid to help it along. She would not elaborate.”

“Does this happen… often?” Pepper asked finally.

“Well, the unconscious change occurs at least once a decade for most of those who experience it,” Thor shrugged. “Though during times of stress or severe depression sometimes Loki’s female form makes an appearance or when he is dealing with certain kinds of magic. When he is possession of his seiðr, he can make the choice to change on his own if he wants to, but typically he only does so when he needs a female form for trickery. I suppose it is best to say it isn’t abnormal for Loki to be in his female form, but I doubt he would have chosen to reveal this form during his time of imprisonment here.”

“I assume this has been happening since he was little?” Bruce asked.

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “We were not quite school age the first time. I suppose I am more accepting of it as it was explained to be as a young age. Mother just informed me that Loki would be a female for a little while and probably change back when he felt comfortable enough.”

“And I’m guessing the All-Daddy took this news just as spectacularly?” Tony said with a raise of his eyebrow. Thor fell very silent.

“No,” Thor admitted. “He often had Loki confined to his rooms during these times under the guise of ‘illness.’ He claimed it was for Loki’s protection as there are many in Asgard who are still not as accepting of such things…Asgard often has a strict dichotomy between the male and female, which is why shapeshifters are not considered trustworthy by many. Mother hated it, and she usually
refused to leave Loki’s side during this periods, but even she cannot overrule the Allfather.”

“But Loki probably didn’t see it that way,” Bruce finished. “He just saw that his father was locking him up in his rooms because of something he couldn’t help.”

“I think perhaps…” Thor said, standing up from the table, “I should go check on Loki.”

“This was a massive mistake,” Loki said to Sigyn, pacing their rooms. “I am probably going to be arrested. Or sent back to Asgard.”

“Everything will be fine,” Sigyn asserted.

“You just marched me in there without any explanation,” Loki said, annoyed. “I’m sure they are gathering SHIELD’s army as we speak!”

“You are over-reacting,” Sigyn snorted.

“I’m not over-reacting!” Loki shrieked.

“You were worried they would treat you differently,” Sigyn said. “They obviously didn’t.”

“They were too worried about the stranger you brought among their midst to react!” Loki said, throwing her hands up in the air and then continuing to pace. “This is why I don’t go out in public like this…”

“Odin is why you don’t go out in public like this,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “I, for one, do not think you have anything to be ashamed of and therefore, you shouldn’t have to act like you are ashamed. And I think our Midgardian friends might be a bit more accepting than certain Asgardian factions I could mention…”

“Loki!” Thor called, bursting through the room without a knock.

“Thor!” Sigyn called back angrily, “have some manners!”

“Yes,” Loki agreed indignantly, “what if one of us had been changing?”

“You do not change in your bed chambers?” Thor asked, confused.

“Once again, Thor, you have spectacularly missed the point,” Loki huffed, dramatically falling backward onto the chaise next to Sigyn.

“I am sorry,” Thor frowned. “I was worried.”

“About?” Loki snorted.

“You,” Thor admitted. “I did not think it was… time yet for this transition. You have shown no signs. And I know it typically doesn’t occur unexpectedly unless there is something deeply troubling you…”

“Such as the stress of finding out I was secretly abducted as a baby, raised by someone who is my native peoples’ sworn enemy, used as a pawn, cast out, again captured, tortured for more than a year, brainwashed, and then sent back to the realm of those who had initially abducted me who then sent me back to a realm where I went on a murderous rampage to serve penance?” Loki snorted. “Why, no, Thor. I cannot think of anything that would be bothering me.”
“I believe the seiðr has been working to heal Loki both body and soul,” Sigyn explained more gently. “I think this transition was the result of the seiðr working to repair some things that were harmed during the past year. For whatever reason, it required this form.”

“The others were… were concerned that the seiðr had returned to him unexpectedly,” Thor winced. “Either that or that you invited a friend down from Asgard without informing them.”

“Sir Stark really thinks I would be so rude?” Sigyn huffed, annoyed.

“In answer to the embarrassingly probing questions of your compatriots,” Loki sneered, “this happened some time during the night. I am not aware of when. I do not know if or when things will change back. I was not prepared for it, and this is possibly the most inconvenient time it has ever happened. And I am not in the mood for whatever jests they want to make at my expense. So, Thor, kindly fuck off.”

“Loki,” Sigyn said with a frown, “Thor was just worried about you…”

“He has no right to be,” Loki growled.

“As long as you are well, I am satisfied,” Thor said, trying to ignore the jibe. “If you would like, I can request the others give you your solitude until you specify otherwise?”

“That might be wise,” Loki said as JARVIS chimed in.

“Miss Potts is at the door,” JARVIS announced. “She would like to know if she may come in.” Loki opened her mouth to say no, but Sigyn cut her off, allowing Pepper inside.

“Hi,” Pepper said shyly as she walked into the room. “I just wanted to see if you needed anything? I mean… you know… Sigyn’s clothing doesn’t exactly fit as she’s a good foot shorter than you, and I thought you might be more comfortable in something else. You can borrow something of mine - we seem about the same size - or I can have my shopper pick you up some stuff, if that would be alright…”

“Pardon?” Loki said, flabbergasted.

“I think that would be greatly appreciated, Lady Pepper,” Sigyn smiled brightly. “Loki, say thank you.”

“Why do you want me to have women’s clothing?” Loki asked instead, causing Sigyn to roll her eyes.

“If it makes you more comfortable,” Pepper shrugged. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to…”

“No… I…” Loki began. “We didn’t pack anything for me to wear… in this state. We didn’t think this would be happening here. It wasn’t due for… well, I wasn’t anticipating it. And some of my… more masculine wardrobe doesn’t always fit…”

“I offered to make something for Loki to wear, but that might take time,” Sigyn nodded.

“I can send you down a few things of mine in a bit so you can be more comfortable, and then I’m sure we can get some things delivered later on,” Pepper said. “I’m guessing you don’t know your shoe size though…”

“You’re not…” Loki said, a bit surprised, “you’re not revolted by me…” Pepper smiled, walking forward and sitting next to Loki on the remaining segment of the chaise.
“I have this cousin, Bernice,” Pepper explained. “About six years older than me. Well, she was born Bernard, but she always felt wrong and when she was in her twenties, she decided she much rather liked being Bernice. It was pretty hard on Bernie. My uncle didn’t exactly understand things. Kicked her out of the house. She still finished school, though, and lives in Schenectady now. Even got married.”

“She wields seiðr?” Loki said, surprised.

“No, but I’m sure she wouldn’t mind being able to,” Pepper laughed. “Sometimes, people are born in the wrong gender. Sometimes they don’t feel they fit into one category. Just because she was born a boy doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with Bernie. She’s still one of my closest family members and I still love her.”

“How did she change without seiðr, though?” Loki frowned.

“Surgery,” Pepper said. “After years of hormones and treatments. That’s how it’s done on Midgard. I’m pretty sure being able to magically change would have made things a lot easier for her and others.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded, suddenly feeling very grateful to have the aid of his seiðr. “Alright, Lady Pepper. I will accept your gifts of dresses and shoes, but I must warn you…”

“That you definitely have your own fashion sense?” Pepper smirked. “I’m sure I can pick out some things you would like.”

“Alright,” Loki nodded.

“Thank you,” Sigyn smiled, grabbing Pepper’s hands and squeezing them affectionately. Pepper smiled back and then rose from the chaise, waving to Thor and setting out to complete her task.

“What can I do?” Thor asked hopefully as he continued to stand awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Nothing,” Loki grunted.

“I take it you have already explained things to everyone,” Sigyn said to Thor.

“Yes,” Thor nodded.

“Oh, I’m sure they were absolutely riveted by your salacious tales of me,” Loki spat.

“Contrary to what you might believe,” Thor said, a bit annoyed, “I have never seen eye-to-eye with our Father…”

“Your father,” Loki hit out, trying to ignore the fact that Thor had unwittingly made a pun.

“...on the way he treats you during these periods of time,” Thor continued. “I know there are certain expectations of members of the royal family, and we cannot always be ourselves in public settings, but I find there is a great difference in being polite and cordial to those who annoy you and locking your child in a room because of something they cannot help.”

“Unless that thing they cannot help happens to be the fact they were born a Frost Giant?” Loki challenged.

“You are the one drawing the conclusions between your… different transitions...,” Thor said.
“What is that supposed to mean?” Loki hissed.

“It’s just that you’re more of a shapeshifter than I realized,” Thor said, backpedaling. “I didn’t mean anything cruel by it...

“So, you’re saying that you’re relieved I just turned into a woman and didn’t embarrass you in front of your friends by turning into some hideous, big blue Frost Giant?” Loki shrieked, her voice going so high-pitched Thor cringed.

“That isn’t what I’m saying at all!” Thor insisted.

“Honestly, Thor,” Loki said, seeming like she was tearing up a bit, “I can’t stand talking to you when you’re like this!” With that, Loki swept out of the room and into the bedroom, throwing herself on the bed in a weeping heap.

“I don’t know what I did,” Thor said to Sigyn helplessly.

“It’s alright,” Sigyn assured him. “You know the mood swings always come early in the change. I will tend to her. Meanwhile, perhaps you could scrounge up some treats Loki likes, hmm?”

“Chocolates and cheeses?” Thor said thoughtfully. “And maybe I can ask Stark for some good wine?”

“Excellent,” Sigyn said happily. “See you soon.” Thor left determinedly and, once the door closed behind him, Sigyn let out a sigh and then went to tend her spouse.

After convincing Loki that Thor just wasn’t very good with words and hadn’t meant any insult, Sigyn managed to get Loki up out of bed and back into the living area to await the delivery of dresses from Pepper Potts. Happy arrived a few moments later with some of Pepper’s personal belongings for Loki to try on and select from, informing them that it would probably be later in the afternoon before Loki would have a chance to pick out some of her own clothes from the batch the personal shopper was bringing over. Loki ended up picking out a pair of baggy black sweatpants and a rather airy, green meshed blouse Sigyn goaded her into. Fifteen minutes after Happy left, Loki was still fiddling with her clothes and her hair in the bathroom mirror, still not feeling exactly comfortable. It was JARVIS announcing they had visitors that finally made Loki emerge to see what was happening.

Sigyn had opened the door and was a bit surprised to find Bruce and Tony on the other side, each carrying a rather large box with different contents. She invited them inside as Loki emerged from the bedroom, a bit nervous as to what was about to happen. Tony sat his box down on the dining room table and Bruce followed suite. While Tony began rummaging through his box, Bruce began pulling books out of his. Loki slowly ventured into the dining area to join them as Bruce began handing Sigyn various books on Midgardian gender studies he had collected over his years as an academic and thought the pair might like reading.

However, Tony’s box seemed to intrigue Loki more. Inside, were various records, DVDs and other paraphernalia relating to some of the Man of Iron’s favorite bards. Loki peered over Tony’s shoulder to see what was inside, only to snap back a bit in fear when Tony noticed him. Instead of a rebuke, Tony just grinned and motioned for Loki to come closer to the box. Excitedly, Tony began pulling them out and explaining to Loki about musicians like Jobriath, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, the New York Dolls, Queen, and Prince. While Bruce did try to temper Tony’s excitement with a short lecture about gender as performance art, Loki was too busy being transfixed by Tony’s “Man Who Sold the
Tony rolled his eyes. “I mean, I get that she thinks you might enjoy them, but they are not to my particular musical taste.”

“I like ‘Karma Chameleon,’” Bruce commented.

“See?” Tony snorted. “Bruce has horrible taste in music. He likes elevator jazz, too.”

“It’s calming,” Bruce reasoned as Tony moved his box further in front of Loki. Tentatively, Loki reached out to go through it but then pulled her hand back.

“Why did you bring me this?” Loki asked, worriedly.

“Because these guys are cool,” Tony shrugged. “And I never miss a chance to introduce someone to good music. And I thought you might like some of this stuff.”

“Because…” Bruce prompted.

“Because you seem to like a lot of the same cool stuff I like,” Tony shrugged, “and I never miss a chance to introduce someone to good music. And I thought you might like some of this stuff.”

“You’re not?” Loki said skeptically.

“Thor told us what happens on Asgard,” Bruce said to Loki comfortingly. “We didn’t want you to think you were some kind of outcast because of this. We want you to feel free to be yourself…”

“You know, as long as being yourself doesn’t involve mass murder,” Tony shrugged.

“And, for what it’s worth,” Bruce said. “We all really think it’s awful that you aren’t allowed to be yourself on Asgard.”

“Because home is the one place where you should always feel safe and comfortable being who you are no matter what,” Tony nodded. “And it’s not fair that you didn’t have that growing up or even now. But, since this is your home now, we wanted you to feel comfortable here. Besides, it would probably be a crime to let you return back to Asgard without listening to all the tracks on Ziggy Stardust or A Night at the Opera. We’ll have to watch Purple Rain, too. And I’ve got some of the live concert recordings…”

“We’re not overwhelming you, are we?” Bruce asked Loki, worriedly.

“No… this is fine…” Loki nodded.

“Ah, I forgot the turntable,” Tony grumbled. “JARVIS, ask Happy to bring down the turntable with the clothes.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS responded.

“I have returned!” Thor announced, bursting through the door. He was balancing six cheese platters on one hand and carrying around ten bags worth of goods from the nearby Godiva store on the other.

“Wonderful!” Sigyn clapped. She directed Thor into the kitchen and the pair of them began laying out the spread. Loki seemed to not know if she should follow the delicious smells of cheese and chocolate or stay with the things Tony had brought down. Her internal debate was interrupted by the main chamber door opening up widely and loudly a second time.
“Alright,” Clint said, bursting into the room with a huge box in both of his hands. “Never fear. We’re here with the good stuff!” He was followed by Natasha, carrying a similar several Sephora bags and Steve carrying a similar big box to Clint’s.

“What is all this?” Loki asked worriedly.

“Pepper mentioned to Natasha that she’d forgotten to ask if you wanted makeup or anything when she ordered dresses,” Steve explained.

“And since there is no one better at makeup…” Clint began.

“Than Natasha?” Tony suggested.

“Please,” Clint snorted. “Maybe she can assassinate a terrorist cell leader from 2,450 meters, but I had to teach her how to hold her hand steady enough to apply liquid eyeliner.”

“Hey!” Natasha said, annoyed. “It just took some practice!”

“You do still have uneven wing tips sometimes,” Steve admitted embarrassedly.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Natasha gaped.

“Wait, are you trying to tell me that Barton and Rogers are the two best makeup artists in this Tower?” Tony gaped.

“I worked for the circus,” Clint snorted. “You really think I didn’t learn about makeup?”

“And I spent months on tour with like fifty USO dancers,” Steve nodded. “I not only know how to apply flawless lip liner and eyeshadow but I can also use your eyebrow pencil to draw a straight line up the back of your leg to make it look like you have nylon stockings despite war rationing.”

“There are pencils for eyebrows?” Tony said, stunned.

“Doesn’t Pepper use them?” Natasha frowned. “What did you think they were for?”

“I don’t know,” Tony shrugged. “Crosswords? Sudoku? What next? Am I going to find out that Captain Fancy Pants over here also gives the best bikini waxes this side of the Cold War?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Loki said.

“It better not be,” Sigyn snorted, giving Steve a bit of a jealous once over.

“So,” Clint said, sitting down before Loki as Cap began opening up and arranging the various types of makeup they had bought. “you are definitely a winter. Your best bet is accentuating one major facial feature, such as your eyes or lips, I think your skin really works to your advantage in that.”

“We’re here!” Pepper called out, carrying several dress bags. Happy was hot on her heels, pulling an entire rolling rack of outfits behind him with the turntable at the bottom. “We’ve got a good mix of stuff here.”

“Well,” Sigyn grinned, walking over to Loki. “What do you want to get a look at first?”

An hour later found Loki in a full-length evening gown, made up to the nines, and drinking champagne with chocolates as the group gathered around a David Bowie/Iggy Pop concert DVD.
Loki curled up against Sigyn as Tony tried to catch Steve up on how the electric guitar had evolved since the 1930s while Clint demonstrated various makeup techniques to Natasha and Pepper using Happy as a dummy. Thor had just been staring at the electric guitars and the noises they made in open-mouth wonder the entire time, and Tony knew he had a metalhead on his hands. He made a mental note to make Thor a playlist sometime before he took the Rainbow Road back to Asgard.

The group moved on to a documentary on Queen, during which Steve painted Sigyn’s nails, Sigyn painted Steve’s nails and then the pair of them painted everyone else’s nails. Both of them were very artistic in their views of the best polishes and designs for each of the other Avengers, though Steve seemed to hold the polish brushes more steadily in hand than Sigyn did. Steve had learned a lot during the one year he had been able to afford art school, but he admitted it was more nerve wracking to hold such a small paintbrush in his hands. Tony was curious if Bruce’s nails would remain painted if he “hulked out,” and if they didn’t, if the polish would still be on Bruce’s nails when the Hulk retreated. While Bruce admitted it was an interesting theory, he didn’t think he or the Hulk would be ready to be Tony’s test subjects any time soon.

The evening ended with a massive order of pizza and both the Purple Rain album and film. After a couple of beers and a glass of cheap wine, Clint had done everyone’s makeup and, some time during the film, both Clint and Tony had fashioned themselves tiaras made out of tin foil. While Tony’s was more structurally sound, Clint’s was easily the more artistic of the two. Sigyn had also brought of some of her own tiaras and was wearing one, as was Loki. When the film ended and before everyone left for the evening, Sigyn insisted on having a group photo taken to help remember the unusual evening. She also thought Loki might like to have a souvenir of the group of people who had so thoroughly accepted her.

Because Loki was still uneasy about being in female form, Tony and Steve had negotiated with SHIELD to allow Loki to stay home from clean-up duties if she wanted to or until she had changed forms again. Loki did stay home with Sigyn the next day, but decided to head to the work site the next day. Mostly, Loki didn’t attract much attention from the work crews who thought SHIELD had picked up another stray to do some of the heavy lifting. During their lunch break, a businessman passing by had catcalled the female Loki, only to find himself backhanded by the woman in question and then surrounded by Avengers determined to give him a lesson in respect. Thor had been especially angered, and it had taken Steve, Tony, and three SHIELD agents to pull him away from the Wall Street-type - who may or may not have peed himself as the result of the encounter.

Despite Loki’s insistence that everything was fine, Thor couldn’t abide by the thought of Loki being leered at so rudely in public and insisted on taking her back to Sigyn and the Tower where he was sure she would be safe. For his part, Tony texted Pepper to see if they could have a catcalling section added to the company’s sexual harassment workshops. Loki had been furious at being dragged away from the job site because of someone else’s behavior and threw a massive tantrum the entire way back to the Tower. After Thor left, she threw another tantrum at Sigyn and then retreated to the bedchamber to take a nap. When the work group came back for supper that evening, the found a decidedly male Loki sitting in the communal living area, watching a home DIY show and shoveling beef jerky into his mouth.

“Hey… man…” Tony said awkwardly. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Loki sighed. “I think I got all that out of my system… For a while, anyway.”

“Sorry about what happened earlier,” Steve said to Loki. “I know Thor overreacted a little…”

“And how would you feel if that was your little sister?” Thor demanded furiously.

“I had it handled,” Loki huffed. “And regardless of my form, I could have crushed that man’s
windpipe with one hand if need be.” Thor muttered something unintelligible, but Steve gave him a pointed look to let the subject drop.

“So, where’s the wife at?” Tony asked curiously.

“Reorganizing the wardrobe,” Loki shrugged. “Now that I no longer have need of them, she thought the clothing I acquired in recent days needed to be put away.” Loki sighed before turning to Tony. “Unless, of course, I will have to return all of the items purchased for me. I suppose by wearing them I have soiled them beyond use.”

“I’m sure you’ve got plenty of room in that trunk of your wife’s to take everything back to Asgard with you no problem,” Tony shrugged. “Unless you don’t want to take it with you because all that stuff is centuries out of fashion on Asgard.”

“I wasn’t sure if I would be allowed to keep such items,” Loki replied dismissively. Tony and Steve exchanged a brief look, both seeming to sense this was a sensitive subject for Loki.

“Nah, keep it. We bought it for you, so it’s yours,” Tony shrugged. “Besides, I don’t think anyone else here can pull off those evening gowns and six inch heels.”

“Definitely not you,” Clint snorted. He then added thoughtfully: “Though, Banner might be able to. I think the shoes would probably be too big, and he’d probably ruin a few of the outfits when he transforms.”

“Which would be a travesty,” Tony agreed.

“Perhaps the next time such a situation arises I can take a brief holiday to Midgard for the duration,” Loki mentioned offhandedly. “That is, if I could find a willing host.”

“Hey man,” Tony grinned, “you bring the flower crowns and I’ll provide the nail polish.”
“Hide me!” Thor demanded, rushing into the communal living area in only his sleep shorts.

Natasha, Clint, Steve, and Tony looked up from where they were gathered around Tony’s XBox 360, which he had rigged up on the big screen with surround sound and every accessory known to man. After realizing Steve knew nothing about video games, Tony had decided to ease him into it with Minecraft. Clint and Natasha were watching the entire thing unfold like one might watch reality TV. Steve had been catching on much faster than Tony had anticipated when Thor burst into the rooms, looking like he had just woken.

“What’s going on?” Tony asked Thor, confused.

“Hide me!” Thor said. “I beg of you!”

“From who?” Steve asked.

“My brother,” Thor said just as Loki’s voice could be heard in the elevator.

“Thor!” Loki called. “I know you’re around here!”

“Hide yourselves, you fools!” Thor shrieked. He then dove behind a large chair, and Tony marveled at how the large god managed to make himself small enough to hide there. Loki skidded into the room, looked around, and his eyes narrowed on the four people before the video game console. Despite the fact that Loki was wearing a black t-shirt, black sweatpants, and a billowy black bathrobe, he still looked rather intimidating.

“Have you seen Thor?” Loki asked.

“Like in general?” Tony blabbered. “Because I see him a lot. You know, when he’s on this planet. Or do you mean recently? And, like, how recently would you want to know if I’ve seen him. Because recently could mean five minutes ago or five days ago, given the relative nature of time in the Asgardian sense and time in the…”

“If you see him,” Loki interrupted, annoyed, “let him know I am looking for him.”

“Okey dokey, Loki,” Tony nodded as Loki angrily swept out of the room, using his robe as if it was a cape. Once Thor was certain Loki had left and was in the elevator heading back to his rooms, he popped up from behind the chair.

“That was close,” Thor sighed.

“What’s going on?” Steve asked. Thor looked a bit sheepish.

“As you know, Sigyn’s Name Day is in a fortnight,” Loki said.
“We did not know this,” Tony snorted.

“I knew it,” Natasha said, causing the three men to look at her. “What? It’s July 31. Said so in her SHIELD file.” Tony and Steve then to looked at Clint.

“Oh, like I read SHIELD files,” Clint snorted. “Tash always gives me the Cliff’s Note’s version of anything important in them anyway. Calls them Clint’s Notes.”

“I’m sorry, I fail to see how your sister-in-law’s birthday makes you afraid of your brother,” Tony said.

“I should instill fear in you all,” Thor said gravely. “for, to my brother, his wife’s Name Day is the most important occasion of the calendar. You see, not all of Sigyn’s Name Day’s growing up were pleasant and, thus, Loki has made it his personal mission to see that every Name Day she has is grander than the last. On Asgard, he usually throws very extravagant parties and members of the court present to her elaborate gifts for fear they will feel my brother’s wrath and displeasure for not doing so. Members of the palace kitchen staff begin planning their proposed meals for the event months in advance so as not to draw my brother’s ire. Fortunately, Sigyn was born on Lithasblot, the most important festival and powerful day of the year for magisters, so it has never been too much trouble in Asgard to convince my brother that the celebrations should be one in the same with Sigyn exemplifying the virtues of Lithasblot. On Midgard, however, I fear…”

“He won’t be as forgiving,” Natasha concluded.

“Wait, you mean he wants to throw Sigyn one of those completely outlandish, money-wasting and totally unachievable ‘perfect’ parties where everyone wears expensive clothes, gets cars as a gift, has a fight or tantrum, and some ‘celebrity’ performs?” Clint said, his mouth nearly watering. “We get to throw Sigyn a ‘My Super Sweet Sixteen’ party!”

“He was really devastated when that show got cancelled,” Natasha informed Steve and Tony with a roll of her eyes. “Luckily, ‘Dog Cops’ starting airing shortly afterward.”

“Don’t worry, Thor,” Tony insisted. “I can talk to Pepper about getting Loki a meeting with the Stark Industries event planner. We’ve thrown together huge bashes in less time, and with my bank account, money’s not an option. Besides, Siggy Stardust kind of deserves a giant party each year for all the shit she has to put up with. Norman Bates is pretty smart for thinking up such a thing.”

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After their meeting with Loki, the chief event planner for Stark Industries and half of her staff threatened to quit immediately - a feat not even Tony had accomplished before. With Pepper promising pay raises and performance bonuses for everyone involved, the staff had suddenly grown less terrified and more excited about completing the project for the obscure Norwegian billionaire's son who was couch surfing with his wife in Stark Tower. At least Loki’s extremely specific instructions, which ranged from the extremely trivial to highly irregular minutiae of the day’s events, gave the planners a clear picture of how things were to happen even if it left little room for personal creativity. While Tony had noticed Loki could be fastidious, the actual facts binder of ideas Loki had brought to the meeting made Tony upgrade Loki from tastefully discriminating into full-blown royally anal retentive territory.

The first section of Loki’s binder included instructions for the meals, not just with a list of food and exact recipes to be followed but actual instructions on the cooks themselves and the behavior of the kitchen staff. Tony found himself muttering under his breath in his best Ina Garten imitation “If you cannot find a French pâtissier educated at one of these three schools and with a minimum of ten years
experience, store bought is fine.” Loki also wanted a throne for Sigyn to sit on while she oversaw the party, like a kindly queen watching over her simple peasants. He counted on various gifts being given to Sigyn, but seemed to think she was above the Midgardian tradition of gift bags for her guests and that giving away something at her own celebration might “send the wrong message.” Since Loki had nearly thrown a temper tantrum on finding out the mayor of New York City would not close down Park Avenue for a massive parade in Sigyn’s honor nor could a circus be brought into the Tower itself to entertain her, no one decided to push him on the gift bag issue. Especially not after he punched a hole in the floor between Stark Tower’s sixty-fifth and sixty-fourth floor after learning that the permit for a fireworks display in Sigyn’s honor hadn’t been approved.

It was only after Loki began demanding that he approval all outfits of any party guests before the event in question to ensure no one was wearing the same color or clothing of a similar cut to Sigyn’s that Tony called off the party planning meeting. When Tony remarked to Pepper that keeping up with Loki’s demands was something akin to obeying the whims of Henry VIII or Louis XIV, he was informed he was just getting his comeuppance for years of being selfishly demanding. Tony dropped Loki off at Steve’s quarters in the hopes that calming game of chess, Life, or whatever board game they were playing would help stop Loki from seizing Coney Island for Sigyn’s birthday gift. Tony was sure the party planning stage would be the worst part of the whole Name Day fiasco.

It was not.

It soon became apparent that the denizens of Asgard and Vanaheim had not forgotten Sigyn’s birthday, nor were they willing to risk the prince’s wrath by ignoring such a special day, even when he wasn’t in the realm to assure they were celebrating properly. A week to the actual day, massive gifts started arriving at Stark Tower from all corners of the Nine Realms, and most were not delivered through something so trivial as the U.S. Postal Service, UPS, or FedEx. No, large birds seemed to be the preferred manner of magical delivery from beyond the realms. As Thor and his compatriots had previously explained, ravens seemed to be the main method of inner and outer-realm communication and delivery, though a good number of hawks, eagles and even a few songbirds came bearing notes and packages. After dropping off their deliveries and tweeting at Loki, Sigyn or Thor in some matter, most of these birds paid a visit to Clint before departing back to whence they came. This was how most of the non-Black Widow occupants of the Tower learned Clint had a special pocket in his tac vest just for bird seed.

However, the whole delivery by bird thing stopped being like something out of an enchanted fairytale and began to seem more like a waking nightmare when ten giant golden eagles came bearing a massive package, deposited it in the communal living area and then proceeded to leave their droppings all around the Iron Man launch pad. Tony then instructed JARVIS not to let any more bird messengers into the building, only to be informed that JARVIS hadn’t let a single bird messenger into the building. Rather than crash into windows or walls, these birds seemed imbued with the power to just sail through them. Tony wondered what kind of twisted Asgardian magic allowed for delivery birds to go through walls but not stay their bowels while on important missions. Tony went to the chambers of the prince and princess to see if there was some manner of preventing his building from being covered in avian excrement only to walk into what appeared to be some otherworldly bazaar. Loki and Thor were working to help catalogue Sigyn’s various gifts so she could accurately dispatch thank you notes to the appropriate person.

“What is all this?” Tony gawped.

“Silks and rare magical items from Alfheim, Vanir perfumes and handicrafts, Asgardian silver goods, and jewel-encrusted everything from Niðavellir,” Loki explained. “Even Queen Sinmara of Muspelheim sent Sigyn some obsidian, fire agate, and larimar from that molten homeworld of hers. I’m surprised the good queen consort always deigns to send a present each year since her husband,
King Surtr, has vowed to kill the Allfather over and over again, even if doing so requires him to consume all of the Nine Worlds in fire.”

“Sounds like a charming guy,” Tony snorted.

“He’s been swearing to do so since before any of us were born,” Thor replied with a roll of his eyes. “But as Father always says ‘What do you expect? Fire giants are full of hot air.’”

“There are also some archaic tomes, rare vintage wines, sweetmeats, works of art, and various other luxury items,” Loki said airily.

“Does Sigyn… um… need all this?” Tony asked curiously.

“Of course she doesn’t need for anything,” Loki seethed, rising to his full height so he could tower over Stark. “As her husband, it is my duty to ensure all of her needs, wants, and desires are promptly and perfectly taken care of, and I never neglect my duty. Perhaps none of these things are necessary, as you so claim, but they bring her joy and demonstrate how valued she is by others. And furthermore, I think that you are the last person in any realm who should lecture someone on overindulgence or overconsumption of high commodity goods, especially considering the fact I have not yet seen you wear the same timepiece on your wrist once in the nearly three moon cycles since I have arrived here.”

“Touché,” Tony agreed. “So, where is the birthday girl since she’s not here helping review her presents?”

“She is assisting the occasional Green Behemoth with one of his projects. These gifts will be appropriately presented to Sigyn on her Name Day,” Loki said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Thor and I are merely recording them so she may speedily thank those who have given them.”

“Loki likes for there to be a great pageant in which all of Sigyn’s gifts are presented to her,” Thor stage whispered to Tony. “A sort of promenade of presents, if you will.”

“Present parade,” Tony shook his head. “And people thought Marie Antoinette was too obsessed with consumerism.”

“Who is that?” Loki asked, popping up from where he had been arranging various pieces of jewelry.

“French queen. Got her head cut off by an angry mob - either because she didn’t understand bread and cake aren’t the same thing or because she was a symbol of the vast overconsumption of the noble classes at the expense of the peasantry,” Tony said. “Take your pick.”

“I prefer cake to bread,” Loki replied. “And why did she let them cut off her head? Ridiculous. She should have been the one cutting off heads. I’m sure the peasants would gone back to their works if she had chopped off enough of their heads.”

“Your brother would not have survived the French Revolution,” Tony informed Thor, who just looked confused.

“Where is French?” Thor asked curiously. “Is it a part of Midgard?”

“So, I actually came here for a reason,” Tony began, really not wanting to delve into the little he knew about France and its history.

“Ah, yes, to discuss the appropriate gifts you and your Midgardian compatriots might bestow upon my wife,” Loki nodded.
“Um… no… I was actually going to ask if there was something that could be done to prevent all of the eagle poop that is currently covering up my Tower,” Tony replied.

“Your priorities are most certainly askew,” Loki harrumphed.

“Believe me, there has never been an instance when I ever thought I might have to conduct a frank discussion with either of you about predatory bird shit,” Tony replied, “but yet here we are.”

“Perhaps if you had a proper rookery…” Thor suggested.

“I do not get enough mail via bird to merit that,” Tony shook his head. “And it's apparently hard enough to make Clint spend the night in his own bed rather than the ventilation system already.”

“Well, then,” Loki said haughtily, “I will give you a piece of advice you earlier gave to me: ‘Man up and deal with it.’ I’m sure your precious Tower will recover… unless you are implying the mere weight of bird droppings are enough to topple over this shoddily constructed heap?”

“Shoddily!” Tony glared.

“Come, Sir Stark!” Thor said, pushing Tony toward the door. “Explain to me again the wonders of your Digital Versatile Disc player!”

“This isn’t over Antler Boy!” Tony shouted as Thor herded him from the room.

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Luckily for Loki, Tony was distracted from the insult about his Tower when Steve approached him to ask questions about some of the new tactical gear Tony was developing for him, particularly to make his shield easier to wield and carry about when he wasn’t using it. Steve wasn’t always comfortable in the lab setting - possibly because of his history as a science experiment - and so Tony suggested they go over the plans in the communal area over a cup of coffee and some snacks. Clint was already there, sleeping on the couch in the same way Snoopy slept atop his doghouse, but Barton could sleep through anything. Natasha had once regaled them how she had single handedly taken down 18 members of an emerging terrorist cell attempting to hijack a train in India because Clint had fallen asleep at his post and remained asleep through most of the op. Tony and Steve were almost done going over everything when Loki skidded into the room, looking more joyful than either man had ever seen him.

“You have inspired me!” Loki informed Tony, coming to stand in front of where he and Steve had been sitting. “After your comments about the beheaded queen from the lands formerly known as Bélgica and Gaul…”

“He means France,” Tony informed Steve, who just rolled his eyes.

“I know where Gaul was,” Steve snorted. “I also know some Latin. Catholic, remember?”

“Thor and I - by which I mean chiefly I - have conducted research into the history of these unfortunate monarchs,” Loki said. “And, I have found what I wish to give Sigyn as her Name Day gift.”

“If it’s the Hope Diamond, no way,” Tony said. “First off, the thing’s cursed. Secondly, it’s in a museum.”

“I would think it should be first off it’s in a museum,” Steve pointed out. “And which museum? Since when?”
“This!” Loki said, producing a piece of paper and slapping it down on the table before Tony and Steve. Tony looked down to realize the piece of paper was actually a photograph.

“I’m hoping you mean you’re giving her the picture and not the thing in the picture,” Tony said.

“You can use your wealth to acquire it and then I will pay you back when the Allfather returns access to my funds,” Loki said gleefully.

“Loki, this is the palace of Versailles,” Steve pointed out. “Even if the French government were willing to sell it…”

“And, no, we’re not letting you go conquer a French palace for Sigyn’s birthday,” Tony snorted.

“... I think there would be some major opposition for you acquiring it as a personal home,” Steve said. “The place is a museum now and a part of French cultural heritage. Not to mention, when would you live in it? You’ve already clearly stated you never want to come back to Earth ever again.”

“I would move it to Asgard,” Loki replied. “We could live in it there.”

“Do you even know how much it would cost to buy?” Tony asked.

“The estimate is roughly 300 billion dollars American or 275.5 billion French euros,” JARVIS intoned, as Loki grinned brightly. “That is, if it were to be sold with all of its furnishings and gardens intact.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Tony said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You want to purchase a 300 billion dollar museum of French Baroque excess that just happens to be a national symbol and international tourism destination so you can somehow manage to move it through space and time to another dimension so Sigyn can use it as… what? Her summer palace or something?” Loki frowned, and Tony hoped that Loki was beginning to realize he hadn’t thought this whole thing through.

“Maybe you can get her a book about it or a model kit…” Steve suggested.

“No,” Loki said, beginning to angrily pace the room, “that simply won’t do!”

“Maybe this party you’re throwing her could be your present,” Steve said.

“Ludicrous!” Loki hissed at him. “An insult! Merely fêteing one’s spouse is the absolute least one can do on such an important day!”

“Pepper might argue that having Happy pick a card up at last minute and then having DUM-E forge my signature on said card before delivering it to her is the least one could do,” Tony pointed out.

“Sigyn has come to and very well should expect more,” Loki snorted. “Besides, how do you think she would feel if everyone who is even slightly acquainted with her across the Nine Worlds sends her a gift and yet her own husband shows up empty-handed? If I didn’t know better, Captain, I might think you were purposely leading me into a situation that might result in strife with my wife.”

“I’m not,” Steve insisted. “I’m just thinking… scale it back a bit, you know? Maybe try for something more personal?”

“And what you have gotten my wife that is so personal?” Loki jeered, trying to tower over the Captain despite their mere inch and a half height difference.
“If you really want to know,” Steve said, remaining completely calm, “I painted a picture of your magpies for her. I figured it was something I could do that utilized my talents and was personal, but not too personal. And that you could both enjoy it.”

“Lame,” Tony grimaced. “Pepper bought her a metal wolf sculpture and I got her a book about beginning blacksmithing as a joke.” Loki glowered at Stark indignantly. “Okay, yeah, and I also got her some museum guides to those metalworking exhibits from the Met.”

“What do you normally do for her birthday?” Steve asked curiously. “I’m guessing you don’t try to buy her a palace every year.”

“Or have your magic horse friends build her one,” Tony muttered, earning a sharp glare from Loki.

“Normally, I am in possession of my seiðr and do not have to worry about obtaining her something as a result,” Loki said, miffed. “For her last birthday, I had a giant silver ship constructed and enchanted so she may sail it through the skies of Asgard as well as its waters. And inside the ship were various jewels, clothing and other items Sigyn enjoyed as well. The year before that, I had an observatory constructed outside of Asgard in her honor. On her first Name Day after we married, I purchase for Sigyn her very own gem mine in Niðavellir.”

“That’s… a lot,” Steve said.

“Look, I’m sure it’s not a big deal,” Tony insisted. “And so what if you get her something lame. You can always make it up to her next year.”

“Are you a simpleton?” Loki huffed. “This is the first Name Day I have spent with Sigyn since my unplanned departure from Asgard. I cannot hope to just ‘make it up to her next year’ after allowing her to spend the day alone last year! Why am I even talking to the two of you about this? He’s probably never been alone with a woman who wasn’t his mother and you, Stark, seem to be only able to keep a woman if you have her on your payroll!”

“I know you’re upset right now,” Steve said, annoyed, “and that is the only reason I’m not punching you in the face.”

“And he’s really good at punching people in the face,” Tony nodded. Loki frowned and then began to pace back and forth again, muttering under his breath.

“Look,” Steve said, “I know you want to do something special for her, and that’s great. But maybe you’re setting the standard a bit too high for yourself. Maybe you’d be better…”

“Do not give me some nonsense about making some gift from the heart on my own,” Loki snorted, his hand slicing through the air in a gesture of dismissal. “Do you honestly think I haven’t considered what I am capable of doing sans seiðr and come up woefully lacking? Tell me, Captain, if you were given one last chance to find a gift for the woman you love that is the absolute embodiment and epitome of all the love you feel for her, what would you think is enough?” Seeing Steve couldn’t form a coherent response, Tony decided to step in again.

“To be fair, you are the one who waited until a few days before her birthday to realize you needed to spend a fair amount of time preparing her a gift,” Tony pointed out. “But as a fellow procrastinator and bad-decisionmaker when it comes to how I conduct my relationships, I feel it is my duty to help you out. And I think I have an idea.”

“What?” Loki asked curiously.

“How good are you at metalworking?” Tony asked. Loki scoffed.
“You really think I would know anything about smithing?” Loki said, annoyed. “Sigyn is the one with the genetic predilection for that. As a prince of Asgard, I have never been remotely encouraged to do anything resembling physical labor and as a biological Jotun - well, let’s just say that explains why I manage to get burns just standing in the vicinity of the dwarven forges. No, the idea of involving me in some kind of metalwork is preposterous.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Tony smirked.

When the day of the major event occurred, the Tower was aflutter with activity. To help ease the general hubbub - and possibly to avoid one of the party planners Natasha had tried to set him up on a blind date with - Steve volunteered to go with Happy and help oversee the security measures being put in place around the Tower as various caterers and florists would be coming in and out. Clint, as per usual, was nesting somewhere in the vents and Natasha had somehow interspersed herself with the caterers and event planners. She blended in so well with the staff that Tony nearly forgot who she really was. He then began to worry that she had gotten word that someone was using this event for corporate espionage or, worse, to find out details about his personal life - like where he had hidden the various packages of cookies around the apartment. When Pepper just assured him that Natasha liked to do things like this from time to time to hone up on her spycraft, Tony felt even less relieved knowing that Pepper and Natasha were still such good friends.

Even with Clint snoring obnoxiously on the sofa in the middle of the room and Natasha playing Spy Versus Spy with the catering staff, things seemed to be coming together. Loki would appear randomly every hour to check on the progress before heading back to his chambers where Sigyn allegedly remained blissfully unaware that anything was going on. Apparently, putting on a nature documentary was all that was needed to distract Sigyn for the bulk of the day. Just to be on the safe side, Loki was sacrificing his patience and some of his personal dignity to allow Thor into their rooms so he could watch over Sigyn during the times Loki went to check on the party planning. All of the outrageous arrangements and ludicrous decor were almost complete for Sigyn’s Name Day when Thor came rushing into the room, a look of panic Tony instantly recognized on his face. Pepper let out a giant sigh as Thor practically fell to his needs before the two of them, his big blue eyes pleading for sympathy.

“Help me!” Thor begged. “For the love of Asgard, help me!”

“We already took on the mantle of helping your brother plan this surprise party today,” Tony snorted. “What else does Asgard need?”

“I forgot to get Sigyn a present,” Thor admitted mournfully, causing a series of groans from around the room, even one from Clint in his sleep.

“How could you forget?” Pepper asked, frustrated.

“Normally, all I must do for Sigyn’s Name Day is acquire her a present,” Thor pouted. “But this time, I had to be involved in the planning. I was working so hard to make sure Loki’s demands were met I forgot to acquire a gift.”

“Who normally helps him plan this shindig?” Tony asked, curiously.

“Mother does,” Thor said sadly. “Mother is the only one who can rein in Loki during this time, the only one who can soothe his anger when the plans do not go his way, and the one who makes handling this entire affair seem so effortless. Certainly, she has an entire army of palace staff and the aid of seidr to ensure things go smoothly, but it is all Mother. I miss Mother.”
“Thor, calm down,” Pepper said to him, seemingly worried the anxious thunder god might again
summon his lightning powers and fry another appliance. “I’ll send someone down to the New York
Botanical Garden to pick up some books about earth plants. You can wrap them and make a card.”

“Make sure they’re about ugly, stinky plants,” Tony suggested. “Weirder the plants the better.”

“Noted,” Pepper nodded before pulling out her phone.

“Bless you both! Bless you!” Thor said happily. “May aid always come to you in your times of
need!”

“Thor!” Loki’s voice called out from the elevator. “What are you doing? I can’t check on the
progress if you aren’t down there to make sure Sigyn doesn’t get into mischief!”

“I must go,” Thor replied gravely before dashing back out of the room.

“You know,” Tony said to Pepper, “I’m honestly beginning to think that when Thor leaves his
hammer in weird places, he genuinely just set it down for a second, got distracted, and forgot to pick
it back up again. He’s got the attention span of a gnat.”

When everything was decorated and the food was ready to be served, JARVIS pinged down to let
Loki know. Loki tried his best to coax Sigyn upstairs, saying he was eager to go to the communal
supper that had been provided, but Sigyn seemed a bit skeptical. The fact that Thor was prancing
around, giddy as a schoolgirl and making it completely obvious that something big was about to
happen didn’t help in Loki’s attempt at subterfuge. Loki suddenly remembered why no one ever let
Thor in on plans for surprise events and, by the time the elevator had reached the community floor,
Loki was certain Sigyn knew what to expect when the doors opened.

Regardless, Sigyn still managed to fake surprise and show genuine joy that all of her friends and
family had put forth such an effort to give her a pleasant Name Day celebration. While the party
definitely resembled one of the events on “My Super Sweet Sixteen,” Clint had to admit Sigyn was
the exact opposite of the stars on the show, acting extremely thankful and a hundred percent pleased
with the outcome of things. Loki naturally preened with delight at her praise, even though the most
he had done was make over-the-top and ridiculous demands about how the party would be
conducted and then show up every forty-five minutes or so the day of to annoy and frustrate the staff
by complaining over non-issues, rearranging things they had just finished working on and just being
a prima donna in general. And yet, somehow, Pepper hadn’t got mad at him like she did when Tony
behaved similarly, citing Loki’s desire to make his wife happy as a plausible excuse for his odious
behavior.

After sitting Sigyn up on a dais in front of a dining table, Loki gave the signal that it was now time to
serve up the evening meal. It consisted completely of Sigyn’s favorite foods, meaning the meal was
very heavy on fish, vegetables and fruits. Rather than buffet-style, Loki had directed that the caterers
serve the meal in the same way feasts were done on Asgard, with a presentation of each dish for each
diner to choose what they wanted and then have the caterers deposit the dishes on their plates. It was
a seemingly never ending plate of courses and dishes, stretching from starting plates of cheeses and
breads to soups to main courses and finally desserts.

When the meal was over, the caterers removed the table so Sigyn could sit atop her fancy chair and
receive her presents. Loki and Thor did the bulk of the presenting of the delivered gifts from the
other realms. After being presented with various rich fabrics, gemstones, perfumes, and other gifts to
symbolize Sigyn’s status as a princess of Asgard, Loki brought out the gifts that had been sent by
Sigyn’s family. It didn’t escape notice of anyone present that Sigyn’s mother hadn’t remembered to
send her a birthday present, but she had gotten some from her grandfather, uncle and other members
of the Vanir royal family.

The King of Vanaheim had sent his granddaughter a giant decorated shell that could be used as a jewelry box as well as an ornate hourglass that had once belonged to some long again Vanir queen and was allegedly filled with sand from the island where the Vanir capitol stood. Sigyn’s uncle, the crown prince, had sent her various jewelry of sea glass, pearls, and aquamarines. From her cousins, she had received a new chronometer. From her father, Sigyn had received some new cauldrons as well as a hooked shelf for robes and capes depicting Sigyn’s beloved magpies. Some gemstones, precious metals and a jeweled letter opener had also come from other dwarven relatives.

Sigyn’s sisters had also each sent a gift, often showcasing their own unique talents. Idunn had sent an apple blossom oil to be used as an air freshener, Nanna more healing oils and items, Var a necklace of her own creation and Syn and Snotra had gone in together to buy Sigyn the latest in what the non-Asgardians could only assume was the next in a series of popular Asgardian erotica novels based on the blush on Sigyn’s face when she opened it. Her sisters had also sent her a letter informing her that the pets were well-behaved - though there was a vase outside the room of one of Odin’s councillors that Fen insisted on marking as his territory every so often. Rather than upset, Loki seemed proud of this news and thought that Fenrir might deserve a good steak for his efforts at bringing the crotchety politician down a few pegs. The final delivered gifts were those from the Allmother and Allfather, though it was evident Odin probably had little to do with them. It was a new tiara for Sigyn, fashioned of gold and various bright jewels with stars all around it. Sigyn happily put it on around the top of her head and then went on to receive the rest of her gifts from those who were present to give them to her in person.

Clint had gotten her a modern bow and arrow set, trying to find any excuse to get her out onto the archery range because of Loki’s constant insistence Sigyn could best him. Natasha had continued with the weaponry theme, purchasing Sigyn a set of throwing stars and a promise to train her with them. Loki seemed a little envious of this present himself. Tony and Pepper handed over their various metal-related gifts, which made Sigyn very happy. The wolf looked surprisingly like Fenrir, and Sigyn was excited to show the books on Midgardian metalworking to her dwarven family, promising to write Tony and Pepper with news of how the books were received. Sigyn also delighted in Steve’s painting of the magpies, which even Loki had to admit was rather charming.

Bruce had gotten Sigyn a book on Viking shipbuilding as well as a kit that allowed her to construct her own model Viking ship, Sigyn happily informed him how these ships resembled the traditional wooden ships often used to gondola passengers around the canals of Vanir cities.

However, it might have been the gift from her brother-in-law that produced the happiest squeal from Sigyn. Whoever had picked up Thor’s gift definitely deserved a pay raise. Sigyn was delighted by the heavy tomes that included a basic overview to Midgardian botany, a photography book of flowers, a text on “the weird world” of mushrooms, a guide to carnivorous plants, a tome on strange vegetables, a how-to book on “growing bizarre botanicals,” and, for some reason, a book on North American butterflies that Sigyn also seemed to delight in. Thor seemed pleased that Sigyn enjoyed her gifts, but more than that relieved that Loki had deemed his offering acceptable and seemed to be marking him off his mental “to kill” list. Loki even seemed interested in a few of the books, picking up to read the back cover of the carnivorous plant text as Sigyn’s next gift was presented. Coulson had apparently sent Sigyn a t-shirt with two cartoon platypuses kissing on it while Fury had sent her a book on Midgardian herpetology. Sigyn expressed her desire to go through the book later and see if there were any earth snakes that resembled Jor, though Loki slightly suspected Fury had meant the snake identification book to be a jab at himself.

While he had insisted that everyone else present their gift to Sigyn not only in public but also with great theatricality, Loki wanted utter privacy for the presentation of his gift. Stark had insisted Sigyn would love it, but Loki was not so sure. The last thing he wanted was to be humiliated in public or
for there to be a scene. So, when the last presents had been given and everyone went to mingle and
drink, Loki took his wife by the hand and snuck her into the more private library off of the common
room. Sigyn initially seemed to think her husband was inviting her into a private room for a romantic
escapade but found herself surprised when instead of moving to take off either of their clothes, Loki
began wringing his hands a bit.

“I have a gift for you,” Loki said gently, causing Sigyn’s face to light up.

“Oh, Loki,” Sigyn said as he produced the small box and handed it to her. “You didn’t have to…”

it and did pretty much whatever he thought I could handle on my own. The robots did help a bit too,
but…” He winced as Sigyn opened the box to gasp.

“A ring?” Sigyn said, surprised. “Silver with moonstone! Loki, you made this?”

“Yes,” Loki nodded.

“But you hate the forge!” Sigyn said, shaking her head. “What would possess you to…”

“I love you more,” Loki shrugged. “And Sir Stark’s forge is not quite like your father’s. For one, it
didn’t have either of your brothers intentionally trying to send sparks in my direction while they
worked”

“It’s beautiful,” Sigyn said.

“The moonstone is good luck for seafarers and the silver is precious,” Loki replied. “Sir Stark had
the capabilities in his lab and suggested that I craft something as a bit of an homage to your Dwarven
heritage. I thought the moonstone tied both sides of your ancestry together. Sir Stark and the Captain
told me that, on Midgard, instead of a handfasting at the marriage ceremony most cultures have the
couple exchange rings to symbol the eternity of their bond. Stark said that they once thought the ring
finger had a vein that flowed directly to the heart and that putting the precious metal on that finger
would always keep the love pure.”

“You’ve written something inside?” Sigyn noticed, picking the ring up.

“Well, Stark’s light beams helped,” Loki admitted nervously.

“To Sigyn, my heart,” Sigyn read the runes aloud. She then extended the ring to her husband. “Put it
on me?” Loki smiled slightly and slid the ring on her finger, only for Sigyn to wrap her arms around
him and press a big kiss against his lips when he was finished.

“So you like it?” Loki asked, still feeling a little trepidation.

“It’s the best gift I’ve gotten all evening and possibly the best gift you’ve ever given me,” Sigyn
grinned, “though don’t let Jor or the magpies.”

“I’m pleased you’re pleased,” Loki said.

“I cannot wait to tell my father and brothers about this! And Var!” Sigyn said happily. “You’ve
given them quite a run for their money!”

“Yes, well do tell them not to expect me around any of their forges or metal shops anytime in the
near future,” Loki grimaced a bit. “I’ve realized that my Jotnar ancestry probably doesn’t lend itself
to standing around hot fires all the time.”
“Thank you, my love,” Sigyn smiled. “This has been a most wonderful Name Day! I know it couldn’t have been easy of you to organize this without your mother’s help.”

“Well, Sir Stark, Lady Pepper, and his servants did do a lot of the work,” Loki admitted begrudgingly. “But at my direction, of course. I tried to make it as special as I could without the aid of seiðr and the like.”

“You did marvelously,” Sigyn grinned, giving him a peck on the cheek.

“Well, we best get back to the festivities,” Loki sighed. “If not, Thor will probably burst in here at any second in the hopes of walking in on something inappropriate.”

“I don’t think he does it apurpose,” Sigyn shook her head.

“Cluelessly, then,” Loki replied. He leaned in to kiss her again just as Thor burst into the room.

“Loki! Sigyn!” Thor said happily, seeming oblivious to the fact he had just burst in on something intimate. “Come quickly! Sir Stark is to teach us the most recent Midgardian dance known as the hokey pokey!”

“We are on our way, Thor,” Sigyn laughed, pulling her dour looking husband behind her.
Summoning the Heroes

Chapter Summary

Or, in which Thor discovers the Midgardian feats known as the Olympics

Perhaps it had been a mistake to tell Steve the Olympics were still being held. Born not too long before the initial split into summer and winter games, Steve had always delighted in hearing the coverage of the various sporting events over the radio has he was growing up. Still a bit bitter that Nazi Germany had been allowed to host both the final summer and winter games he had been allowed to listen to before World War II cancelled the event, Steve was happy to known the Olympiad had not only resumed after the war - in Peggy Carter’s beloved London of all places - but also had expanded and grown to include more people, more countries and more sports. It almost seemed fated that the 2012 Summer Olympics, the first Steve could witness after being unfrozen, were also to be held in London.

What was most exciting for Steve, however, is that now the magic of television and the internet allowed him to see the games, ceremonies and various coverage first hand instead of relying on radio narration of the events as they unfolded. The opening ceremony soon became a mandatory function for all Tower residents to attend featuring snacks from around the world to munch on. While no other member of the team could match Steve’s excitement, there were varying ranges of interest in the games from the various team members. Clint was always very into the archery competitions and had his favorites as well as those he was sure would win. He actually even knew some of the competitors. Natasha always kept an eye out for former Red Room officials among the coaches of teams from former Soviet bloc countries, especially since most of the Red Room trainees were now too old to be in competition. Bruce and Pepper both enjoyed the pageantry and spirit of the games. Tony didn’t exactly get into the Olympics - there wasn’t a robot-building or engineering competition - but he figured he needed to be on hand in case there was a pop culture reference that Steve or the Asgardians needed explained.

Thor had actually been invited to the games by several countries as their guest or to represent Asgard as an official dignitary, but had turned it down because of his duties in New York and the fact he didn’t really understand what Olympics were. However, it soon became apparent Thor might have regretted this decision. The concept of people from all over the planet coming to compete in various sports, for both glory and personal achievement, struck a chord in Thor and he was glued to the screen from the first moment. During the commercials, Bruce was showing Steve and Thor examples of all the sports that would be done during the coming days. Steve talked a bit about hearing Jesse Owens’ famed run over the radio one of his downstairs’ neighbors had while Thor was intrigued at all the Midgardian athletic feats. It took time to explain to Thor that jousting, sword fighting and some of the other Asgardian sports typically played during tournaments were not part of the Olympics. He had a hard time with the concept, especially since feats like race running, swimming and decathlon feats were your typical morning exercises in Asgard rather than matters of serious competition. Tony arbitrarily wondered if they could find somewhere for Thor to mimic a discus throw with Mjolnir.

While Thor was like a kid at Christmas when it came to the Olympics, Sigyn and Loki seemed slightly intrigued by everything, but spent most of the opening ceremonies curled up together on the same overly large chair, whispering and giggling to each other about various things. While the pair...
seemed to be more into the theatricality of the opening ceremony than the promise of sporting events to come, Tony had a feeling he had just gotten glimpse of how the pair behaved during Asgard’s tournament season, sitting in the very back and making fun of everything happening around them. Tony tried to play the opening ceremonies cool too, but the inclusion of so many of his favorite songs and the appearance by Sir Tim Berners-Lee brought out his inner geek to the point he was sure Sigyn and Loki spent a good few minutes secretly whispering about him. Well, at least until Loki started nibbling on the shell of Sigyn’s ear and whispering something that made her blush. Then he was pretty sure they were not talking about him anymore.

In fact, sometime during the Parade of Nations, Tony noticed that Sigyn and Loki were no longer in the oversized chair they were sharing. By the time the torch lighters entered the stadium, Tony glanced back to see that Sigyn and Loki had returned, but both were wearing different clothes from before and Loki’s typically meticulously styled coiffure looked like it had been pulled, parted, twisted and turned in every direction possible. Tony finally turned away when Sigyn levitated a plate of cheese cubes over to them and Loki began hand-feeding his wife off of the plate. The last thing anyone needed was to watch Sigyn sensually licking cheese residue off of her husband’s fingers. Tony thought watching the two of them continue on was something akin to watching his parents canoodling.

“This must be the pinnacle of Midgardian sport!” Thor thundered once the ceremonies were over. “How impressive and mighty these warriors are!”

“It’s not just the Olympics,” Bruce mentioned. “Sure, full-bodied athletes compete in these games, but they also have a Paralympics and Special Olympics so everyone of every ability level has a chance to compete in various sport.”

“How wonderful that Midgard includes all in its celebration of athletic form,” Thor nodded. He turned toward Loki to say something but instead just scrunched up his face at the way Loki and Sigyn were full on making out, tongues and everything.

“Archery team finals are tomorrow and Sunday,” Clint mentioned. “Individual is next weekend.”

“Who are you rooting for?” Natasha asked.

“I mean, I know deep down I want the Americans to win, but I don’t know how realistic that is,” Clint sighed. “I mean, Ellison is a legend already, but his two teammates are Olympics virgins. As for the women, you know I gotta root for my Iowa girl Leek and Lorig’s basically Artemis come to life, but Nicholas has a history of choking at the big event. Smart money says South Korea because they have the two top-ranked archers in the business, though France, Italy, and China have had good years both as a team and individually. I mean, as long as China doesn’t sweep I won’t be too upset.”

“They’ve got weightlifting, judo, swimming, shooting, fencing and cycling on for tomorrow as well,” Steve noted.

“Cycling?” Thor frowned.

“Bike riding,” Bruce explained. Thor seemed even more confused.

“Swimming?” Sigyn said, pulling away from Loki, who seemed annoyed she had been dragged into the conversation.

“Oh, yeah, swimming is big. Especially with that Phelps guy. Some people swear he’s half fish,” Tony nodded. “They also do sailing, rowing, canoeing, diving, water polo and synchronized swimming, which is kind of like dance swimming.” Sigyn got off her husband’s lap and came over
to where Clint was showing Thor the Olympic schedule, causing Loki to whine in protest.

“Synchronized swimming is in the Olympics now?” Steve let out a low whistle.

“Remembering those Esther Williams movies?” Tony grinned. He turned toward a pouting Loki. “Don’t worry, Hat Trick, there will be plenty of equestrian events for you to watch.” Loki let out a strangled noise and nearly fell out of the chair.

“Brother! They have wrestling and sword play!” Thor said happily. “And Midgardian knattleikr!”

“Field hockey, Thor,” Clint corrected.

“Ooh! Wonderful!” Sigyn clapped.


When Tony came up for a cup of coffee after working in the lab around six the next morning, he found Clint, Steve, and the three Asgardians gathered around the massive big screen in the common area. Tony’s insane cable package meant that anyone could watch almost up-to-the-second coverage of the game. While Clint’s control of the remote meant that most of that morning’s coverage was focused on the archery events, spots of fencing, swimming and weightlifting had also been interspersed whenever there was downtime in the archery competition. Thor seemed most impressed by the female Midgardian weightlifters while Loki had attempted to not look interested in any of the fencing competition. Sigyn was doing her best to excitedly cheer for the swimming competitors and yet not wake up anyone.

However, Sigyn’s cheering had managed to draw Steve’s attention has he came back from his early morning run. Still in his running gear, Steve was now high-fiving Clint and Thor anytime one of Clint’s favorite archers did something cool or whenever a weightlifting competitor finished their round. Thor didn’t seem to care much for winners or losers, instead seeming to delight in the fact that the competition was taking place at all. He applauded each competitor enthusiastically and, whenever one fell short or was obviously disappointed in their performance, he would call out what he thought was good about their work as if he thought they could hear him. Tony wondered if perhaps Thor was the god of good sportsmanship as well as the god of lightning and possibly the god of forgetting to put items on the grocery list after he ate the last one. Steve was pretty keen on the sportsmanship aspect as well and seemed just as jovial as Thor at the spirit of competition among the athletes.

Of the entire group, Loki was the one who seemed the least interested in the goings on around him, though he did tend to perk up whenever Sigyn cheered and whenever she turned to him to express excitement of displeasure at something that had happened on the screen. It was apparent Loki wasn’t very into sporting events, and Tony had a feeling he was the type of kid who did whatever was necessary to get out of gym activities at school - or whatever the Asgardian equivalent had been. Tony sympathized somewhat, though while he had performed pretty well in the various sporting activities he had to participate in at his various boarding schools, Tony much preferred science class to anything else. Still, he found himself abandoning his work down in the labs to watch the Olympics over breakfast with the Tower’s other occupants, more interested in people-watching than really watching the sports.

Before Tony realized it, lunchtime was upon them and the rest of the Tower residents were now gathered around the television watching the games. Pepper had ordered half the contents of a nearby Pan-Asian restaurant to feed the group, most of whom were intently viewing the Olympic sporting events. Tony found that as more people joined the group in front of the TV, he and Loki had
somehow migrated further from it. Tony wasn’t exactly upset that he wasn’t right up against the screen, but he found it interesting how those with real interest in the proceedings had gotten closer and closer. As Loki let out a scoff, spearing a piece of beef with his chopsticks, Tony followed the younger princeling’s gaze to find Thor had given up using both chopsticks and a fork and was now eating his lo mein with his hands. When an exuberante cheer from Thor nearly sent containers of rice, noodles, soups and Clint’s General Tso’s across the floor, everyone slowly began to back up a bit from Thor to protect their food if nothing else.

“I’m taking it you’re about as into this as I am,” Tony said to Loki nonchalantly.

“I find it interesting that, even on Midgard, there are grand tournaments to celebrate physical feats yet no such game is held for those of the mind,” Loki said. “Of course, I must admit that this sport of fencing does intrigue me as it seems more elegant than most Asgardian swordplay. Beyond that, however, I don’t expect to be much entertained.”

“Well, we did have chess matches back during the Cold War,” Tony shrugged, “but you know it's harder to make intellectual interchange as visually entertaining as feats of athleticism. Except for maybe BattleBots. Have you ever seen BattleBots? It was awesome. They wouldn’t let me compete, though…”

“Huzzah!” Thor yelled happily at the screen as two female judokas battled it out. “We should have such wrestling in Asgard!”

“Be forewarned,” Loki said to Tony, “Thor may attempt to recreate these sporting events in the near future.”

“I was afraid of that,” Tony admitted. “Pepper’s still working with our insurance to see if we can’t get stuff he breaks insured under ‘acts of god.’ Apparently, the agency is trying to change the phrasing because people are claiming superhero damage under that clause.”

“To be fair, it is damage caused by one god in particular,” Loki huffed as Thor began jumping up and down, causing the entire room to rattle.

“Pin her! Pin her!” Thor chanted excitedly, sending the contents of the rice carton in his hand all over the floor.

“Yeah, I need to Thor-proof this room,” Tony sighed.

“It was most graceful, husband!” Sigyn said happily, dancing around the room in a turquoise blue, flowing dress. “They jumped from different heights and then as partners! The Midgardians have truly found many interesting ways of showing off their talents!”

“I am sure,” Loki muttered over his dinner.

It was the middle of the week, and Loki had heard nothing from his wife except the feats of Midgardian swimmers and divers with some gymnastics mixed in for good measure. Thor had returned to work alongside the rest as the clean-up efforts were coming to a close, but he didn’t miss a moment of the Olympic madness thanks to recording devices, time delays and the fact the events were taking place half a world away. All Thor and the Captain ever wanted to talk about during the day were the various athletic feats they had watched, and the rest of the work crews seemed equally thrilled by these same displays of machismo. Instead of getting a reprieve from the sporting talk when he returned home, Loki instead had to sit and listen as Sigyn recounted the meager feats of
Midgardians who had learned to swim. Worse, the sailing, rowing and canoeing events were still to
come. Loki thanked the Norns that at least blacksmithing was not considered an athletic event on
Midgard.

“There will be viewing of the events in the communal area soon,” Sigyn said, cleaning up her own
dishes and plates as the leftovers were levitated toward the fridge. “Do you wish to come with me,
husband?” Loki tried to think of a response that wouldn’t come off as mean while at the same time
not trying to take forever with his answer.

“Alas, most beloved, I do have some work I must do,” Loki said finally. “Besides, you regale me
with the events so beautifully that it would feel criminal to watch them firsthand rather than hear your
marvelous accounts.”

“You are too charming for your own good,” Sigyn smiled, walking over and giving her husband a
kiss atop his head. “Perhaps I should be more suspect when you weave your words so well.”

“Well, if you are willing,” Loki smirked up at his wife, “you may remain here this evening and I can
demonstrate to you just how wickedly I can weave my tongue.” He leaned up offering her a brief
taste of what she could have if she stayed behind.

“Tempting,” Sigyn admitted as she pulled away from her husband, “But the rowing events begin
tonight, and I do not wish to miss them. Perhaps once they are over and when you have completed
your work for the evening we can… partake in more pleasurable pastimes?”

“Then,” Loki said, taking his wife’s hand and kissing it, “I most certainly look forward to your
return.” Sigyn let out a giggle and peppered him with sweet little kisses before flouncing out of the
room to join the others. With a sigh, Loki cleared up his own dishes and then headed into the library
to commence his work.

The next thing the dark prince knew, the unique mechanical clock in one of Sigyn’s display cases
was chiming a late hour. Ornately covered with filigree and showcasing its exposed gears from the
back, the clock face was set into a treasure chest being hoarded by a large kraken that might have
been terrifying if he were not pink and bejewelled. Upon the hour, a group of little sea creatures
appeared out of one side of the treasure chest and made a merry little chase around it before
disappearing into the other side. The entire thing was a grotesquely opulent fixture created less for
timekeeping and more for the entertainment and distraction of some long-dead Vanir queen. If
Sigyn’s Uncle Freyr was to be believed, the queen had been gifted the ridiculous time piece in the
hopes it would be enough of a distraction from the fact that her husband was tupping several of her
handmaidens. Naturally, Loki had never passed on that particular nugget of information to Sigyn for
fear she would look on her little clock less in delight and more in pity.

Of course, the last thing on Loki’s mind when the ridiculously ostentatious timepiece began chiming
wasn’t about the thing’s origin but rather how late in the evening it was. Surely, he often got lost in
his research and found himself up at all hours of the night, promising himself he would go to bed
after the end of whatever chapter, paragraph or sentence he was on. Usually, Sigyn came in a few
times to chide him for staying up so late before retiring herself. Yet, here it was, nearly midnight and
his wife had not come to call him to bed. He began to believe that, perhaps, she had not returned to
their rooms at all.

Choking down the panic and bile that seemed to rise in his throat anytime he could not locate Sigyn
since he was wrangled from The Mad Titan’s grasp, Loki abandoned the myriad papers and tomes
upon his desk and rushed from the library. He briefly checked each room in the chambers before he
speeding out of them and into the hallways. Just as he skidded to a halt in front of the elevator doors,
they opened to reveal Thor carrying Sigyn less like a warrior who had just rescued a damsel in
distress and more like a bag full of angry cats. While still carrying her as one might a bride over a
threshold, Thor was doing his best to keep Sigyn’s loudly snoring face away from his ears as
possible. The sudden appearance of his angry younger brother, seething at the way Thor was failing
to support Sigyn’s bobbing head, nearly made the elder prince drop the young woman entirely.

“I will take her,” Loki said in such a low, even tone Sigyn shuddered a bit in her sleep.

“She had much of the clear liquor the Widow drinks,” Thor explained. “While it is apparently among
the strongest drinks on Midgard, I don’t think Sigyn was more than slightly tipsy from it. However,
she must have fallen asleep during the acrobatics events and no one noticed until she began to
snore.”

“Well, yes, I am sure the safety of my wife cannot be your top priority when the are tourneys to
watch and ale to drink,” Loki huffed. “Had I the time and were this the best setting to lecture you on
Sigyn’s well-being I would do so, but as it stands, getting her safely abed is a much more pressing
matter. No doubt she will be extremely tired in the morning and yet still wish to wake with the sun.”

“With all due respect,” Thor replied, slightly annoyed himself, “Sigyn is very much her own woman
and does need your, nor I nor anyone else to mind her as if she were a child. And even if I did try, do
you earnestly believe she would follow my direction or the direction of anyone else?” Loki opened
his mouth to respond, though Thor cut him off - a dangerous move in itself. “I understand you wish
to protect her against all manner of threats, but I sincerely doubt doing it this way will achieve your
aims.”

“I did not ask your opinion,” Loki hissed before sweeping back into his rooms, Sigyn cradled
tenderly in his arms.

To avoid waking his wife, Loki did not mutter to himself about Thor’s audacity, instead keeping his
rushing thoughts silent on the matter. However, he wasn’t about to be told how to protect his wife by
his oafish and unmarried brother. Thor knew nothing of what he had experienced! Oh, certainly
protected his beloved mortal made Thor feel as though he had some authority on the subject of the
safekeeping of loved ones, but Thor couldn’t possibly know what it was like to have a true partner in
the sense he and Sigyn where and, furthermore, Thor did not know a true enemy like the Mad Titan
or the Other. Loki’s internal angry rant was cut short when Sigyn moved her head slightly and began
mumbling. Worried he might wake her, Loki acted swiftly to set Sigyn on the bed, undress her and
then redress her in a nightgown as best he could without waking her and then tuck her into bed.

“Loki,” Sigyn sighed as he was putting the covers atop her.

“Yes, my love?” Loki asked gently.

“Tell the cats to stop licking the marmalade man before he starts singing again,” Sigyn muttered
before letting out a huge snore and rolling over. Loki tried not to snicker as he finished tucking his
wife in. It wasn’t uncommon for his wife to talk in her sleep, especially after she had imbibed, and
Loki usually found it adorable. The time she had thought he was a giant talking lump of bread dough
that needed to be beaten into submission was the one exception.

“Rest now, sweet princess,” Loki said, stroking some stray hairs away from Sigyn’s face.

“I’m sorry, husband,” Sigyn murmured. “Don’t be cross…”

“And why would I be cross with you?” Loki whispered soothingly to his wife, trying to hide his
own curiosity and a slight tinge of trepidation.
“You didn’t come to see the swimming,” Sigyn pouted in her sleep. Loki resisted the urge to kiss the pout away. “Thor was there so you would not come.”

“That wasn’t why I did not come,” Loki replied,

“You hate anything he likes,” Sigyn sighed. “If he is nice to me, should I expect you to be cruel?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Sigyn,” Loki snorted.

“Loki?” Sigyn asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yes, my love?” he replied.

“Tell the thirsty dragon to get off the barn roof,” Sigyn muttered before flopping over and letting loose a snore that could rattle glass. Loki sighed and paused a moment to wonder why dwarves insisted on living underground when the echoes of their snores could be so loud.

“Sleep peacefully, lykyng,” he sighed before slipping into bed next to his wife.

“I thought you hated sports,” Tony said, trying his best to creep up behind Loki in the communal kitchen. The younger prince did not startle or even waver slightly as he continued arranging the cheese plate he was putting together.

“I do not enjoy most sporting events, no,” Loki replied.

“And yet you’ve been here all afternoon while Thor and Cap shout at the scream and then jump up and down like madmen whenever the person they’re rooting for win,” Tony said, stealing a piece of cheese off the tray and popping it in his mouth. “So what gives?”

“Sigyn wished to watch the swimming and rowing competitions,” Loki replied. “I wished to be with her while she did so.”

“So you put up with all the shenanigans?” Tony asked just as Thor let out a shout so loud the floor seemed to tremble.

“I love my wife more than I hate watching sporting events with my brother,” Loki snorted.

“I’m surprised Thor is still here,” Tony said. “I thought he was supposed to head back at the end of the moon cycle.”

“Yes?” Loki replied.

“We had the full moon the other day,” Tony pointed out.

“You honestly believe Asgard goes by the phases of the your planet’s single moon?” Loki snorted.

“So, how long is he here?” Tony asked.

“A few days hence, but I’m sure if he lingers until these obnoxious athletic events end, Asgard will not be sorely disappointed in his further absence,” Loki shrugged. Tony reached forward to grab another piece of cheese only for Loki to bring a knife down into the marble countertop right where Tony’s hand has just been. “Sigyn likes the strawberry chardonnay cheese. You will not eat it all.”

“I wasn’t aware Asgardian princes served up cheese plates,” Tony snorted, turning around and
pulling some ingredients for a smoothie out of the fridge.

“Only for my wife,” Loki replied with a snort.

“You realize that cheese is mine, by the way?” Tony said, organizing his various fruits before the blender. “I paid for it. You shouldn’t knife the hand that feeds you.”

“JARVIS ordered it,” Loki snorted. “And your Happy One delivered it. And the Allfather has promised repayment for all our expenses. Therefore, I doubt very much this is your cheese.”

“Allfather cheese then?” Tony smirked.

Loki rolled his eyes and then picked up the finished plate, carrying it over to Sigyn, placing the tray down on a table in front of the large chair the two of them were sharing. As Loki sank down into the chair, Sigyn situated herself in his lap and then pulled the tray towards her, picking pieces of cheese up daintily. Loki had also cut up slices of apples for the tray along with pieces of crackers and some jams. He smirked to himself as Sigyn took an apple slice and pocketed it, no doubt to feed to her magpies the next time there was a commercial break in the games. When Sigyn returned from the break and magpie feeding, she sat down and began scooping up jellies with slices of cheese. Loki worked to lick what jelly residue was left off her fingers, causing Sigyn to giggle happily. However, her giggles were soon drowned out by a mix of hacking and choking noises coming from Thor.

“What?” Loki said to his brother with a raised eyebrow. Cap kept his head down in embarrassment as Tony nonchalantly came over to sit in another armchair, smoothie in hand.

“Must you do that here?” Thor muttered, a red blush on his face as well.

“It’s a communal room, Thor,” Loki snorted. “If you do not wish to share it with the community, I suggest you retreat to your private quarters.”

“Look at the costumes!” Sigyn cheered happily, directing everyone back to the screen where the synchronized swimming competitions were just beginning.

While Tony had to admit women in glittering bathing suites performing water-based gymnastics wasn’t the least interesting sport in the Olympics, it still wasn’t enough to keep his attention for very long. He soon found his attention wandering to the other occupants of the room. Steve was obviously captivated by the nice ladies with waterproof makeup in one-piece bathing suites - though if his interests were merely artistic or more base, Tony wasn’t exactly sure. Thor seemed to also be trying to focus on the water ballet before him, ignoring the sound of his brother sucking on Sigyn’s fingers behind him. When Sigyn removed her hand from her husband so she in turn could focus on the screen, Loki took to imitating the sucking sounds on his own, seeming to delight as Thor sat ramrod straight in annoyance.

Sometime during all of this, Clint and Natasha had slunk into the room. Natasha decided to announce her presence by informing everyone that one of the members of the Russian synchronized swimming team was the niece of a high ranking Red Room official, making more than a few occupants jolt because of the sudden sound of her voice. Tony noticed Loki was not one of them and wondered if maybe sneaking up on Loki should be his new goal in life. Natasha then continued on, telling Steve and Tony how many of those candidates who were not Red Room material but still had some talent often found themselves in the Soviet Olympic programs. Natasha’s description of the connection between sporting and the Soviet military reminded Steve uncomfortably of similar programs in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. While Tony wasn’t exactly down for the depressing tales of life under the Iron Curtain, anything was better than hearing the sounds of Loki who trying to get his wife’s attention by sucking on her neck like some sort of teen romance novel vampire. Tony was
actually pretty surprised at how well Sigyn was able to ignore her husband’s attempt to seduce her in public. Loki finally succeeded in regaining his wife’s attention when the show broke for commercial.

“Did you like that my love?” Loki whispered to his wife as the program broke for commercial.

“The costumes are so pretty!” Sigyn smiled. “It was as if they were dancing in the water rather than just swimming!”

“Would you like some of your own?” Loki asked curiously.

“I already have a few Midgardian swimming costumes,” Sigyn shrugged. “I think the group of performers it what makes it most interesting, anyway.”

“Still, I think you would look delightful in one,” Loki grinned, wiggling his eyebrows. Sigyn giggled and then snuggled up to her husband.

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It had been a relief to most of the Avengers when Loki finally found an Olympic sport he could watch intently without being derisive or annoying. It confused most of them that the sport he had founded to enjoy just happened to be tennis. Of course, the most confounding part of it all was when Tony, Steve and Bruce came up to watch the communal viewing to see the strange tableau of Asgardians already in front of the giant flat screen. Loki was dressed in full battle regalia - sans helmet - leaning as far as he could off of the chair he was sitting in so he could tensely watch the tennis ball volleying back and forth across the screen. By contrast, Thor was in Asgardian pajamas, slumped as far back in his chair as he could go, obviously depressed that his hogging of the remote thus far meant Loki got a full day of watching tennis - perhaps the only sport Thor seemed to think was boring. Of course, the cherry on top just happened to be Sigyn, donning a sequin bathing suite with a glittery, floor-length tulle skirt as she danced around the room behind her husband and brother-in-law.

“Hello friends!” Sigyn said happily before any of the three earthlings could figure out a way to make their escape from the scene before them. “Have you come to watch the sporting events?”

“Um… yeah,” Tony said, still confused by the bizarre scene before him. “If that is what is happening here…”

“So… tennis?” Steve said, taking a seat on the couch with Bruce as the show broke for commercial.

“I have been informed it is a game of kings,” Loki nodded. “Unfortunately, I missed the performances at the Wynnman’s Hill earlier this year, but the program has informed me that major local competition will be happening not far from here soon.”

“The where?” Steve asked, confused.

“I’m guessing Wimbledon,” Bruce whispered back.

“I am not taking you to the U.S. Open,” Tony yelled from where he was making a smoothie.

“JARVIS has informed me you own property nearby and attended frequently in the past,” Loki pointed out.

“I have Pepper now,” Tony scoffed. “I have no desire to see attractive women in short skirts grunting due to physical exertion, let alone doing so in a public setting.”
“I’m not sure that’s the point of tennis,” Bruce pointed out.

“Besides, even if I wanted to take you, SHIELD would never allow it,” Tony pointed out.

“The let us go to the ball of bases game,” Sigyn pointed out.

“Yeah, and that went so well,” Tony grumbled.

“I apologize for developing a non-threatening interest,” Loki huffed.

“I don’t see the image of you with a tennis racquet as being ‘non-threatening’ in any way,” Tony pointed out.

“You could be a bit more encouraging,” Steve pointed out, causing Tony to roll his eyes as he joined them on the sofa.

“Fine,” Tony groaned. “Pepper has a tennis instructor for some reason. Maybe I can ask her to set you and Siggy Stardust up some lessons. Just don’t use tennis for murder, especially not if you take it back to Asgard as an example of Midgardian culture.”

“Do you wish to attend, Thor?” Sigyn asked her brother in law, dancing around the chair he was sitting in.

“No,” Thor said sullenly, then changed his tune when he saw Sigyn’s face fall slightly. “But I may ask to be taught later.”

Sigyn then resumed happily dancing until Loki grabbed her hand with his and pulled her down into his lap. Sigyn let out a long peal of laughter as she found herself and her massive, poofy skirt cuddled into her husband’s lap. They remained in that position until the tennis coverage ended, at which point Loki suggested - with a wiggle of his eyebrows - that they retreat to their rooms to prepare for the evening meal. Sigyn eagerly followed behind him, a trail of giggles growing ever fainter the further away the couple got. With Loki gone, Tony snatched the remote out of the chair Loki had been sitting in - and using for hiding the remote - and tossed it over to Steve to regain control of the coverage.

“Cheer up, Big Guy,” Tony said to Thor. “You and Loki have a common interest in the Olympics now. And at least now we know if he disappears there’s a fifty percent chance he’s trying to conquer the world and a fifty percent chance he’s at a tennis match.”

“I suppose,” Thor sighed, sounding anguished.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked.

“I suppose I should be happy that Loki has found entertainment in these Midgardian sporting events as well,” Thor said, depressed, “but now, I have realized that by finding a common interest in the event, I will now have to share the talking box controller with him.”

“Great,” Tony sighed. “If Loki conquers the remote control, we might never get it back.”
The final day of clean-up following the Battle of New York came with little fanfare. Not much city funds had been used on the clean-up and while Stark Industries had offered as much funds as were needed to keep the clean-up going as long as need be, city officials decided that things were fixed up enough that private owners could go finish what little was needed. Stark Industries also set up a fund for those owners having trouble with what repairs remained, but with no streets obstructed, difficult debris removed and construction started back in most of the damaged areas, there was little need to keep crews at work. The night before the final day of clean up, Tony and Steve had talked over a glass of whiskey about the resilience of the New York real estate market, which had quickly turned the damaged and destroyed lots from the battle into opportunities for newer, more lavish and obnoxious buildings. Steve was still just impressed that there were now buildings taller than the Empire State Building and that one of them was in Chicago - of all places.

With the clean-up coming to an end, members of the Avengers team who had been stationed in the city soon found themselves breaking away from each other. Thor was set to return to Asgard following the end of the Olympic games. Natasha was heading back to Washington, D.C. and SHIELD headquarters for her next assignment, and Steve had also accepted a job there, citing that he felt he needed some time away from the city where he grew up. Bruce wavered back and forth between returning to India and staying in the fully-funded and equipped Stark laboratories. Pepper was now spending her weeks in California had the main Stark Industries headquarters and flying back on the weekends. While his presence wasn’t exactly required, Tony had a feeling he would have to head back to Malibu before too long as well. Thankfully, Clint was officially stationed at Stark Tower in New York as the official SHIELD operative over Loki and Sigyn.

To celebrate the last day of clean-up and everyone’s last night together in the Tower, Tony decided to throw a party. Pepper talked him down from a full-blown street fair inviting absolutely everyone who had worked in the recovery in any way whatsoever to a small, Avengers and support staff only gathering on the party deck. Tony had sent an invite to Fury as a joke, but Maria Hill had actually responded to it and shown up, stating that Fury wanted someone other than Coulson to help keep a more professional eye on the goings on at the Tower during this final night of revelry. Tony hadn’t really thought of Coulson as a real party animal, but considering the sticks-in-the-mud that made up SHIELD, Tony could see how Coulson might pass as the reckless one.

Presently, Coulson was engaged in a chat with Steve and Thor about the Olympics while Hill and Natasha stood not too far off, talking about whatever deadly female super spies talked about. Tony was trying to pay attention to Pepper, who was telling him and Bruce about some proposals that had
come out of the research and development labs, but found his attention drawn to the corner of the room where Loki and Sigyn had ensconced themselves, feeding each other various fruits dipped in whipped cream and giggling like mad. It wasn’t Sigyn’s cheerful giggles that drew Tony’s attention but Loki’s. Tony found it hard to believe that a guy who had so callously attempted to conquer the earth giggled in such a high pitch when his wife fed him fruit or tickled him. Trying to refocus on Pepper, Tony averted his gaze and found himself locking eyes with Thor, who seemed to indicate he was equally confused and put off by Loki and Sigyn’s outward display of affection.

“They’re adorable,” Pepper commented, startling Tony out of his gross-out.

“That’s one opinion on the subject,” Tony said before taking a sip of his drink.

“That giggle is a little unsettling,” Bruce nodded as Loki let out a snicker before Sigyn slipped a strawberry between his lips

“Bruce, I’d expect Tony to make fun of someone making a public display of affection, but not you,” Pepper chastised.

“What can I say?” Bruce shrugged. “Loki even creeps the Other Guy out a little bit.”

“I think it’s sweet that he’s so happy to spend time with his wife,” Pepper replied.

“He’s not happy that he gets to spend time with his wife,” Tony rolled his eyes. “He’s happy that the clean-up is officially over, there is no way we can smuggle him into one of those union-dominated construction unions to carry on with the rebuild, and SHIELD has no use for him for the foreseeable future. Basically, he gets to spend the next nine months hanging out in this Tower like a kid on summer vacation waiting for SHIELD to send an odd job his way. He’s getting nine months of vacation after only serving three months of community service. I mean, this is what it’s like when they let a violent criminal out ‘for good behavior.’ The justice system is broken, I tell you.”

“Maybe we can get him a job sorting stuff in the mailroom,” Pepper suggested. “You know, just to keep him occupied during the day?”

“I don’t know,” Tony frowned. “I know he can read in English, but a lot of times he just refuses to. And I don’t know if it would be wise to put him in a position where he could cause mischief - like throwing out all the real mail and keeping the junk mail. Besides, I think he has to be supervised by a SHIELD-approved person at all times, which would lead to Barton sleeping on all the piles of unsorted mail. Not good for productivity. Why are we still getting paper mail, anyway? Do we need to send out another company-wide ‘go green and don’t print’ email?”

“Speaking of Barton, where is he?” Pepper asked, looking around the room to find the archer was conspicuously absent.

“My guess is the rafters,” Tony shrugged. “Or sleeping in an uncomfortable position in a room he shouldn’t have access to.”

“Don’t you think someone should check on him?” Pepper asked worriedly.

“Check on who?” Coulson asked.

“Clint?” Pepper asked.

“He’s on his ABBA,” Natasha explained.

“What?” Tony asked.
“The Annual Barton Bender in August,” Hill said. “We came up with the acronym after one year when Clint left a string of drunken messages on Fury’s answering machine at work. Evey message was just Clint singing ABBA’s complete discography. Fury sent an entire STRIKE team down to the resort in Belize where Clint was staying to kidnap him from the hotel bar and bring him back to the states - mainly so the phone would stop ringing. To this day, some of those guys can’t hear the opening lines of ‘Super Trooper’ without having flashbacks and ducking like arrows are being shot at them.”

“You’re telling me that Barton goes on a bender once a year?” Tony said, in disbelief.

“Usually sometime around the first week of August,” Natasha nodded.

“Why?” Steve asked, worriedly.

“I’m sorry, but your SHIELD classification level isn’t high enough to unlock that information,” Hill informed him.

“Shouldn’t we try to do something?” Steve asked. “I mean, that’s not exactly a healthy way of coping with… whatever he’s trying to cope with.”

“Whether or not he’s trying to cope with something is information above your clearance level,” Hill informed him.

“He’s an adult,” Natasha nodded. “You can’t make him behave in a way that he doesn’t want to.”

“Don’t I know that,” Tony agreed. “Seriously, having my best friend attempt to blast plasma into my face via the repulsors I built for him wasn’t enough to get me to give up the sauce when I wanted it. Believe me, I’ve had so many interventions I can’t remember them all.”

“You were drunk out of your mind for about half of them,” Pepper sighed.

“Barton will lock himself up for a few days and then come out when he’s ready to deal with the world again,” Coulson agreed. “Best not disturb him in the meantime.”

“Unless of course he starts running naked around the Tower or attempts to scale the building in a Speedo,” Natasha nodded.

“Have either of those things happened before?” Steve asked incredulously.

“Like I said before,” Hill said, “your SHIELD classification level isn’t high enough to unlock that information.”

With his manual labor completed and no official work lined up for him on the horizon, Loki decided to spend his newfound free time catching up on his reading. While he had been doing a great deal of research-related reading as part of his quest to learn more about his Jotnar heritage and what affects it might have on his ability to wield seiðr, Loki hadn’t really made any time to read for pleasure as of late. The fact that Sigyn kept adding to a stack of Midgardian tomes she thought he would enjoy just made the tower of unread books that much more daunting. While Loki didn’t put much stock that he would find anything enjoyable or perhaps even legible when it came to the so-called literature of Midgard, Sigyn did seem to enjoy quite a few Midgardian books so they couldn’t be absolutely abysmal. Loki decided that if Sigyn liked a few of these books, he might be able to find one that wasn’t completely intolerable. Picking up the thinnest book he could from the stack - deciding if Midgardian literature did turn out to be drivel at least he would find out in a shorter time - Loki
relaxed himself in the living area and began to read.

It was the ideal set up for it. Sigyn had just prepared him some hot tea and a variety of oven-fresh pastries before flouncing off to assist Stark and Banner in their lab work. She thought that their Midgardian struggles to discover basic truths as well as Stark’s seemingly advanced for Midgard but rather elementary for Niðavellir mechanical and robotic engineering were delightful. Loki somehow doubted Stark would let her back in the labs if he realized Sigyn was there cooing over him like a mother attempting to encourage a child playing with construction blocks. Naturally, Sigyn couldn’t give away any dwarven secrets to anyone outside the realm and while she wasn’t as well-versed in the smithing and mechanical arts as others of her family, even the basics of what was taught on Niðavellir were beyond advanced for Midgard’s current level of intellectual evolution.

Loki would have loved to have watched his wife play innocent while Banner and Stark attempted to unweave the mysteries of their world. Sometimes, his sweet little wife - knowing the two Midgardians were on the right track - would say something in a silly, innocuous manner that would allow them to think they had hit on the idea themselves. Loki didn’t particularly like the fact that Sigyn was helping them fill in their knowledge blanks, but she found it entertaining. He had to admit it was comical the way the two men scrambled over their lab tables and research notes when they thought they had hit a major breakthrough. However, Loki was no longer allowed in the labs with Sigyn because, according to Stark, he was either “acting creepy” or “distracting Sigyn with his bad attempts at pelvic sorcery.” So, now instead of watching his wife flit around the labs like the beautiful, carefree creature she was, Loki found himself stretched on a divan with a book in one hand, tray of treats beside him and two chirping magpies nestled together in their gilded cage.

Having settled into his ideal reading environment, Loki was not counting on the second chapter of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* being interrupted by a naked man falling through his ceiling.

“What is Surtur’s flaming bollocks is going on here?” Loki screeched, pushing the naked Clint Barton off of him and then leaping over the backside of the divan as if he were in need of a shield. Barton was standing in front of him, naked as a jaybird with his bow and arrow slung over one shoulder and a bottle of tequila in his other hand.

“You’re not the Costa Rican ambassador!” Clint shouted back at Loki in a drunken rage. “That rat bastard stole my bunch of bananas and I want them back!”

“There are some oblong yellow fruits on the counter in their hammock,” Loki informed him, still confused as to why Sigyn insisted a hammock was the proper storage for these strange Midgardian delicacies. “Retrieve them and then remove your unclothed posterior from my sight!”

“Never!” Clint yelled and then bounded into the kitchen and atop the island counter.

“JARVIS,” Loki hissed toward the AI, “please contact the Lady Widow and tell her to remove her soused compatriot from my quarters, or so help me I will find a way to open one of these windows and convince him he is capable of flight!” JARVIS pinged back as naked Clint began singing “Tequila” and dancing on the counter a la Pee Wee Herman.

“Miss Romanoff says she has five more minutes on the rowing machine and then she will be down promptly,” JARVIS replied. “In the meantime, she suggests you attempt to coax him into some underthings or at least a towel.”

“And where am I supposed to get those?” Loki said, annoyed. “I am not letting him borrow any of my things!” He looked over to where Clint now seemed to be miming being on a surfboard atop the counter, belting out the Beach Boys’ greatest hits.

“I also alerted Sir of the issue, but he merely requested I film this for later,” JARVIS offered up
unhelpfully. “Perhaps I could send one of the robots to fetch some apparel from Mr. Barton’s quarters? He does tend to booby trap them, however, so it may be difficult.”

“You! Former minion! Get down!” Loki ordered.

“No,” Clint said making a silly face in Loki’s direction. “I don’t gotta do what you say no more! I got tequila and no crazy eyes!” Clint then proceeded to take the last swig of tequila from the bottle before smashing it down on the floor, letting it shatter.

“I am not cleaning that up!” Loki hissed.

“I’m not cleaning that up!” Clint repeated back in a sarcastic voice.

“Sigyn likes to walk around barefoot, and if she so much as notices that glass - let alone is cut on it - there will be Hel for you to pay!” Loki informed Clint. “And I daresay once you sober up you’ll feel very badly if she is hurt!”

“What? Do you not come into the kitchen?” Clint huffed. “Is it beneath you? Like all of us are so beneath you?”

“You are testing my patience,” Loki informed Clint.

“So, you’re too important to go into a kitchen, but not too high and mighty to bring me along for the ride and kill a lot of innocent people, huh?” Clint snarled, jumping down from the counter and walking through the broken glass himself, not seeming to notice that his feet were being sliced up along the way.

“This is hardly the time for this conversation,” Loki insisted.

“Oh, I’m sure you’d like to put this one off forever, huh?” Clint snorted. “Well, some of us don’t have that long.”

“Perhaps when you are not intoxicated or bleeding all over the carpet we can rekindle this discussion,” Loki said. “As it is, you are naked…”

“As it is,” Clint interjected, “you’re a serial murderer and a user. What do you have to say to that, huh, bub?” Loki composed himself.

“If you will remember, I was under the same mind control you were, albeit my… otherworldly sensibilities allowed me to fight it a bit more,” Loki said. “And if I hadn’t chosen you to accompany me, odds are you would be among the deceased…”

“Oh, what, so I should be thankful that you mindfucked me?” Clint snorted. “Did you ever stop to think that your bad decisions hurt people other than you, huh?”

“It has been brought to my attention from time to time,” Loki sighed. “But if you are looking for a frank and honest discussion where we hash out our differences and - even if we never truly come to friendship - at least learn how to be civil to each other, I think it will have to wait until a time in which you are clothed, sober and not bleeding everywhere!”

“Maybe I wanna have it now!” Clint roared, lunging at Loki. “Maybe I want to knock your teeth out, ya Asgardian idiot!”

Loki tried to fend off his naked attacker while simultaneously luring away from the carpet. However, Loki inadvertently knocked into his table of pastries and sent them both tumbling to the ground. Clint
seized his opportunity, tackling his nemesis. When Natasha walked into the room, she found a naked and bleeding Clint on top of Loki, having just landed a punch into the god’s face. Instead of continuing to hit Loki, Clint instead yowled at the fact his mortal fist was no match for supernatural cheekbones and leapt off of Loki, hoping around and cradling his fist. Seeming to have regained his pain sensors in his foot, Clint continued to hop around on one foot as he shook out the pain from his opposite hand.

“I thought I told you to make him put something on,” Natasha said to Loki tiredly. She walked over and handed Clint a white towel, which he proceeded to wrap around himself like a diaper.

“He broke his decanter of alcohol and then attacked me!” Loki snorted. “You’re lucky I didn’t hit him over the head and then drag him to your doorstep!”

“What’s going on?” Tony yelled, arriving on the scene with Sigyn and Bruce in tow.

As far as the new arrivals could see, Clint looked like Cupid after he had just been busted up in a bar fight, his hand sore and his foot bleeding. There was broken glass all over the kitchen floor and a giant Clint-shaped hole in the ceiling above the living area where he had fallen through the ceiling. Loki was lying on the floor with a slight bruise on his cheek, pastries and portions of the roof and rafters scattered all around him. Natasha was looking very bored - as if this sort of thing was run of the mill for her.

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to get Reindeer Games here to chase after fictional holiday mascots now,” Tony sighed.

“No, Clint just… dropped in unexpectedly,” Natasha replied, her lip going up in the faintest hint of a smirk at her own pun. “And I came to rescue Loki from him.”

“Don’t think you need to shoot Prince Uncharming here with an arrow,” Tony informed Clint. “He’s kinda married already.”

“Don’t I know it you metal sonuvabitch,” Clint slurred.

“Is he okay?” Bruce asked worriedly.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine once I pick the glass out of his foot,” Natasha shrugged.

“Nat, my tequila went bye bye,” Clint informed her then started to stagger a little. Natasha leapt forward to help steady him and Bruce came around to his other side.

“I’ll help you get him down to medical,” Bruce said. “And maybe we should consider quarantining him from any alcohol? I don’t think this is a good state for anyone.”

“I’m not as think as you drunk I am,” Clint informed Bruce with a snort.

“You can try,” Natasha informed Bruce, “but if he manages to get into the ceiling tiles, there’s no telling what trouble he’ll get into or what hidden troves of booze he might find.”

“One day man,” Tony said to Clint, “I’m going to find out exactly what you’re hiding in my ventilation system and where.”

“Don’t hold my breath,” Clint snorted as Natasha and Bruce helped him out of the room. Tony turned to Loki, who was still lying on the floor surrounded by toppled pastries and broken roof and vent pieces.
“You look pathetic,” Tony informed Loki, standing over him.

“I’m sorry that I’m not more cheerful that my pleasant day of reading was interrupted by a drunk, naked man falling from my ceiling into my private and allegedly secured quarters then being accosted by said man for merely trying to stop him from further cutting himself on broken glass,” Loki huffed.

“There are footprints on the countertop,” Sigyn said, trying to hide that she was mildly impressed. Loki suddenly shot forth like a bullet.

“Sigyn! There is broken glass…” he began before both he and Tony noticed the glass was all gone.

“My, my,” Sigyn smirked, “you’ve been without seiðr so long you’ve forgotten others have it as well.”

“You shouldn’t have had to clean that up,” Loki said, dusting himself off. “I’m sure there was a servant or automaton that could have done so for her.” Sigyn rolled her eyes and then, as if to accentuate a point, used her seiðr to clean up the pastries and bloody carpets as well.

“Hey, there’s this stain in my tub upstairs that no one can…” Tony began.

“You are not suggesting my wife work as some sort of maid or cleaning servant for you,” Loki hissed at Tony.

“So, what did Drunk Cupid want?” Tony asked Loki curiously.

“To coast upon the counter like in that horrid beach blanket movie you made us watch and then to lecture me about all of my past mistakes,” Loki said airily, attempting to settle back onto the divan with his book as if nothing was wrong. “I informed him that if he wanted to have a mature discussion about the past that he could return sober and fully clothed.”

“Probably a good idea,” Tony nodded. “I don’t know about you, but when I’m drunk I tend to be really honest but not in a nice way. He might have cut you up with the neck of that bottle. Though I always have wondered if I would look cool with a facial scar…”

“I’m sorry,” Loki glowered at Tony, “I wasn’t aware this was your personal quarters.”

“I own the building,” Tony pointed out. “Technically, every room is my personal quarters.”

“Then as our landlord,” Loki said pointedly, “shouldn’t you be overseeing the repairs to the ceiling of our domicile.”

“Is he always like this?” Tony asked Sigyn.

“Just during his waking hours,” Sigyn shrugged as she began pulling out the ingredients for a brand new set of pastries.

“Well, I’m going to go see about getting your ceiling fixed,” Tony said, “but because I want to, not because anyone told me to.”

“Oh, you needn’t bother,” Sigyn replied. Then with a wave of her hand, the ceiling magically repaired itself.

“Wait… you could do this the whole time? Why did you never offer to clean up the Thor shaped holes he makes in my windows during his sudden appearances?” Tony gaped at Sigyn.
“You never asked,” Sigyn shrugged before rolling some dough out on the counter. Tony sputtered and then looked at Loki for sympathy.

“Well, you never asked,” Loki shrugged. With a groan, Tony turned and exited the room, causing Loki to roll his eyes.

“Perhaps you should approach Sir Barton about the issue when he is sober, especially as it appears he was only able to broach the subject after imbibing,” Sigyn suggested. “After all, you do owe him a great deal of apology.”

“I was being mind controlled,” Loki pointed out.

“Yet your decision making during that period was better than his,” Sigyn pointed out. “And I daresay he isn’t going to hear an apology from those who sent you to Midgard to do their bidding. Hearing something from you may make him feel better, if nothing at all.”

“Or I could not speak to him, seeing as he will most likely go on hating me for eternity regardless of what I do and the fact that in a few months’ time I will never see him again,” Loki retorted as he flopped around on the divan.

“Avoiding one’s problems does not make them go away,” Sigyn lectured him. “I believe Sir Barton needs this conversation as much as you do. And before you argue, yes, you do need to have this conversation.” Loki placed a pillow over his head and seemed to scream into it. Sigyn ignored him, continued to stir the dough she was making. “Though perhaps you might want to wait until Sir Barton is finished with his annual cathartic release ritual.”

“Is that why he’s been sneaking around in the nude?” Loki snorted. “Midgardians certainly have interesting ways of dealing with their emotional issues.”

“Yes,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “You’ve certainly never dealt with an emotional problem in a strange, destruction or completely erratic way. After all what happened in…”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Loki huffed. “Cease lecturing me, woman. I will handle it.”

“Good,” Sigyn said. “And if you continue to take that tone with me, I won’t let you have any pepparkakor.” Loki picked up his book and quietly returned to the magically cleaned divan, deciding it wouldn’t be a good idea to test his wife further. Especially not if freshly baked goods were hanging in the balance.

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Perhaps it was the copious amounts of tea he had drunk throughout the day along with his baked treats or perhaps it was the fact that he had no hard labor to lull him into a dreamless sleep, but Loki found himself waking up late that night after rather dark nightmare. Once his healing was properly underway in Asgard, Loki had found violent nightmares of his time under Thanos’ influence ravaging his sleep nightly. The dreams hadn’t gotten much better once he had been sentenced to his time of Midgard, but putting in a hard day’s work and exertion during the clean-up often left him tired enough to have dreamless sleeps. The fact he was off his normal Asgardian sleeping pattern and not sleeping for as he normally did made it easier to have a sleep devoid of dreams.

However, the occasional nightmare would sometimes creep up on on the weekend and so, this first Saturday evening burning into Sunday after the work had finished, Loki found himself shooting up straight in bed with covered in sweat but feeling oddly cold throughout. He had begun to wonder if he changed into his Jotnar form during these dreams, but was afraid to explore the subject. Careful
not to disturb Sigyn - though her half-dwarven nature meant nothing short of Ragnarok itself could stir her from a deep sleep - Loki rose, put on some sleep pants and padded out into the living area. He idly checked the cold-keeping device, but decided against eating anything in it. With a sigh, he found himself sitting on his favorite divan in the dark.

“Your Highness,” JARVIS intoned softly, seemingly cognizant of the latest of the hour, “is there anything I can do for you?”

“I assume you are recording me sleeping?” Loki huffed.

“I do not record your private quarters without your permission,” JARVIS insisted for the thousandth time. “However, I do monitor heart rates and brain activity of Tower occupants in case there is a medical emergency that requires prompt response. Sir installed that feature after a health scare of his own. I can sense that you have had a disturbance in your sleep.”

“You could call it that,” Loki huffed.

“You are not the only one in the Tower awake at this time,” JARVIS said gently. “Sir is presently in his lab working through some issue with an algorithm. And Mr. Barton is presenting drunk and on the roof.”

“Again?” Loki huffed. “Shouldn’t someone be responsible for him?”

“I informed Sir of his precarious position, but he asked me to inform Miss Romanoff,” JARVIS explained. ‘Miss Romanoff said, and I quote, that Mr. Barton was ‘a grown ass man who needs to start dealing with his problems on his own.’ I am monitoring Mr. Barton, however, in case he further imperils himself.”

“Were you monitoring him before he jumped out at me from the roof earlier?” Loki snorted.

“My main focus at that time was working in the lab with Sir,” JARVIS said. “Though I did make a note of it and inform Sir about the incident at the time.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have to deal with Barton and his issues if his so-called friends cannot be bothered,” Loki snorted. “The fact that he was my former minion doesn’t make me responsible for him. And it wasn’t as if I was in a position to really control him, being controlled myself. I was a bit of a henchman in my own right, and so I shouldn’t have to concern myself with the affairs of further underlings. I imagine if the roles were reversed, Barton wouldn’t be springing to my aid.”

“I suppose not, Sir,” JARVIS intoned in a manner Loki found strikingly sarcastic for what was allegedly artificial intelligence.

“And don’t give me some lecture about how being considerate of Barton in his time of need would help with that whole development of my personal character Sigyn insists I need to do in order to please the NotFather,” Loki huffed. “I am in no way obligated to do anything beyond the labor required. Surely humble myself in that way is enough to show him I am sufficiently sorry for whatever ills I have committed and have learned from past mistakes.”

“Not knowing the King of Asgard, I could not say either way,” JARVIS replied unhelpfully.

“I’m probably the last person Barton wants to see,” Loki insisted. “One look at me and he’d jump off this dreadful monstrosity. No, it would be best if I stayed here.”

“If that is what you wish, Your Highness,” JARVIS droned on.
“Fine,” Loki huffed, slamming a pillow back against the divan as he sat up. “I’ll do things your way.”

Loki found Clint not exactly on the roof of the building but rather on the side of the Iron Man launch pad, his feet dangling over the side some seventy-stories up in the air. In the back of his mind, Loki filed away a bit of information that JARVIS might be a bit overdramatic, having tugged on Loki’s heartstrings with images of Barton pacing back and forth on the edge of the roof as if ready to jump. Instead, Clint was just swinging his legs back and forth, working his way through Tony’s collection of expensive whiskeys and bourbons. Loki briefly considered heading back to his rooms. After all, there was no guarantee Barton would be receptive to his meager attempt at kindness. In all likelihood, Barton would shove him off the edge of the building as soon as he attempted to sit down.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Barton snorted angrily, interrupting Loki’s inner dialogue.

“The talking building informed me you were on the roof,” Loki replied. “Although, he seemed to indicate you were in a bit more danger.”

“I’ve been drunk on a roof before,” Clint snorted. “Maybe not on a building this big, but believe me, I’ve been drunker on other roofs.”

“Quite,” Loki nodded.

“Well? Are you gonna just stand there?” Clint snorted, gesturing as if he wanted Loki to join him. Or, at least Loki thought that was what he was doing. Loki had never been too sure of social cues on Asgard and the ones on Midgard often confused him even more. Still, Loki nervously took a seat, bracing himself should the archer toss him off the building. “You wanna drink?”

“No thank you,” Loki replied. “I had quite a large amount of tea today, and it isn’t helping me sleep tonight.”

“Yeah, caffeine’ll do that,” Clint nodded.

“Well, I suppose it’s not just the caffeine,” Loki shrugged.

“Stuff you did?” Clint nodded before taking a swig straight from the bottle.

“Yes,” Loki frowned. “I find it keeps me up at night… I have dreams… Worse than I think it was in actuality. I’m not sure. Much of my trip to Midgard during that time is a blur.”

“And New Mexico?” Clint asked curiously.

“That is, frightfully, more clear,” Loki sighed. “Had you asked me a few years ago if I would ever do something so reckless… Something that would endanger Thor, our friends, and strangers… even my relationship with my family… I would have earnestly been horrified at the mere thought. And to do it all for the crown? I would have called you a madman. I still don’t understand how I let my jealousy and my greed get the best of me. I suppose it was the fresh sting of betrayal that made me lose my grip. And fear. After all, all our lives Thor had promised to eradicate Frost Giants from the Nine Worlds, finish the work our father had started. How was I to believe he would change his mind over something silly like finding out I was one? And to be honest, that first taste of power was intoxicating. Even if no one really listened to me when I had it.”

“You realize all this shit is your fault, right?” Clint snorted. “I’m having a hard time feeling sorry for a guy who thinks he should be forgiven for a few bad decisions that led to multiple deaths. I mean, it
would be one thing if you’d gotten arrested for drunk driving and weed possession without hurting someone, but dude, you committed mass murder.”

“Technically, I didn’t kill anyone,” Loki pointed out.

“No, you had us schmucks do it for you,” Clint growled out.

“I didn’t tell you to do it,” Loki pointed out. “I told you to ‘handle the situation.’ Apparently, to you and your fellow SHIELD friends, handling a situation involves murder. How was I to know the control the Mad Titan gave me was as finicky as asking a making a request of a djinn?”

“You aren’t making any sense, and I don’t know if it’s because I’m drunk,” Clint snorted. “And ordering deaths makes you just as responsible as the people who carry them out. More in some cases. Watch any crime special about a murder-for-hire plot.”

“Yes, well I shouldn’t expect you to be sympathetic to my year-long torture at the hands of one of the most powerful beings in the universe,” Loki rolled his eyes. “After all, half of my own family seem to think I’m faking the extent of it.”

“You know,” Clint slurred, “you aren’t the only person trying to reconcile himself with his rocky relationship with a jackass older brother.”

“I know you have a family,” Loki mentioned off-handed.

“You don’t know shit,” Clint snorted, taking another swig.

“Then tell me,” Loki suggested. Clint was quietly contemplative for a moment.

“I was born in Bumfuck, Iowa on a farm,” Clint said. “It was Dad, Mom, me and my big brother Barney. Don’t know why we called him by his middle name. His first name was Charles. Dunno. Dunno why Mom and Dad gave him the same name as a shitty purple dinosaur. Though, actually I guess the purple dinosaur came later. Anyway, Dad ran a butcher’s shop in town and ran the farm during his time off. Of course, by the time I came along the butchering business was tanking in favor of grocery stores. The worse business got, the more dad drank and the more he drank, the worse business got. So, he took the edge off my smacking my ma around. Actually, one of my first memories is her icing her forehead while he was passed out in the living room floor.”

“I am sure that must have been difficult,” Loki said quietly. Odin was many things, but never a man who would raise a hand to a woman, let alone one he loved as deeply as Frigga. There were a lot of things Loki despised about Odin, but the queenly way the Allfather treated his wife was one of the few traits the man had Loki actually admired. Clint merely shrugged and took another sip.

“It was all I knew,” Clint said. “It wasn’t until I started school I started to suspect my family was different. Anyway, I’d been at school a few months when Mom and Dad went out for the night, left us with the babysitter. Sometimes, they got along alright. The next morning, we woke up and the babysitter was still there and so was a cop. Dad had gotten drunk, crashed the car. He’d died instantly, but Mom was in the car bleeding out. By the time someone finally came across the wreck scene, it was too late to do anything for her. ‘Course cops didn’t tell us that. I read it when I was older and got access to the file.”

“You were close with your mother,” Loki surmised.

“Yeah, well, she never took a swing at me,” Clint shrugged before taking another swig of the drink. “So, there’s me at five and Barney’s just turned eight. Don’t have any relatives. At least not any wanting to take us in, so we go into the system. Foster care at first. It’s easier to get adopted when
you’re little and cute, but it gets harder as you get older. It’s also harder when you’re siblings and they want to keep you together. We had six foster homes in the first two years we were in the system. Nearly thirty in the full eight years we were in the system. Some of them were better than others, but none of them were really that great. Some of them just wanted the government check. A few of them thought we were a good source of slave labor. There was one nice old lady who let us stay up late and watch TV. She’d also give us a cigarette to share as payment for doing errands for her. One of the better homes we lived in.”

“No one wanted two young boys to care for?” Loki asked curiously.

“Well, sometimes they wanted me cuz I was littler and cuter, but they had to take Barney, too,” Clint shrugged. “He kinda developed a chip on his shoulder cuz of that. Sometimes the homes were abusive, and we learned really quick to get away from someone who wanted to hit you - or worse - you had to do to them before anything to done to you. We set a fire in one house of this guy Barney was pretty sure was a creep. Another time we broke all the dishes in the kitchen while they were out to eat, leaving us home with no food. Unfortunately, we got a bad reputation and after reading our files, people’d want us out of their homes for the smallest shit. Like, we once got sent back after two weeks because I put a spoon in the fork section of a silverware drawer. How fucked up is that? The arson was at the last family they sent us to. They took us back into state custody, and they were talking about splitting us up, putting us in different boys homes or in juvie. That’s when Barney decided it would be easier for us to just run away.”

“Where too?” Loki asked. Clint offered him a sip of the whiskey, but Loki passed.

“Circus,” Clint laughed. “I know, right? People joke about runnin’ away to join the circus but no one actually does it, right? They’d taken the bunch of us from one of the group homes out to it a few days before, and Barney remembered it was leaving town. They weren’t sure about taking us on, but then Barney stood me up beside a tree with an apple on my head - William Tell-style, you know - and threw a knife at me, slicing the apple in two. Duquesne took him on as an apprentice right there. I fell in with Chisholm. He’d like to say he taught me everything I know about archery, but there was some natural talent there. Genetic component, I’d almost say, since Barn was just as good.”

“And you stayed with the traveling show for a while?” Loki surmised.

“That’s just it, you know,” Clint sighed. “They weren’t just a circus. I mean, you hear stories all the time about circus folks being criminals, perverts and freaks, and for the most part that isn’t true. Duquesne and Chisholm were in that like one percent who gave the rest a bad name. Stole everywhere they went and it was hard to track ‘em down. Course, Barn and I went along for the ride. We’d never had nice things before, so having some cash… it was nice. Oddly enough, it wasn’t the stealing from other people that got to me. It was when I found out Duquesne and Chisholm were embezzling from the circus that I couldn’t take it any more. I mean, it was one thing to steal from rich snobs, right? It was another to steal from your own kind. They roughed me up for threatening to go to the authorities. Not that I had any real faith a cop would believe me - you know, a circus freak, foster care runaway criminal. I went to Barney, thinking he’d have my back, you know? But he told me I should leave. Next thing I know, I’m barely twenty, living on the streets, the only skill I’ve got is shooting a bow and arrow, and seven years of experience getting paid under the table by a traveling circus. Not exactly résumé material.”

“And then SHIELD found you,” Loki nodded.

“Well, yeah, after I’d done a few shitty mercenary jobs,” Clint shrugged. “But they gave me a chance. First real one I’d ever had.”

“And your brother?” Loki asked. “Did he stay with the minstrels?”
“For a while,” Clint shrugs. “About eight years after I started working with SHIELD, we get this assignment to go after this serial heist master. Guy runs around stealing valuables from the most hard to crack safes and vaults, armed mainly with a sword. And it turns out it’s my brother. Of course, SHIELD being SHIELD I can’t claim conflict of interest and sit this one out. Oh, no. They figure I’m their ace in the hole.”

“Did you bring him in?” Loki asked, already slightly knowing the answer.

“Eventually. And briefly,” Clint sighed. “Turned informant for a while then… fell off the face of the earth. Presumably went back into criminal enterprise. I’m tracking a few things that have his calling card written all over them, but he’s been smart. Squirreled away a lot of what he stole in the first place, and using all the modern tech to his advantage this time around. Still, when a guy with a sword steals from you, you tend to remember it.”

“And that’s how he bought the farm, presumably?” Loki asked. Clint nodded as he finished his latest sip.

“I have no fucking idea why he bought the old family farm,” Clint said. “Can’t hold too many good memories of him. Just like Barney, though, to go straight, knock a chick up and then abandon her and some kids out there in the middle of fucking nowhere. I know he still comes around now and then, but Laura’s way too loyal for that bastard. And you know the worst part? Goddamn Barney flakes on everything - me, his criminal circus buddies, going straight, his own family - and yet he still gets the nice farm with a picket fence, pretty wife and two point four kids. And me? I’m the wrong side of forty with a failed marriage and a shit apartment in Bed-Stuy to show for it. And you know the worst part? Goddamn Barney flakes on everything - me, his criminal circus buddies, going straight, his own family - and yet he still gets the nice farm with a picket fence, pretty wife and two point four kids. And me? I’m the wrong side of forty with a failed marriage and a shit apartment in Bed-Stuy to show for it. Okay, yeah, I mean things with Bobbi and me probably would never have worked, especially not with our careers and after that miscarriage… I don’t know. Shit.”

“What is it that as you so melancholy?” Loki ventured curiously.

“Today is - drumroll please - my big brother’s birthday!” Clint said derisively. “Yup. He’s probably getting trashed off his ass on some Greek billionaire’s yacht before breaking into the guy’s vault and making off with all his oil or headless statues or whatever. So, Happy Birthday Barney Barton, wherever the fuck you are.”

“I wish I knew some words to comfort you,” Loki admitted. “The truth is, I barely have a grip on my own familial issues so I daresay I shouldn’t be advising others. Sigyn also believes I might be what you on Midgard call ‘emotionally constipated’? I’m not sure if it is a real medical condition or…..” Clint’s boisterous laughter indicated to him it was not.

“Yes,” Loki agreed, standing up himself. He paused for a minute. “For what it is worth, I am sorry for what I did to you, the things you were made to do. I know that doesn’t mean much and probably isn’t helpful, but I just thought you should know I’m sorry.”
“Good. You should be sorry,” Clint agreed. He was quiet for a bit. “Maybe someday I’ll learn to be a bigger person and forgive you.”

“Well,” Loki smirked, “I do have time to wait.”

Chapter End Notes

So, yes, I have decided to keep Clint’s backstory Marvel 616 compliant - not Age of Ultron compliant. In the Marvel universe, Clint was married to Bobbi Morse (aka Mockingbird from Agents of SHIELD) until the strain of their careers led to their divorce. His backstory, including his brother, etc., is all taken from the Marvel 616 storyline. However, I also couldn’t resist Clint having a family on a farm back in Iowa, so in this alternate universe, Laura and the kids are Clint’s sister-in-law, niece and nephews through his estranged brother, aka the only blood family he really has and can depend on. Since Barney kind of coasts in and out of their lives, Clint is the more stable, male influence in that situation, trying to pick up his big brother’s messes again.
“Have you seen this?” Pepper asked, slapping a print out on the table in front of Tony.

“Looks nice,” Tony nodded, looking at the emerald and diamond tiara. “Maybe if we get invited to
the Nobel ceremony you can wear it. I mean, I’m sure half the ones all those European royalty types
wear are stolen anyway.”

“I didn’t buy this tiara, Tony,” Pepper grimaced. “Do you really think I would have gone online to
Sotheby’s and spent four hundred thousand dollars on an Edwardian era tiara outright so it didn’t go
to auction and then have it shipped here at high cost from Geneva?”


“No,” Pepper grimaced, “but you approved the purchase of it.”

“Oh shit,” Tony said, realizing who had purchased it.

“When you told JARVIS to give you prior approval before Loki ordered anything online, I actually
thought you were going to take it seriously,” Pepper said disapprovingly.

“At least it’s a tiara and not yellow cake uranium!” Tony grimaced.

“It cost nearly half a million dollars!” Pepper said, annoyed.

“I can afford it,” Tony said. “Besides, Odin promised he would pay me back for any expenses they
incurred.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to worry about that,” Pepper admitted. “I know Odin promised to pay you back,
but Loki seems to have no sense of what anything is worth and he has very expensive tastes. I’m fine
clothing, housing and feeding them, but I’m not okay with him spending money left and right on
frivolous things. I mean, he’s supposed to be suffering a punishment not buying antique jewelry from
defunct European noble houses. Next thing you know, he’s going to be buying real estate at auction
until he amasses enough land to actually start his own country!”

“It’s not that bad, Pep,” Tony reasoned. “Most of these things are just nice stuff to impress his wife.
And it’s just Loki, not both of them. Besides, he grew up in the lap of luxury - not unlike myself -
and has probably never had to worry about money before. Seriously, Pep, if you dropped me off in
the middle of Kansas with no access to my credit cards and twenty bucks in my wallet, I’d be dead
within a week.”

“Have you actually been paying attention to the things he buys?” Pepper questioned.

“I may faintly remember this tiara coming across the screen, but I didn’t really look at the price,”
Tony admitted. “I thought it was costume or something. I didn’t realize Asgardians could tell the
difference between diamonds and rhinestones. Hell, I can’t.”

“I had some of the accountants run the numbers,” Pepper informed Tony. “Do you know how much
Loki has spent in the past month alone?”

“If I had to take a guess, a lot?” Tony winced.

“Not including this tiara,” Pepper recited, “he has spent one point three million on jewelry, nine
hundred and ninety six thousand dollars on ceramics and porcelain figurines, one point two million
on various objets d’art - including a barometer that allegedly belonged to Louis XIV and sold for a
hundred and fifty thousand dollars - two point four million worth of antique and vintage silver, and,
in my opinion the piece de resistance, thirty-five thousand dollars on an antique model ship because it
was based on a Norwegian yawl named the Loki.”

“I mean, if there was a model yacht named the Tony or the Iron Man, I could honestly see myself
snapping it up,” Tony admitted.

“You said to me yourself when they moved in here that they’re basically teenagers in Asgardian
years,” Pepper said, “so I see no better time to start acquainting them with financial literacy.
Especially if they end up in a situation where they no longer have the Asgardian Royal Exchequer at
their disposal. I mean, how do you really see them surviving without that money to bank on?”

“I figured they’d resort to turning tricks,” Tony replied. Pepper glared at him and he turned red. “I
mean magic tricks. Jeez, Pep, get your mind out of the gutter.”

“We are going to teach Loki how to budget,” Pepper informed him.

“You’re asking the guy who wastes untold amounts of money building himself robot suits to teach
someone how to manage their money,” Tony said blankly. “You should have waited until Steve
came back to visit and had him help teach Loki how pinch pennies.”

“Well, you haven’t done too bad for yourself,” Pepper pointed out. “I mean, you have more money
than your dad left you, and not just because you picked a bank with good interest rates. You’ve
earned a fair bit of money, and you managed not to blow it all. In my experience, for those born into
money half the battle is not surrounding yourself with people who try to relieve you of it.”

“Fine,” Tony sighed. “I’ll help. But only because you’ve put the image into my mind of Loki and
Sigyn dying of consumption in some sort of Dickensian-style workhouse or debtor’s prison in
Asgard. While we’re at it, the first lesson might be that gold is of higher value on Midgard than
silver.”

“They think silver is more valuable?” Pepper said, surprised.

“Oh yeah,” Tony nodded. “The ancient Vikings did too. According to Sigyn - who is apparently
well-versed in all metal-related things owing to being a half-dwarf - silver is actually rarer than gold
in Asgard and most of the Nine Realms. The fact that everything in Asgard is gilt is because gold is
so common there. So, if Thor or Loki lay down some gold coins - as they are wont to now and again
- its because they think the service was crap and not worth very much. Trying to pay someone in
silver, however, means they think whatever it is must come at a high value.”

“Great,” Pepper sighed. “I’m going to have to read them The Wizard of Oz now.”

“What?” Tony frowned.
“It’s an allusion regarding the changeover from silver to the gold standard?” Pepper sighed. “How did you pass your economics classes again?”

“I think the Old Man got them to give me credit for that class because of how rich we were. Either that, or it was one of the AP classes I took so I could test out of the boring college classes and focus on the ones I like,” Tony shrugged. “To tell the truth, my senior year of high school and freshman year of college are sort of a whiskey-coffee-marijuana-robotics laboratory haze.”

“After this, I’m pulling up your transcripts and possibly sending you back to college to audit a basic business class,” Pepper sighed.

“Probably wouldn’t hurt anyway,” Tony admitted.

“What has he done?” Sigyn asked angrily before Pepper and Tony had any chance to say hello. The two of them stood at the door to Sigyn and Loki’s quarters like two open-mouthed goldfish, wondering how Sigyn had not only opened the door from where she was standing in the kitchen and before they knocked but had also instantly been able to sense her husband was up to something.

“We just wanted to talk…” Pepper began.

“Loki! Get your arse in here!” Sigyn yelled, before turning to Pepper and Tony pleasantly. “Please do come in. I was just about to put on some tea.”

“What?” Loki whined loudly, emerging from the library in a black t-shirt, plaid sleep pants and his billowy black bathrobe robe Tony noticed the prince of darkness now seemed to be using in lieu of a cape.

“Lady Pepper and Sir Stark have come to visit us,” Sigyn said, as she put the tea kettle on. “As a result, I am wondering what mischief you have caused.”

“I think it is rather unkind of you to assume they have come to visit us because I have done something untoward,” Loki said, ambling over to a big stuffed chair and flopping into it. “They are most gracious and genial hosts. Certainly it wouldn’t be above them to take time out of their immensely busy schedules to drop by and check in on how we, their guests, are doing.” Pepper seemed a bit flustered and, for a moment, Tony was concerned she was going to flake on the fiscal responsibility lessons idea either leaving him to awkwardly bring it up or to berate him about why he didn’t later.

“Do not play this game, Loki,” Sigyn warned him, annoyed. “You and I both know that Lady Pepper and Sir Stark have been most gracious hosts, and I do not appreciate your attempt to play on their emotions in order to avoid whatever lecture I am sure you most decidedly deserve. Now, Lady Pepper, what has my husband done?”

“I wanted to talk to him about… perhaps… limiting his spending?” Pepper said, more meekly than Tony had ever seen him.

“My, my, my,” Loki snorted. “are the Stark vaults running dry?”

“No,” Tony said, annoyed. “It’s about the fact that you’ve more than four point nine million dollars in the past month on jewelry, art, and old wooden sailing ships!”

“Is that much?” Loki asked tiredly.
“Considering the fact that you’ve spent ninety-four times the average yearly income for an American family of four in a single month, I think it is a bit much,” Pepper said, annoyed. “I know Tony can afford it, but it would be nice if you showed a bit more respect for him. Besides, I doubt very much that your father is going to be pleased when he finds out how much you’ve been spending since he promised to pay back anything you spent.”

“What would be so unusual about that?” Loki snorted. “As a prince of Asgard, I have always been entitled to use of my royal allowance. Are you supposing that now I’ve discovered my true heritage that Odin will not continue to grant me the coin befitting my station? Because if you earnestly believe that, you have not met my mother.”

“Well, if you no longer care to be his son, why should Odin give you the same financial benefits as before?” Sigyn asked, suddenly seeming a bit worried. “I do have some money squirreled away from my time as Frigga’s handmaiden and my grandfather did give us my dowry - though a bit less than what was initially settled on when they thought I was going to marry…”

“Do not say that ingrate’s name,” Loki hissed.

“My point is,” Sigyn continued. “You’ve never had to work for anything you didn’t want to in your life and you’ve never had to earn your own money. Neither of us has ever had to work about finances because we always had your parents to rely on. What if that were no longer true? What if there was a situation where we could no longer rely on our current situation?”

“You have relatives in Vanaheim and Niðavellir,” Loki shrugged.

“Your plan, should we become impoverished, is to leech off my family?” Sigyn said, annoyed.

“What would you do,” Pepper asked Loki pointedly, “if you were in a situation where you had no money and no relatives to rely on? How would you ensure you and Sigyn were fed? Clothed? What would you do if one of you got sick and couldn’t afford medicine?”

“Asgard does have universal health care,” Tony pointed out. “And I don’t think homelessness is much of a problem.”

“Who said they were still on Asgard?” Pepper pointed out.

“I have seiðr,” Loki snorted. “I could conjure us anything we wanted.”

“Alright,” Pepper smirked. “Conjure up some food and medicine right now.” Loki glowered at Pepper for pointing out the obvious flaw in his plan. “Say that, after this is all said and done, the Allfather decides you haven’t served your debt to society. He banishes both of you from Asgard and its associated realms. He binds your magic. What are you going to do to keep food on your table and a roof over your head?”

“If you say prostitution, Pepper will be mad,” Tony cautioned them. Loki let out a strangled noise, indicating he had never considered that to be an option and was slightly offended it had even been brought up.

“I would never,” Loki garbled out.

“Great,” Pepper said happily. “I’ll clear some time in my schedule and we can began some lessons tomorrow. Sigyn, you can come if you would like as well.”

“I would love to!” Sigyn smiled happily. Loki grumbled to himself, but didn’t protest Sigyn joining his lessons.
“Do I have to come?” Tony groaned.

“It would be nice,” Pepper pointed out before turning to Sigyn and Loki. “Well, we’ll see ourselves out. I’m looking forward to tomorrow!” Tony silently wondered how long Pepper’s enthusiasm would last.

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It didn’t last long.

Sigyn seemed to catch on easily enough, though she wasn’t exactly as much of a wasteful spender as her husband. Loki, however, seemed a cross between being unable and unwilling to learn. Pepper had begun simply enough, familiarizing them with various pieces of Midgardian currency and what they were worth. Loki was hung up on the concept of paper money and currency being backed by silver and gold one couldn’t actually see. Sigyn understood the concept, but was saddened by how dour all of the people on the currency seemed to be. Once Loki at least seemed to understand the value of different pieces of currency, Pepper decided to walk them through setting a budget.

Her first step was to budget how much they thought various household things cost. She consulted with the couple beforehand to come up with categories of things they might spend money on - especially since doctor visits and insurance weren’t exactly things one paid for on Asgard but magical items and servants wages were. In addition to categories like clothing, food, entertainment and pets, Sigyn and Loki apparently needed to budget for the heating of rooms via magical fire, the housing and upkeep of a private boat, fees for participations in various events and memberships to various magical and intellectual societies on Asgard and a few other realms, a separate account for magical books - which Loki insisted had to be kept different from the “entertainment” category - an account for acquiring items used in magic and magical research, and the wages of people like their horse grooms, household servants, laundresses, and various craftspeople the couple seemed to keep on retainer. Pepper silently hoped that Loki was not only given a royal allowance but was maybe allowed to collect taxes for certain properties, as the European royals of old did to try and balance their budgets.

While Pepper had no clue what a lot of these things would cost on Asgard, JARVIS helped her find the modern American equivalent. Using that, Pepper then asked the couple to decide what they would need to budget for each category. Based on their calculations, Sigyn seemed to think the couple’s monthly spending on Asgard amounted to a little over one point five million in American currency. Loki, however, seemed to think six point two million bucks per month was more realistic. Pepper honestly hoped that inflation was high in Asgard, especially when it came to the royal family. The fact that Loki’s suggested monthly budget actually came in around two hundred and sixty-nine thousand dollars over what Pepper had chastised him for spending in that month made him smug, and made it harder for Pepper to try to get her point across. Starting from scratch, she gave them a sample budget for an average American family and suggested they budget based on the average American family’s income.

“Ridiculous,” Loki huffed as Sigyn continued writing away on her paper. “Why on earth should one pay for access to technology or medical care? And fuel for one’s means of conveyance?"

“I doubt very much your horse runs on alternative energy,” Tony pointed out.

“Possession of horses is a luxury item for the wealthy,” Loki responded indignantly. “A hobby, if you will. Most on Asgard have means of conveyance not unlike your flying vehicles, though more commonly used. And those run on sustainable sources of energy.”

“Wait, you don’t actually need to have horses?” Tony gaped. “You just keep them around for fun?”
“Kolr was a gift from my father,” Sigyn pouted.

“Yes, and as he is primarily comprised of metal, fire and seiðr, he doesn’t actually require feeding, but Sigyn spoilt him to the point where he likes to indulge in regular horse feed, even if it does nothing for him,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“But why would you have a horse for fun?” Tony shook his head, causing Sigyn to look even more perplexed.

“He had a bad experience at boarding school,” Pepper explained to Sigyn.

“Were you thrown from one?” Sigyn asked, full of concern. Tony opened his mouth, but Pepper’s snort of laughter interrupted him.

“No, one starting chewing on his hair and it scarred him for life,” Pepper smirked.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think riding on animals is the best way to get from one place to the other,” Tony snorted. “Sure, a driverless car has a modicum of independent thought, but you don’t have to worry about wandering off to find hay or to eat apples off a tree. And it would certainly never run over you.”

“As fascinating as this glimpse into your pathetic formative years is,” Loki said boredly, “I still don’t understand why Midgardians need to pay for basic utility service. Why should one pay for their water or power to their home? Isn’t that provided for free by your government?”

“Tony, I want to move to Asgard,” Pepper announced.

“I know. It’s pretty sweet,” Tony agreed. “But you can’t get any TV shows there, and I know you’d miss ‘Scandal.’ Besides, they have a weird dress code and don’t have any coffee.”

“Ugh, fine,” Pepper presented before turning to look over Loki’s shoulder. “Loki, you cannot spend two-thirds of your monthly budget on clothing!”

“Why not?” Loki huffed.

“Because you have to pay rent, utility bills and for food,” Pepper explained.

“I don’t agree that I should have to pay rent, for utilities or for transport, so I simply won’t,” Loki said indignantly.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Pepper insisted.

“Perhaps on Midgard,” Loki pointed out.

“Look at Sigyn’s budget,” Pepper pointed out. “She’s managed to budget for necessities like food, rent and utilities while limited spending on less necessary things like entertainment.”

“Clothing is less necessary than fuel for a vehicle I do not possess?” Loki snorted. “And here I thought being clothed was more important than having a full tank of fuel!”

“I told you this was going to end terribly,” Tony stage whispered to Pepper.

“You can still buy clothing without spending the bulk of your income on it!” Pepper insisted. “How are you going to feed yourself, huh?”

“I would rather starve than look like some peasant,” Loki huffed.
“Well,” Tony said, eying up the budget Sigyn had completed and now seemed to be doodling various animals on, “at least one of them can handle money. I vote Sigyn be in charge of all the finances in this relationship. She can give Loki some pin money whenever he needs it.”

“Ridiculous!” Loki grumbled. “Any of the money that comes in is mine anyway! I earned it!”

“For doing what?” Pepper pointed out.

“Excuse me, Lady Pepper,” Sigyn said, standing up from her seat and glowering at her husband in a manner that made Loki first realize what he had said and then cower a bit in fear. “Since I have completed your assignment, I think, perhaps, I should excuse myself in the hopes my husband will take this exercise seriously without my presence. After all, he seems to have a problem taking me seriously. So I can only conclude I am the faulty part of this equation.”

“Sigyn!” Loki protested as Sigyn swept out of the room.

“I’ll go talk to her,” Tony offered, leaving Loki awkwardly standing before the table.

“Well,” Pepper said to Loki once Tony had left the room. “You ready to act like an adult and take this seriously?” Loki frowned and then nodded, slumping back into his chair.

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Sigyn had grumbled under her breath the entire walk back to her rooms, and upon entering them, headed straight for the kitchen to begin pulling out ingredients for some kind of dish she could make off the top of her head. Tony had made some poor attempts at conversation with her, which were further prevented by the loud clattering of pots and pans. Deciding that it might be better for her to get her anger out on her own, Tony said goodbye and headed out. While Tony was certain Pepper could hold her own against Loki, he also knew that there might be issues if Pepper strangled Loki to death in a fit of frustration. Begrudgingly, Tony headed back to where the lesson was taking place in the communal living area, asking JARVIS to run the elevator at a speed two-thirds below normal.

When Tony arrived back, he found Pepper pacing back and forth in anger while Loki, who was still sitting at the dining table, seemed to be playing a game on a StarkPad. Tony certainly hoped that Pepper’s attempts to educate Loki on financial matters hadn’t deteriorated into Loki playing Angry Birds while Pepper plotted the best way to murder their Asgardian houseguest. Pepper liked Sigyn a lot and wasn’t about to let him get away with insulting her. While Tony and Pepper had never really gotten into an argument about who was the breadwinner or who brought in more money, they had fought about finances, spending and similar issues before. Tony also had a penchant for sticking his foot into his mouth, saying things in frustration that he only later realized were extremely hurtful and inconsiderate toward Pepper. Tony sidled over to Pepper, hoping to help calm her and figure out a way to turn the situation around.

“How is she?” Pepper asked Tony, worriedly.

“Channeling her anger into cooking,” Tony replied. “What’s he doing?”

“I found some financial responsibility-themed video games on some website aimed at teaching teens about money,” Pepper sighed. “He did really well at the game where you have to move around a piggy bank to collect money but avoid things that drain your cash. Now he’s playing a simulator that teaches him about saving for retirement, rainy day funds and budgeting. I think it’s actually doing him more good than I am.” Tony looked across the room to see Loki concentrated on the game.
“Well, he is roughly seventeen by earth standards,” Tony shrugged. “Maybe video games were the solution all along.”

“I don’t know how to deal with him,” Pepper admitted.

“He and I are a lot alike,” Tony suggested. “Deal with him like you would have deal with me if you had known me as a teenager. Better yet, I’ll call Rhodey and see if he can come here and sit on Loki until he starts behaving better.”

“Rhodey used to sit on you until you shaped up?” Pepper said with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, not always,” Tony shrugged. “Occasionally he also locked me in the dorm room closet or the ensuite bathroom. Once he cuffed my right hand to the railing of my twin bed’s headboard and my right foot to the bed’s footboard because he didn’t think I was getting enough sleep. Unlocked me when I had gotten a full eight hours. It worked for a while. At least until the RA came in for a surprise dorm inspection. Thought we were getting up to some kinky shit and as a result, handcuffs got banned from the whole dorm.”

“Is this why every time I ask Rhodey what you were like in college he tells me I don’t want to know?” Pepper sighed.

“Probably,” Tony shrugged. Pepper’s face suddenly lit up and Tony realized she had an idea.

“You said Loki’s basically a teenager, right?” Pepper said.

“Yeah,” Tony shrugged.

“Maybe I’ve been going about this all wrong,” Pepper said. “Maybe it would be better off if he learned about this the way normal teenagers here do. We could make him get a part time job.”

“I don’t know how Odin would feel about that,” Tony admitted. “I mean, he’s only supposed to be working on the cleanup and for SHIELD, right?”

“Yeah, but in the meantime, he’s had a lot of free time, which he’s then used for online shopping,” Pepper said. “I maxed out my dad’s credit card at the mall once, and had to get a job as a cashier at the local grocery store until I’d paid it off.”

“With the current minimum wage rate and if he works only part-time,” Tony calculated. “Loki should be able to pay us back for all he’s spent this month in about four hundred and thirty-four years. Well, as long as we don’t charge him interest...”

“It’s not necessarily about him paying us back,” Pepper shook her head. “It’s about him learning the value of money. He’s never really had to work for anything, or at least for anything he didn’t want to do. Making him a minimum wage slave might teach him a thing or two about the value of a dollar and about the so-called peasants he thinks he’s above. I bet he’d have a lot more respect for people if he actually had to work for something. And let me tell you, the worst thing about low-level retail work is definitely having to deal with people like Loki who treat you like crap.”

“Either that or dealing with members of the public will drive him over the edge to the point he’ll massacre us all and try to take over the world again,” Tony pointed out. “You said yourself that when you worked in retail, it made you want to kill everybody.”

“Just think about it,” Pepper said.

Tony sighed. With most of the rubble now cleared, there wasn’t much to be done in terms of manual
labor on the streets of New York. There were plans underway to start rebuilding, though most were in the early stages of architectural design. It turned out that the whole rebuild was pretty unionized, and Tony didn’t know if he wanted to add a union card to the growing list of paperwork that evidenced Loki - or rather his alter ego’s - presence in the city. The fact that Loki had no sort of gainful employment left the prince bored, and Loki’s near constant presence around the Tower was also starting to grate on Tony’s nerves - as well as a lot of the Tower’s other occupants. Even Loki himself seemed a bit depressed to not have any jobs to do, often stalking around the tower in his pajamas and billowing black bathrobe.

Tony had asked SHIELD if there were any assignments for Loki, since SHIELD had agreed once the cleanup was complete that he could be of use to them. However, there seemed to be a sudden dearth of magical objects turning up around the world, and SHIELD was already dealing with the headache of getting sass master Steve Rogers back into the field. Steve had managed to catch up on a lot he had missed already, but seemed to delight in trolling the SHIELD operatives assigned to helping him adjust. However, the annoyance inflicted on them wasn’t nearly as bad as the panic of the STRIKE teams he was working with, each of whom found themselves gaping in horror on multiple occasions as an American icon jumped from a seventy-two story height without a parachute, launched himself through concrete walls to gain interior access to a building where a terrorist cell was operating, and attempted to stop a heat-seeking missile with his shield. With SHIELD busy coralling Steve, Tony realized he was left to his own devices in finding a way to keep Loki occupied.

“Fine,” Tony sighed. “I can see if Sigyn knows some way to get in contact with Asgard so we can clear this first. As long as we get approval to have him move about, I’ll look into getting him a job somewhere. Just not here.”

“Great,” Pepper grinned.

“I have finished your game,” Loki announced. “Apparently I earned enough to retire to a place called Bora Bora. According to your Wikipedia, it was believed to have been created by the gods, but never mentions which ones. Is it nice there?”

“Did you at least learn something?” Pepper sighed.

“Despite your preconceived notions of me,” Loki huffed, “I do understand the concept of overspending. It is just I have never had a limit to my spending before.”

“So you and Thor just have Asgard’s version of the Black AmEx?” Tony asked.

“Is that a form of currency?” Loki frowned. “And yes, all of our debts are paid by the royal treasury. It is to be expected.”

“But why did you need all those things?” Pepper asked. “It wasn’t like you were buying essentials. It was all extravagant stuff. Some of which I don’t even suppose you’ll take back to Asgard.”

“It was for Sigyn,” Loki shrugged.

“I get the whole ‘just because’ thing,” Pepper said. “But why do you need to buy all of this stuff for her? I know she doesn’t ask for it.”

“So she will love me,” Loki shrugged. Pepper paused for a minute, trying to work out Loki’s response to her question.

“You don’t have to buy her things to make her happy or make her love you,” Pepper insisted. “As a
woman, I can tell you the more precious gifts are those that come from the heart. Intangible stuff, like just spending time together.”

“That is…” Loki began, pausing to consider what Pepper had just said. Pepper grinned at Tony, feeling she had just helped Loki reach a breakthrough. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Wait for it,” Tony told Pepper.

“… the stupidest thing I have ever heard in my entire life, and I’ve lived more than a millenia!” Loki pronounced. “Oh, so I’m supposed to find something in the corner of my cold, little black heart that will be romantic and meaningful?”

“Sigyn loves you, inside and out,” Pepper insisted. “You just need to be who you are for her to love you.”

“‘Be myself’? That is possibly the worst possible advice I have ever gotten in my entire life!” Loki snorted. “Have you met me? ‘Be myself,’ indeed! Do you really think I would spend so much time pretending to be other people if being myself actually made anyone like me?”

“Sauron makes an impeccable point,” Tony agreed. Pepper glowered at him to let Tony know he wasn’t exactly being helpful.

“You really think that Sigyn is such a shallow person that she’s only with you because of what you can buy her or how much money you have?” Pepper asked Loki pointedly. The godling shifted awkwardly from one foot to another, knowing full well Pepper was trying to trap him. As always, his need to defend his wife overruled his desire to be right in an argument or even make a self-deprecating comment.

“No,” Loki admitted, annoyed.

“Then why would you think your ability to buy her things is the only reason she is with you?” Pepper pointed out. Loki grimaced. He did not like Pepper’s use of logic.

“Maybe now would be a good time for you to go apologize,” Tony pointed out to Loki.

“Fine,” Loki huffed, handing Pepper back the StarkPad, “but I will be back if she is still cross with me.”

When Loki arrived back in his rooms, he found nearly every fish dish Sigyn knew how to cook laid out on the counters of the kitchen. Sigyn was pulling out some sort of tuna loaf from the oven as he walked into the area. Surveying all of the various fish soups, beet salads, pickled fish and side dishes, Loki realized he was probably going to have to consume a bit of everything as part of his apology to his wife. He had to admit Sigyn’s plan to get him to eat her entire repertoire of fish dishes - including the ones he didn’t like - was a truly and thoughtfully malicious way to get back at him. She had even managed to procure tentacles from somewhere, knowing full well they were his absolute least favorite food. The entire thing was disgustingly cruel. Loki thoroughly approved of it. He would have to compliment his wife on her cleverness once her fury at him had calmed down.

“This is a veritable feast you’ve cooked up, lykyn,” Loki said gently, walking toward his wife like one might approach a wounded wild animal. “Perhaps we should invite the neighbors around to help us polish it all off?”

Sigyn merely glared at him in response, sitting the hot tuna loaf dish down and then moving to put
some fresh garnish on a potato side that had also just finished baking.

“Sigyn...I know what I said was wrong,” Loki sighed. “I didn’t mean it. I was just angry, and you know I tend to shoot off at the mouth when I’m upset. I did not mean to belittle you or any of your contributions…”

“Oh, I actually make contributions now?” Sigyn said angrily.

“Sigyn…” Loki began.

“The last time I checked,” Sigyn cut him off. “I am the only one of us who was ever required to work for my keep.”

“I understand you are upset…” Loki began again.

“No,” Sigyn shook her head, biting her lip. “I don’t think you quite understand how upset I am. Lady Pepper was merely attempting to teach us some useful life skills. Life skills we might need in the future if things do not go to plan. Unlike you, I cannot sit idly by and pretend that everything will always be as it once was, that recent events have not occurred.”

“You really think after this big show of banishing me to Midgard to seek redemption the Allfather would call us back to cast us out again?” Loki harrumphed. “Especially since you so kindly offered to take along any future burden alongside me? You and I both know that your family’s influence would prevent that from happening.”

“So what if he never calls us back?” Sigyn pointed out. “What if he decides we should make it on our own? What if something happens to you and I can not longer rely on your status in Asgard to protect or take care of myself? What if we return, everything goes to plan and then when the Allfather dies your brother decides he is no longer interested in financing your lifestyle?”

“What if I step outside of the Tower tomorrow and am struck and killed by a Midgardian automatic carriage?” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Jest about your own future all you want,” Sigyn huffed. “I know you have expressed on various occasions that you care not what happens to you, but I had at least hoped you gave a care about mine.”

“Sigyn…” Loki began.

“No, Loki,” Sigyn replied, near tears, “I am tired of this! I am tired of your own careless attitude toward your life. I am tire of the fact that when anyone tries to help you, you do your utmost to shove them away and belittle them for making an effort. I am tired of advocating and promising on your behalf that you will do better. I am exhausted with trying to convince you that you have the potential to be better!”

“Maybe it’s not what I want!” Loki shot back.

“You don’t want to reach your potential? To be the man you and I both know you can be,” Sigyn sighed. “Should I wager you no longer want me either?”

“It’s not the same thing,” Loki shook his head.

“It is exactly the same thing,” Sigyn replied. “It is our lives, our future. When we married, we ceased to be two different people and became one. When you do these things to yourself, hold yourself back, you are doing it to me as well. I just want what is best for you, for everyone to see you the way
I see you. For too long you have been angry, hellbent on showing everyone who has ever doubted or crossed you how important and powerful you can be. Has it never occurred to you that the best way to show them up is to live the best and happiest life you can? You are just playing right into their hands, becoming exactly who they claim you to be. Can you, for once, take something seriously?”

“I am taking things seriously!” Loki insisted. “After you left, I listened and did exactly as Lady Pepper asked. And Stark is finding me work if the Allfather approves!”

“And you are genuinely going to try with it?” Sigyn asked skeptically. “You will not give up the first time things become difficult?”

“I promise you, Sigyn,” Loki said, taking his wife’s hands in his own. “I will not give up easily. I will try with this.”

“Alright,” Sigyn said, desperately wanting to believe him.

“And I will also have you know, that I haven’t exactly been frittering away our finances with no care for the future,” Loki said.

He turned, walking into the bedroom and retrieving a small gilt box. Sigyn recognized it has a box where Loki kept things like cufflinks, his signet rings, brooches and belt buckles as well as some of the other jewelry signifying his state as Asgard’s prince. Loki traced a finger along the velvet seam at the back of the box, whispering a few words and revealed a secret compartment with a key and piece of paper.

“I admit, I should have let you in on this sooner,” Loki sighed, “but I had never given much thought to the fact we could be separated, that there would be a situation where I wasn’t there to take care of you.”

“What is the key for?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“It’s here with the instructions,” Loki said. “After we married, I talked with your father some and opened up a vault at the Gorminnsons’ Bank. I’ve squirreled away a bit of money from my royal allowance into it each month and now and again portions from commissions I’ve earned. Your father was kind enough to help me negotiate a good interest rate as well, so it’s grown to quite the nice little nest egg. It should be enough to take care of you if anything happens to me. The key and these instructions will give you everything you need to access it, should something happen.”

“You chose a bank in Niðavellir?” Sigyn said, slightly confused. “Wouldn’t one in Asgard have been easier to manage?”

“Ah, but the Allfather is in charge of all banking in Asgard, and I knew a bank in Niðavellir would always be sympathetic to you,” Loki said. “Besides, Dwarven banks have higher yields, better security, and more reasonable fees - well, if you know how to negotiate them. So long as you don’t take out a loan in one, you should be fine.” Loki placed the key and parchment back in the secret compartment, sealing the compartment up and then closing the box.

“I’m sorry I accused you of not looking out for me,” Sigyn said, “but why didn’t you bring this all up earlier when Lady Pepper and Sir Stark asked us about it?”

“I’m not about to tell that blabbermouth Stark about a secret bank vault,” Loki huffed. “He’d probably tell the Allfather and then Odin would require me to pay back all of our expenses here. And I am not about to waste our lives’ savings on a jaunt to Midgard when it’s much more satisfying for Odin to try and salvage our familial relationship by buying my love. Honestly, he should have just
admitted my origins outright and then spent the rest of my life buying me off. At least when someone’s buying you off, you know where they stand.”

“Oh, Loki,” Sigyn groaned before allowing her husband to wrap her up in a comforting hug.

“Do not worry, Sigyn,” Loki soothed her. “No matter what, I will always protect you.”
Loki the Barista

Chapter Summary

Or in which Loki mistakenly believes a certain major coffee chain holds the key to conquering Britannia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A week later, Pepper was still nagging Tony about why he hadn’t acted on her idea to find Loki some sort of part-time work. Still not clear on what exactly Loki could leave the protection of the Tower for without violating his Asgardian parole, Tony realized he might have to consult someone off-planet to figure things out, but he was still dragging his feet on the matter. Finally, after enough nagging, Tony gave up and decided dealing with introducing Loki to the minimum wage grind would be less irksome than Pepper’s annoyance at him. Since Thor was busy defending the Nine Realms and Asgard didn’t seem to be jumping on the email bandwagon anytime soon, Tony consulted with Sigyn on how to best speak to Odin about what to do with Loki. While Sigyn did throw out the idea of an outloud consult with Heimdall, Tony had a feeling the Allfather might prefer for this sort of thing to be more private. Sigyn agreed and promised to find a solution. He was surprised when, a few hours later, Sigyn brought in a giant raven on her arm into his lab.

“Um… why is that bird here?” Tony asked, flabbergasted.

“This is Muninn,” Sigyn introduced, stroking the bird until it let out what Tony thought sounded strangely like a giggle. “Huginn is out on the balcony pecking at my husband.”

“Okay,” Tony said, still not sure why this giant bird was in his lab. He was certain ravens weren’t that big. He’d have to consult an ornithologist. Or Google.

“Just tell Muninn your predicament and he will fly back to my father-in-law,” Sigyn said. “They will return with the answer probably before supper.”

“I just talk… to the bird?” Tony said, still trying to wrap his head around everything.

“Well, you probably could write something and have the missive attached to his leg,” Sigyn suggested. Tony groaned. He hated writing letters.

“I’m about to talk to a bird,” Tony sighed.

After a long, rambling explanation about the predicament with Loki involving several tangents Tony secretly hoped the raven cleared up on its own, Sigyn departed with the bird. Not long after that, Tony emerged from his lab to hear Sigyn fussing over her husband who would not let her bind his hand where the raven had pecked at it. Hours later, as Tony was going through various takeout menus in the communal kitchen, Sigyn raced up to him what what appeared to be a rolled piece of parchment. Loki strode behind her, trying not to seem curious. Either Loki had figured out this entire thing was about him or Sigyn had flat out told him that was what it was about. Either way, Tony was
surprised when Sigyn placed the parchment in his hands.

At first, it seemed like a bunch of weird sticks on the page. Tony knew they were the runes that his Asgardian friends and charges wrote in, but that still didn’t make them sensible to him. However, after looking at the paper for only a few seconds the sticks morphed into something that was clearly the English language. A little surprised but not wanting another explanation of “it’s magic,” Tony decided to roll with the idea of auto-translating letters from Asgard. Odin stated that Loki still had to finish out his year on Midgard but agreed that the problems presented in the union aspect of the rebuilding might spoil Loki’s secret identity. To help humble his son, Odin suggested that Loki be tasked with getting a closer glimpse into the lives he had disrupted and perhaps tried his hand at some menial Midgardian employment to see how these people were forced to make ends meet. While Odin suggested tasks like “rat catcher,” “swine herd,” and something called a “hedge ward,” Tony had in mind something far more humiliating.

“So,” Loki asked as though he was completely uninterested, “what did the NotFather say?”

Tony’s idea was so deliciously evil that he was momentarily concerned that he was becoming the villain. There was one job Tony could think of that was so humiliating, so frustrating and so entirely beneath Loki that he probably wouldn’t last a week at it. In fact, he had texted all of the Avengers about his amazing, perfect, wonderful plan before even telling Loki himself just so they could all have a good laugh before the big news broke. Once the minor amount of negotiations Tony needed to make to set everything up were finished, he strode into Sigyn and Loki’s suite to inform the erstwhile prince of Asgard of his newfound employment.

Loki had been hired as a barista.

Well, Loren Olsen had been hired as a barista, technically. And it hadn’t been easy. While Stark Tower - or the Avengers Tower as it was about to be known - had some retail shops in the bottom, it did not have any coffee shops inside. That was mainly because one of the perks of being employed in Stark Tower was all-you-could drink coffee in each office and custom espresso, lattes and a myriad of other fancy drinks made up in the employee cafeteria. However, there was a very popular, big name, West Coast-based coffee retailer located on the ground floor of the building just across the street from Stark Tower. Its clientele ranged from the wolves of Wall Street to their wives, the spoiled rich kids of Manhattan, their nannies and the occasional completely confused tourist. Yes, there was probably nothing closer to working in hell than working in a coffee shop in Midtown.

Tony gleefully informed Loki of his new task and waited for the frustration to set in. To his surprise, Loki insisted that it couldn’t be “that hard” to make coffee, even without magical powers. Even Thor had mastered the Mr. Coffee machine. Loki thought the drink was pleasing enough, even if it was just beans brewed with water. Tony was also surprised that Loki identified the logo of his new corporate masters, though the Asgardian language barrier was a bit hard to get through at first.

“What do nokken have to do with coffee?” Loki asked.

“What?” Tony asked.

“Nokken,” Loki offered. “You know… necks, nicors, nixies?”

“Pixies?” Tony replied.

“Maybe they call them marmennill here?” Sigyn suggested.
“No, that is a nokken,” Loki snorted. “You know, people who randomly appear out of bodies of water and start singing or playing instruments to lure people to their death?”

“Ah, yes,” Tony nodded. “We call them sirens or mermaids here.”


“That’s how I learned to play the fiddle you know,” Loki smirked.

“Not this story again,” Sigyn groaned.

“A mermaid taught you to play the fiddle?” Tony said in disbelief.

“I don’t know what you insist on calling them mermaids,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Nokken usually take the male form to lure in beautiful women. Although they do sometimes turn into horses or dragons…”

“What?” Tony said, confused.

“Is this place down by the river?” Loki asked.

“Why would you think that?” Tony asked.

“Where else would you put a business that serves coffee to nokken?” Loki snorted.

“Mermaids aren’t the customers,” Tony groaned.

“Then why do they use marmennill as their symbol if they do not serve them,” Sigyn frowned. “I highly doubt marmennill are trustworthy enough to serve such a drink to anyone. At least anyone who is afraid of being poisoned.”

“The mermaid doesn’t have anything to do with the coffee,” Tony interrupted, not sure he wanted to go down this particular Asgardian rabbit hole. “It’s just their symbol. And mermaids completely fictional on Earth.”

“So, I will be making the coffee at this place,” Loki nodded.

“Beginning tomorrow,” Tony nodded. “You’ll need to be there at four a.m.”

“You mortals should begin your days later,” Loki huffed.

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It had taken a little bit of bribing to get Loki a position as a barista with no experience, no real references and the fact that he was for all intents and legal purposes here as a foreign exchange student allegedly interning at Stark Tower. Tony had been able weave a story to the owner of that particular franchise that the so-called Loren Olsen who would be working there was the son of some eccentric Norwegian millionaire who Tony knew from his rich people circles. Dear old dad had shipped Loren off to learn about American commerce and was a big believer in starting from the bottom up.

To ensure that nothing went awry, Tony intended to be there during Loki’s entire shift, monitoring to make sure the Asgardian didn’t go postal and strangle some tourist with wiring from the espresso machine. He planned to sit in the background, sipping his drink and nibbling on a Danish, trying to get some work done while watching out for Loki. He considered live tweeting Loki’s first day on the job, but he had a feeling there might be some blowback from SHIELD. Sleepy and not ready to pull
away from his wife’s warm body, Tony had literally dragged Loki out of the Tower and across the street to begin his shift.

Orientation went even better than Tony thought it would. The name badge for Loki’s Midgardian persona had been hilariously misspelled as “Lauren” and the dorky visor and apron he was forced to wear - while in Loki’s trademark green - did nothing for the guy fashion wise. He was placed with complete hipster tool of a barista while he learned how to make drinks and was given a run through of some basic stuff he could do. Just before the morning rush began, Tony began a group text with the other Avengers, sending them a picture he had clandestinely shot of Loki in his new work apparel. Responses had varied from a bunch of laughing emojis (Clint) to a snarky comment about poisoned coffee in Manhattan (Natasha) to a question about why coffee had gotten so expensive and fancy (Steve).

Unfortunately for Loki, his first day on the job turned out to be deceptively easy. He watched some training videos, got to taste test making various drinks and, when the store wasn’t busy, practice making drinks for his future co-workers. The worst part of the day was that when things were busy, he was made to clean up the bathrooms or do the menial work as he wasn’t ready to mix drinks yet. However, Loki proved rather good at rote memorization of ingredients. He later informed Tony that making a basic healing potion was harder than crafting Midgardian beverages. On his second day of work, Loki was convinced getting along with his co-workers was going to be the worst part of the job. Karl, the manager, was the type of man who had started out working at a coffee shop until something better came along, only to find himself a manager of the same store some twenty years down the road. As a result of his own personal disappointment, Karl seemed to take things out on his much younger employees who all had rich lives ahead of them instead of being stuck with pot bellies, child support payments, and a salary that left canned pork ‘n’ beans as a primary diet stable.

Cordelia was in a similar situation to Loki - a snobby rich teenager being taught a lesson - and insisted on being called by her full name. Upon Sigyn’s insistence he catch up on Midgardian literature, Loki had read the play with the character of Cordelia but could find no semblance of the Shakespearean figure in the bleach-blonde, French manicured co-worker who seemed to think being asked to lift a finger was an insult. Loki would have despised her more had she not been so similar to him not long ago. Cordelia spent most of her shift typing away on a Swarovski crystal encrusted, top-of-the-line phone, and Loki learned quickly it was better to let her.

However, the most annoying member of the team was probably Harrington, a student in NYU’s MFA program and who was always droning on about the fact he was writing “the next Great American novel.” From Harrington’s bragging about his book, tales from his classes and the few scribbled notes Harrington had written on napkins around the store, Loki quickly surmised the only thing Harrington’s novel would be “great” at was holding up wobbly furniture or as a doorstop. Then there was Vince who was always leering at anything remotely female and between the ages of twelve and twenty-five that walked through the store door. Loki decided instantly to take great care in making sure Vince was not on shift if Sigyn came to visit him. Since Loki was decidedly male - or was as far as Vince knew - Vince left Loki alone.

Of course, not all of Loki’s coworkers annoyed him to the point of despair. Bonzo - if that was his real name - was a stoner who always came in late, always left early, always smelled of something “medicinal” and yet never could get fired. While Bonzo wasn’t exactly the cleverest person Loki had ever met, he did occasionally drop gems of witticism and his ability to coast through life was something Loki slightly admired. Then there was Garth who Tony described as a fellow nerd. A student in between high school and college, Garth could be found LARPing or playing a MMORPG when he wasn’t at work. Not very good with his social skills, Garth often spoke in terrible puns or nerdy references none of his other coworkers seemed to understand. Loki, however, enjoyed the company of this loveable outcast and did his best to follow along, making him one of Garth’s few
non-online friends. For his part, Garth assumed Loki didn’t understand his references because Loki was a quirky foreigner and did his best to introduce the godling to American nerd culture.

There was also Claudette, a sweet but snarky Broadway hopeful who was between acting gigs. She reminded Loki of Syn and Snotra, especially in the way she could be completely nice to a customer who was nasty to her, only to turn around and quip something particularly devastating about said customer when they were gone. Finally, there was Demarcus who was working his shifts at the coffee shop and as a janitor at Columbia so he could afford his tuition there. Loki rather admired the hard-working young man who had come from one of the city’s less-than-desirable neighborhoods - especially since Demarcus seemed to have some sort of preternatural ability to tell if someone was on the up-and-up after a mere thirty seconds in their company. Loki felt it was a skill the Avengers could most definitely employ. He thought about suggesting it to Stark when Karl the Manager asked him to tell Stark to buy more coffee or get out after hour three of Stark’s not-so-in-cognitio monitoring of Loki behind a laptop in the corner.

By his fourth day on the job, Loki realized it was not his sometimes unbearable co-workers that would make his job difficult. It was the customers. Had Loki taken a thankless retail job before his failed attempt to conquer Midgard, he would have learned that no alien race could be a match for the audacity and sheer force-of-will possessed by Midgardians when they wanted something so small and inconsequential as a cup of brewed bean water made to certain specifications. Loki had encountered thunderously cruel businessmen who were five minutes late to a meeting and yet thought stopping by to order a drink that took five minutes to make would miraculously turn back time. He dealt with pushy soccer moms who inexplicably thought they knew more about the business than he did and often called for the manager at every minor inconvenience - even if the manager could only relay the same message he could.

However, Loki found the worst customers by far where the adolescent girls from Cordelia’s elite private school who came in hoping to catch a glimpse of their schoolmate “slumming it.” Loki couldn’t quite tell if Cordelia was friends or enemies with these girls. Truthfully, after centuries of studying court intrigues and watching Sigyn’s and her various sisters’ interactions with other court women, he sometimes doubted there was such a distinction between friends and enemies for many females. All he knew was that Cordelia managed to magically disappear whenever these girls showed up. Loki wished he could do so as well. Wrangling an angry horde of bilgesnipe in heat while seiðrless was an easier task compared to managing the multitude of complicated orders these juvenile demonesses demanded. It was as if making low-wage workers suffer was their sole purpose in life.

Tony could have warned Loki to be afraid of teenage girls, but it was much more fun sitting in the corner, watching as some sixteen-year-old wearing the latest designer fashions yelled at Loki about how her alleged secret menu item wasn’t pink enough for the filter she wanted on Instagram. Tony’s surveillance of the incident was interrupted by Pepper discreetly walking into the room and sitting down beside him. Sigyn had wanted to stay away from Loki’s place of employment out of a mixed fear of being a distraction and that she would embarrass him, so Sigyn had occasionally asked Pepper to go check on her husband under the guise of a “coffee run” for the Tower’s occupants.

“Is he okay?” Pepper asked worriedly as the huffy teenage girl took her drink and left.

“He’ll be fine,” Tony shrugged. “Can’t hurt for a few teenage girls to mop the floor with him, right?”

“That’s how eating disorders get started, Tony,” Pepper pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I think he’s tough enough to take it,” Tony replied. “Otherwise, having us is pointless and Fury should just send out a group of cheerleaders to take down the next super villain who tries to
destroy the planet.”

“Might actually be a good idea,” Pepper mused. “So, how’s he getting along?”

“Well enough,” Tony admitted. “Although he’s not allowed to write names on the cups. For some reason, he can speak the language by Allspeak but whatever magic that is doesn’t magically translate writing. He wrote a few names on cups in Asgardian runes, but one one besides him could pronounce them and so now he’s forbidden from writing names down.”

“Strange,” Pepper frowned.

“Doesn’t stop him from getting blamed for misspellings, though,” Tony said, pointing Pepper over to the front counter.

Pepper looked over to where Loki was currently being yelled at by some girl about how her name was spelled A-S-H-L-E-I-G-H but whoever had written her name on the cup had spelled it A-S-H-L-I-E-G-H. Loki had tried to explain that he hadn’t been the one to make or write on her cup but it was to no avail. Loki ended up with the massive iced sugar-free vanilla latte with soy milk all over his head. The girl stomped out of the cafe, and Karl the Manager informed Loki the cost of the unpaid for drink was coming out of his salary. Loki groaned and then retreated to the bathroom to clean himself up.

“Do you think he’s learned his lesson yet?” Pepper asked Tony worryingly.

“He’s not even been on the job a week,” Tony snorted. “At least let him have a meltdown in the breakroom first. You know, give him the whole minimum wage experience.”

“You’ve never worked for minimum wage in your life,” Pepper pointed out.

“And don’t you agree I’m a worse person because of it?” Tony grinned. Pepper rolled her eyes and then went up to order a simple coffee, making sure to be as nice to Loki as possible as she did so.

Pepper returned to Tony’s table and the pair chatted for a bit before she had to head back to the office. Two hours later, Loki was done with his shift and ready to head back home for the evening. As he escorted Loki back to the Tower after an unsatisfying eight hour shift, Tony could sense that the Asgardian beside him was feeling rather down in the dumps. Loki had worked hard, truly put in an effort into doing this job the best he could, and yet none of his customers treated his mere existence as off-putting despite the fact he provided a service most of them claimed to not be able to live without. Meanwhile, half of his co-workers ridiculed him for actually putting in an effort or seemed to think him either socially or intellectually beneath them - mainly because he did his job and was nice to the less popular coworkers like Garth, Demarcus, and Bonzo. Tony had never been one for giving a good pep talk, but he realized Loki might need one.

“So,” Tony said as the elevator doors opened and they walked into the hallway near Loki and Sigyn’s chambers, “today was a tough day.” Loki nodded but didn’t say anything. “But you made it through. And that’s a good thing. I think it shows some real growth.”

“I feel sticky,” Loki grimaced. “I do not enjoy feeling sticky.”

“It’ll get better,” Tony shrugged.

“No it won’t,” Loki huffed.

“No, it probably won’t,” Tony agreed. “but Sigyn seems pretty proud of you.
“She made an apple cake yesterday,” Loki nodded. “She let me eat the rest for breakfast this morning. I think she’s a bit surprised I’ve lasted this long.”

“I’m surprised you’ve put up with all this for this long,” Tony admitted to Loki.

“Barton has informed me that perhaps if I work here long enough and well enough, then one of the establishments’ watery propriétresses may choose to bequeath me from a sword found within her aquatic environs, thereby proclaiming me ruler of Britannia by divine right,” Loki explained to Tony in all seriousness. “Of course, I might have to engage in single combat with the present empress of the lands, but I believe I could, as you say on Midgard, take her.”

“First of all,” Tony grumbled, “strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Secondly, Loki you are not allowed to engage the Queen of England in a trial by combat for her lands, and third, Clint you are forbidden from teaching anyone anything ever again!”

“What?” Clint replied, repelling down from the rafters. “You really think there are good odds some watery tart would think he’s good and pure of heart enough to wield Excalibur?”

“Did you even graduate high school?” Tony groaned.

“I dropped out when I was fifteen, though I think I was still in eighth grade at that point,” Clint mused. “Anyway, I technically have a GED now, so, yes, I do have a high school diploma or equivalency certificate, thank you very much.”

“How do you ‘technically’ have a GED?” Tony questioned.

“Sorry, I don’t think SHIELD has given you clearance to have access to that information,” Clint grinned.

“Loki!” Sigyn shrieked, throwing open the chamber doors and rushing forward to embrace her husband. She didn’t seem to mind the fact that Loki smelled of coffee, cream and flavoring syrups or that he was covered in sticky goo and sweat from his long day at work. Tony couldn’t help but smirk, watching as Sigyn’s arms wrapped around her husband and Loki went from hunched over and grumbling to standing up straight with a wide smile.

“Hello, love,” Loki said, breathing in the scent of his wife’s hair as she clung to him. Sigyn pulled back excitedly.

“I am making meats on sticks!” Sigyn told Loki excitedly. “Lady Pepper informed me they are known as roasted skewers or shish kabobs here on Midgard. I am making lamb for you and shrimp for myself!”

“Well,” Loki smirked cheekily at Clint and Tony, “I must ready for supper.” Loki tossed an arm around his wife and ushered her into their chambers, kicking the door shut behind them as Sigyn chattered away about her cooking experiments that day.

“Maybe if I learned to cook Pepper wouldn’t get frustrated with me as easily,” Tony thought aloud.

“Yeah,” Clint shrugged. “Well, I’m off to eat three day old, unrefrigerated pizza. See you later!” Clint then parkoured himself back into the ceiling, leaving Tony to ask JARVIS to pull him up some cooking tutorials as he headed back to the elevator.
An unusual thing happened after Loki had been working as a barista for a mere week. Before he had even clocked in, Loki was eagerly approached by Karl the Manager and, strangely, Cordelia. The two of them seemed strangely excited and Loki resisted an urge to turn and run as far away from them as possible. Looking over Karl the Manager’s shoulders, Loki could see a curious Garth and Claudette, who seemed to be giving him some sort of sympathetic look. He could also hear Bonzo snoring in the breakroom. Taking a deep breath, Loki tried his best to mentally prepare himself for whatever was coming.

“Loren, do you remember writing in uh… your native language on people’s cups last week?” Karl asked. Karl never seemed to remember the name of the country Loki was allegedly from.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “You told me to stop because no one else could read them?”

“Oh, no! Don’t stop!” Karl insisted worriedly.

“What?” Loki asked, confused.

“You’ve gone viral,” Cordelia said, thrusting her phone into Loki’s face so he could see all of the Instagram images of the coffee cups he had written on.

“At least three people have already come in today asking if the guy who does the symbols is on shift,” Karl the Manager nodded. “You have to start doing it again!”

“But no one else can read the names,” Loki pointed out. “And I can’t write in English…”

“So we’ll get someone else to write the names in English for you,” Karl shrugged. Loki didn’t have to look around but he could feel the annoyance coming off of his coworkers.

“I…” Loki began.

“Come on, people,” Karl the Manager ordered. “Get back to work!” Loki sighed and headed back around the counter.

“Sorry about that,” Claudette said to Loki once Karl had disappeared and Cordelia had gone back to typing on her phone. “Karl will do anything to make the store successful. Even if that means exploiting your cultural heritage and making our jobs less efficient.”

“It might not even catch on,” Garth said to Loki, trying to ease his new friend’s concern. “People might not even like their names being written in Norwegian. Might remind them too much of that crazy Norse guy in Germany, right? I mean, that guy killed like eighty people!”

“Um, right,” Loki frowned.

“That chick who beat him up was pretty kick ass thought,” Claudette agreed. “I totally wouldn’t mind an Asgardian fashion trend, either.” Loki heard snickering from a corner of the shop and looked up to see Clint, who had apparently been assigned babysitting duty for the day since Tony had taken Pepper out on an early birthday weekend trip to the Turks and Caicos. Loki sent Clint a scowl as the bell above the door rang, signalling a new customer coming in.

No one really seemed to care that they had gotten names written in ancient Norse runes and English on their coffee cups that day. Some gave Loki odd looks for his strange writings and he endured a fifteen minute lecture from an elderly white man about how he was a nasty immigrant stealing jobs from hard-working Americans, only for Clint to stumble on his way back from the counter and spill his smoothie all over the head of the fat, white man in the red baseball cap. Loki tried not to laugh as the man sputtered and tried to come to terms with the fact his white shirt was now stained pink and
purple. The day passed rather monotonously after that, with only minor incidents such as the dramatic break up scene between two hipsters that took place right in front of the counter - and which Clint live tweeted - and the fifteen minutes it took Loki to explain to one customer that one could not make a cappuccino, hold the milk. At least, Loki figured, he wouldn’t have to continue writing runes as no one was interested in them.

Unfortunately for Loki’s sake, the next day dashed his hopes. There was a line outside the door long before opening, and Loki rushed in to see his fellow co-workers terrified and Karl rubbing his hands together. Garth quickly explained that some help from Cordelia had led to Rune Names going viral and now everyone in Midtown wanted their specialized coffee cup to take a photo with. For some inexplicable reason, Loki felt the need to vomit and a sensation of blood pumping in his ears. After taking a thirty second break to calm himself in the breakroom, he headed back up front. He briefly considered asking Bonzo for some of the strange medicinal Midgardian herbs he used to see if they would help.

“This is fantastic!” Karl crowed enthusiastically. “We actually stand a chance of beating the sales numbers at the Times Square store for this month! I can wait to rub in the face of that snot-nosed Tim!”

“Who is Tim?” Loki whispered to Garth.

“Karl’s archnemesis and the manager of the store at Times Square,” Garth explained. “Guy runs what is arguably the most successful store in all of New York City. Brings in tons of money from tourists. He may have also gotten promoted over Karl once.”

That night, Loki found himself writing rune names on coffee cups in his sleep. He awoke with a fright from a nightmare where he was chased about by a one-eyed espresso machine that had a voice and manner of speaking that was uncannily similar to Odin’s. When he looked over to see he had only an hour left of sleep before he needed to be up for work, Loki fell back against his pillows with a groan. The action stirred Sigyn who, in her sleep, turned over and cuddled closer to her husband, resting her head right under his chin. Loki gave the top of her head a kiss and then vowed he would never again become cross with the kitchen staff of Asgard’s palace.

Loki trudged into work the next day to be met by sympathetic grins from his nicer coworkers. Vince and Harrington, however, each pulled Loki aside hoping to use his newfound semi-fame to boost their own success. Vince wanted Loki to write him out some pick up lines in runes while Harrington prodded Loki for information about Norse culture and heritage that he claimed he wanted to include in his book. Loki brushed them both off easily but acquiesced when Bonzo asked for him to write out the Norse word for idiot. Bonzo, apparently, wanted to prank his older brother - the successful one in the family - who had basically ordered Bonzo to acquire a Norse version of his name so he could tattoo it on himself. Loki happily obliged. Through the support of his friendlier co-workers, Loki found being put on the spot with his rune knowledge easier to bare and, at some points, almost charming. After a week, he found writing rune names a normal part of his job along with oddly demanding customers and a few creepy coworkers.

It was a week and a half into the rune craze when Sigyn finally decided to visit her husband at his place of employment, asking Happy Hogan to escort her over. Sigyn had picked out a floral sundress, sparkly ballet flats and fashioned herself a flower crown in order to head over and see her husband. She and Happy got more than a few odd looks, several people wondering why Tony Stark’s former bodyguard and Stark Industry’s new security head was escorting some lost flower child into the store. When Sigyn walked into the coffeehouse, Loki was knee deep in several orders, but he couldn’t help the smile that light up his face upon seeing his wife bathed in the late afternoon sun. Unfortunately for Loki, Vince was working the cash register at that moment. Happy already
looked as though he was inwardly calculating the best way to protect Sigyn from the creepy guy behind the counter.

“Hey, little lady,” Vince said, flicking his tongue out at Sigyn in what Vince seemed to think was a sensual manner, “what can I do for you today?”

“You dare insult me?” Sigyn said, her eyes narrowing in on Vince. Loki sighed.

It was a dangerous faux pas to bring up a dwarf’s height, and considered by most to be a challenge to fight. Sigyn was no exception and, being the shortest of her sisters, usually took the most offense to any attempt to make her height seem cute or adorable. Normally a very passive and pacifist person, something about mentioning her height made Sigyn go off. Loki couldn’t remember the number of times he had to drag away his wife from a fight she had started based on the assumption someone was making fun of her stature. Still, Loki was a bit keen to see Vince finally get some comeuppance. Happy also seemed to have forgotten about trying to protect Sigyn from Vince and now seemed to be trying to figure out how to let Sigyn pummel the guy without doing anything that might end up getting media attention. For his part, Loki wondered what kind of lizard Vince would be once Sigyn zapped him with her seiðr.

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything bad, sweet cheeks,” Vince said, winking at her. “You’re just too cute to ignore.”

“Who are you and why are you permitted to speak with me?” Sigyn said in her most regal voice. Loki smirked to himself and all of the customers in the store had turned to watch the exchange. Vince tried to keep his creepy smile plastered on his face, but there was something in Sigyn’s eyes that were deeply unsettling, almost as if there was a demon within her attempting to claw its way out of her body and into the coffeeshop. Loki tried to muffle his laughter. It was a patented Frigga look she taught to most of her handmaidens.

“Ma’am, is there a problem here?” Karl the Manager rushed over, nervously.

“Yes,” Sigyn said, waving at Vince. “This man. His presence offends me. You may dismiss him.”

“Who…” Karl began.

“My Lady Victoria,” Happy smartly intervened, thankful he remembered Sigyn’s Midgardian alias. “Perhaps you should go ahead and be thinking about your order.

“Karl, this is my wife,” Loki introduced to the manager. He then added in a low tone. “She is a relative of the Norwegian royal family.” Suddenly, Karl had jumped to attention, shoved Vince into the backroom and was manning the cash register himself.

“Well, uh, your ladyship, what’ll it be?” Karl asked nervously. Sigyn stood thoughtfully.

“I have just the thing,” Loki grinned. After messing around for a bit, Loki produced a delightful fruit flavored frappe for this wife, and announced to Karl he was going on break. The pair of them commandeered a table while Happy stood over in the corner, asking into his earpiece for JARVIS to run all the information he could on a certain barista named Vince.

“This drink is delightful!” Sigyn informed her husband as Loki worked to cut a fruit-filled pastry in half for them to share. “I am most proud. And I hope you are not upset that I came to see you…”

“No,” Loki insisted. “Your presence is always a welcome improvement. However, I would have found a way to remove that repugnant man from your presence had I known you were coming.” Sigyn flipped her hair over her shoulder.
“He is most odious,” Sigyn agreed. “Perhaps I should consult Sir Stark on how to remove the offensive personage?”

“I have the feelings the Norns have something in store for him yet,” Loki shrugged.

“Well, you certainly have mastered the alchemy of these drinks,” Sigyn smiled. “I should hope not all of your workmates are so terrible?”

“Of course not,” Loki said. He looked up to find Garth, Demarcus, and Claudette staring at him from behind the counter. He waved them over and then all seemed to nervously approach the strange mix of faerie queene and Norwegian royalty Karl had just excitedly pointed out to them.

“Hey, Loren, who’s your friend?” Claudette finally spoke up for the group.

“This is my wife,” Loki said proudly. “Dearest, these are my coworkers, Garth, Demarcus and Claudette.”

“I am positively charmed to meet all of you!” Sigyn said happily. She stood up and then quickly embraced the three, who seemed to be realizing that while their co-worker Loren was a bit of a quirky foreigner, his wife as the real oddball in the relationship.

“Uh, nice to meet you too,” Demarcus said, a little confused by this tiny, spritely woman. Garth just gaped at her like a fish with its mouth open. Loki wondered briefly if Garth had ever been embraced by a woman who was not a relative before.

“Your flower crown is amazing,” Claudette said. Sigyn smiled and took it off her head.

“Here,” Sigyn said, happily placing it on Claudette’s head. “I have more at home.”

“Ma’am,” Happy said to Sigyn in a quiet tone. “We might ought to get back?”

“Oh, bother,” Sigyn sighed. She turned to Loki’s coworkers. “It was nice to meet everyone! I must return some time!” Loki’s coworkers bade confused farewells, just before Sigyn turned around and basically made out with Loki as a way of saying goodbye. When Happy was able to finally extract husband and wife, Sigyn grabbed her fruity frappe and headed out while Loki spent the next hour of his shift in a love-induced daze.

Just as Loki was starting to get a handle on things at work, pumpkin spice season arrived. The twin terrors of Instagram aficionados wanting both the seasonal confection and a bit of Norse imagery meant Loki was both tired and cranky. Sigyn could usually sense when her husband came home from work in a particularly mercurial mood - particularly on days when he had been forced to be nice to impossibly rude customers - and tried her best to get his mind off the stresses of the job and focused on activities he found more pleasant. However, not everyone in the tower was as acquiescent to Loki’s moods. One evening after he came home, Loki showered and then headed up to the communal living area where JARVIS had informed him Sigyn was attempting to teach Sir Stark how to cook a simple Midgardian pasta dish for the Tower residents’ supper that evening. Loki had brought a book to entertain himself until the meal started, but his reading was interrupted by a sharp voice.

“Hey, Bean Boy,” Tony said, annoyed. “Get your feet off the coffee table. This isn’t your parents rumpus room!”

“Oh, pardon me,” Loki said sarcastically, “but as the only person here who is constantly on their feet
all day working for a living, I thought I might be permitted to elevate them to ease their soreness and stiffness. I apologize for not realizing that my personal well-being is secondary to the preservation of your indoor decor."

“You could have sat in the recliner with the footstool,” Tony pointed out.

“It is not as comfortable for my back as the sofa,” Loki snorted. “but then again, I shouldn’t really be surprised how little you care about my comfort. After all, you’ve never been forced to work for anything in your life. And I have been informed by my co-wage-slaves that your industry is part of a bourgeoisie system of capitalistic oppression designed to subjugate the lower classes as well as minorities.”

“Who is telling you this?” Tony grumbled.

“Bonzo loaned me a book on Karl Marx. I find the tome most interesting,” Loki informed Tony.

“Bonzo? What is this kid? A muppet?” Tony said. “And I didn’t send to work a minimum wage job so you could develop ideas.”

“This is exactly why we require a classless society,” Loki harrumphed. Tony couldn’t even begin to address that statement coming out of Loki’s mouth, of all people.

“I am sorry that my husband is being what I am told you on Midgard call a ‘drama queen,’” Sigyn said to Tony, doing the fake quotes with her fingers.

“Barton!” Tony called out, “Have you been teaching them slang again?”

“No,” a muffled voice called back from somewhere in the rafters. It paused for a beat and then added, “well, maybe.” Tony grumbled and tried to ignore the fact that Loki was now rubbing his sock-clad feet all over the coffee table, possibly as some sort of communist protest.

After a somewhat digestible dinner of spaghetti and meatballs a la Tony Stark, Tony and Pepper headed out for some gala fundraiser they had agreed to attend. Banner had eaten some leftover curry in his labs, and Clint had been given orders to check on him hourly until Pepper returned. Ignoring his mission, Clint took a gallon of ice cream and decided this was as good a time as any to introduce Sigyn to his favorite show as “Dog Cops” was doing a marathon of its past two seasons. While the two of them sat against the couch on the floor, Loki had sprawled out on the couch behind them, continuing to lament his wage slavery.

“I am relegated to this plebeian existence for the rest of my confinement here,” Loki grumbled. A thought seemed to cross him. “Unless the proletariat can unite and throw off the shackles of wage slavery.”

“Dude, you are a member of a royal family. Two royal families, in fact. You are the least plebeian thing here,” Clint snorted. “You are the very definition of the bourgeoisie. And unions are already trying to do the throwing off the shackles things. They were pretty successful for the while. Whole reason we get lunch breaks, weekends off and no child labor. Then the corporations realized if they could control the unions from the inside, there wouldn’t be anyone to stand in their way. And the mob also got involved… it got weird after that.”

“Damn,” Loki huffed. “I will forever be enslaved to this coffee-based corporation. They make me stand all day. I must write on everyone’s cup. The orders are unnecessarily complicated and all the customers are rude. Half of my fellow workers are unbearable to be in a room with for more than fifteen seconds. And I burned myself on the espresso machine this morning.”
“Sorry, buddy, but I think you’re stuck there,” Barton said, “until they drag you back to Asgard or unless you can get fired.”

“Why would they set my husband on fire?” Sigyn asked, terrified.

“No, no,” Clint said, trying to soothe her. “It’s just an expression. We have all sorts of names for it - getting fired, let go, getting canned, sacked, axed, terminated, getting your walking papers, being destaffed, a job separation, being reorganized, getting the boot, transitioned out, deployed, getting your pink slip, being let go, having an unexpected reduction in the workforce, a victim of downsizing…”

“What exactly are you on about?’ Loki asked from where he was dramatically sprawled on the couch.

“It means that you do your job so crappy your boss tells you to not come back,” Clint shrugged. “Then you never have to come back. I mean, you’re unemployed but you don’t have to work there anymore.”

A wicked gleam came across Loki’s face and Clint just hoped Tony wouldn’t find out about this conversation.

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Despite Clint’s description of what one needed to do to be fired from their job, Loki seemed to be able to do nothing wrong in the eyes of Karl the Manager. He showed up late and left early. He did the minimal amount of work he could get by with. He had tried writing mean things on the cups, but no one in Manhattan could tell the difference between the Asgardian runes for their names and the ones meaning “colossal bitch” or “one who fornicates with goats.” When he somehow managed to set a very expensive coffee press on fire, he actually got a clap on the back from Karl as they had been trying to get a new one out of corporate for six months. His snarky attitude, quick-witted insults toward customers and announcing that he was going to personally spit into every third drink they served that day actually did more to endear him to his co-workers.

Loki had even captured a mouse in preparation to let it loose on the coffee shop during his shift, but his plot had been discovered by Sigyn when the mouse popped up out of his pocket. The result was Tony finding out about Sigyn’s mouse pet two days later and having to find some sort of mouse rescue to take the creature on. Loki continued half-assing his job for about two more weeks before he decided something drastic was needed to relieve him of his employment. He quickly ruled out suggestions the handheld talking box known as a StarkPad had found for him such as putting bodily fluids into the coffee makers or leaving excrement in visible places. Loki also knew Sigyn would be very cross with him if he did anything that would injure someone else, such as dousing them with hot coffee.

Loki realized that his best chance was to employ his histrionic sensibilities. In the Midgardian terms Barton had taught him, Loki had to “cause a scene.” Unfortunately, on the day Loki had decided to stage his melodrama, Sigyn randomly decided to accompany Clint and Tony for breakfast at the coffeehouse. Loki had already worked up his courage both to tell the coworkers he liked - Claudette, Garth, Bonzo and Demarcus - what he was going to do as well as the courage to make the major display he had been planning in the first place. He just had to wait for the right moment.

“Hey, Loren,” Karl said to him. “We’ve got some orders up.”

“And?” Loki said from where he had been leaning against the counter all morning, waiting for the chance to strike.
“Aren’t you…” Karl said, miming the motion of writing on the cup, “doing the writing thing?”

“No,” Loki snarled.

“What?” Karl meeped.

“I said no,” Loki said, becoming louder and starting to draw attention from the other patrons as well as his co-workers. “I am tired of you exploiting my cultural heritage for profit!”

“Dude, calm down,” Harrington said. “It’s not a big deal…”

“Not a big deal? Not a big deal?” Loki hissed. He then jumped up on the counter and began kicking things off of it. “Not a big deal that I am being exploited for my foreignness?” kick “That I am forced to deal with insipid caffeine addicts who treat me as if I am no more competent than your average sewer rat?” kick “Who promenade about with their complicated confections - not realizing they are consuming twice their daily caloric intake - as they head off to hot yoga or the farmers’ market under some pretense of being a good person?” kick “My ancestors were the first Western civilization to make landfall on this gods-forsaken continent, and no one cares! They all credit that racist, venereally-diseased Italian!”

“Dude,” Harrington said, trying to diffuse the situation despite the fact that everyone knew he was just making it worse, “it’s okay. Just come back down off the counter.”

Loki responded by kicking Harrington in the face, inadvertently using his full god-like force, and knocking Harrington back into the brand-new espresso machine. The force of the Harrington-shaped dent into the espresso machine and the force of the other barista’s body sent the machine back into the brick wall behind it, sending a massive crack up the wall and toward the ceiling. Harrington, for his part, just kind of slumped over like a ragdoll, seeming to think if he played dead no one would bother him.

“Loren! Times Square!” Karl said mournfully. “We have to beat Times Square!”

“You are all cogs in the corporate wheel!” Loki shouted and then proceeded to destroy whatever he could get his hands on in the room, Karl the Manager chasing after him the entire time.

“Should we be doing something about this?” Clint asked Tony curiously. He looked over to find an elated Tony filming the entire thing with his StarkPhone.

With most of the coffee machines destroyed - no one could figure out where Loki had found the baseball bat he used to bash up the French press - Loki then turned to pelting the various pastries on display at the alarmed patrons and his laughing co-workers. He jumped back up onto the counter and recited a bit of the Communist Manifesto, causing Bonzo to wake up from the breakroom and attempt to start a slow clap. Sigyn attempted to calm her husband down, not knowing exactly what he was trying to do but knowing if SHIELD found out it might not be good. Loki, instead, pulled her up onto the counter with him and promptly shoved his tongue down her throat. He then gathered his wife into his arms and announced to everyone that sometime during his tenure, the pair of them had sexual congress on the main counter and against Vince and Harrington’s lockers in the backroom before closing up for the night. While she seemed completely mortified, Tony noted that Sigyn never actually attempted to deny any of these allegations.

At first, Karl seemed ready to forgive Loki’s antics as an apparent and sudden complete and total mental breakdown. However, when Loki took a can of whipped cream and used it to spray a smiley face atop Karl’s bald head, the manager realized his formerly favorite employee had taken things a bit too far. Loki was not only fired but informed he was not welcome within this or any other green
mermaid logoed coffee store in the Greater New York City area for the foreseeable future. His final check would be mailed to him. Loki accepted his firing by somehow producing a lighter and setting fire to his uniform right in the center of the store, fleeing back to the safety of Stark Tower in only his black jeans and black boots, pulling a mystified, slightly angry, but entirely enthralled Sigyn along behind him.

The firing of Loren Olsen would eventually become a fairy tale in the lore of Manhattan baristas. No one had ever made a more spectacular exit, and there were several who were certain the entire thing was too good to be true, even as the footage made its rounds on the Internet and eventually afternoon news channels with a good ten seconds of air to fill. There were even more who insisted it wasn’t made up because they were there. Even Fury - who was surprisingly more mad at Tony for getting Loki a minimum wage job among civilians without telling SHIELD than he was at Loki for his meltdown - seemed mildly impressed by the way Loki had single-handedly destroyed most of the coffeeshop’s equipment without the aid of his magic. Of course, the departure of Loren Olsen wasn’t the only strange thing that happened at the major corporate coffee retailer outside of Stark Tower. Within a month of Olsen’s departure, the entire staff of the shop seemed to have gained a reversal in fortunes.

Cordelia’s father was found out to be behind one of the worst Ponzi schemes since Bernie Madoff, was arrested, and without his income and with all his accounts frozen, Cordelia found herself living in Queens and finishing her senior year at a public high school. She also, apparently, became a much nicer person. Harrington found that no major publishing house and several of the minor ones rejected his MFA novel outright, calling it both “laughably outlandish” and “thematically juvenile.” He ended up self-publishing it to dismal reviews. Vince was arrested after a fourteen-year-old girl he tried to hook up with online turned out to be a fifty-three-year-old former Marine and current FBI agent. And yet, despite his less than genial attitude and bitter resentment toward the world, fate finally decided to give him a break and Karl the Manager found himself promoted to Karl the District Manager, who was now able to properly lord it over Tim from the Times Square store.

Those co-workers who actually had gotten along with Loren Olsen also found their lives improved. Demarcus found himself the surprise recipient of a Maria Stark Foundation Scholarship he hadn’t applied for, which would be enough to cover his room, board, and tuition well through grad school. Stark Industries then snapped up an app Garth and some of his online friends had been developing, aimed at helping people find emergency shelters and safe places in case of freak natural disasters or super villain attacks, and making all five of the nerds Internet millionaires overnight. Claudette nailed a long-shot audition and found herself up for a Tony the next year, a brilliant stage and film career on the horizon. Bonzo, as it turned out, was the nephew of the major coffee retailer’s current Brooklyn-born CEO, and so he didn’t need any magical help. However, his family were a bit dismayed when he came home and announced he was returning to college to study Norse mythology.

Tony Stark had to admit that Loki always seemed to land on his feet as well. While working in the coffee shop may not have helped him earn an appreciation for the minimum wage workers of Midgard, it did make him the best coffee maker in the entire Avengers Tower. Even more amazing was how Loki had utilized his newfound coffee making skills to flirt with his wife. Each morning, he prepared Sigyn some delicious new coffee concoction, often with a heart, a flower or the Asgardian rune for “S” written in cream at the top. She would usually giggle at whatever was presented to her, give her husband a kiss and then begin sipping on the drink. Loki would occasionally make other Tower residents drinks too, if he was feeling generous and hadn’t been asked.

All in all, Tony decided Loki didn’t exactly have a bad run as a barista and probably lasted longer than even Iron Man himself would have. Of course, there were far more humiliating jobs out there that Loki could work at to get a real, human experience. Tony made a mental note to see if he could get Loki a temp position at a toy store just in time for Black Friday. If Odin agreed to this scheme,
Tony had a feeling being Loki’s personal jailor would turn out to be the best thing he ever somewhat volunteered for. He even thought of making a scrapbook to commemorate all of the misery Loki had working in various retail positions. He wondered if Pepper would let him borrow those scissors with the curved edges.

Chapter End Notes

While Pepper mentions her birthday is in May in the MCU, the MCU isn’t consistent with the timing of her birthday. I’m putting it as Sept. 1, which was when the first issue featuring Pepper Potts appeared in Marvel comics. Jane’s is also Sept. 7 since that is when her character first appeared.
Asgardian Oktoberfest

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which Thor brings the booze and Loki brings the apologies*

In retrospect, both Pepper and Tony realized between with Sigyn’s fuss over Midsumarblót during the summer solstice and Sigyn’s birthday being consider the night of largest magic intensity on the Asgardian calendar, they probably should have realized that the autumnal equinox would be a big deal for their Asgardian houseguests. Luckily for the two of them, Bruce was more in tune with the religious practices - or lack thereof - of his fellow Tower residents and casually asked Loki and Sigyn over dinner one night if there was anything they needed to prepare for the upcoming Mabon ceremonies. Tony and Pepper looked confused - allowing Clint to steal the last roll out from under Tony’s nose - but no one looked more confused than Sigyn and Loki. Sigyn scrunched up her nose in thought for a moment and then her eyes widened when she came to a realization.

“Is that what they call it on Midgard?” Sigyn asked. “For we refer to this time as Haustblót.”

“Well, most people on Midgard just call it the autumnal equinox,” Bruce shrugged. “But Mabon is the term a lot of pagan practitioners use.”

“What is Hausblot?” Tony snorted.

“**Haustblótt,**” Loki corrected, annoyed, “is the celebration of the beginning of the harvest season. It is known as the Meadmaking Festival colloquially.”

“Oktoberfest?” Tony said, surprised, “but it’s only September!”

“Technically, Oktoberfest is the sixteen days leading up to the first weekend in October,” Clint pointed out.

“We get to have an Asgardian Oktoberfest!” Tony said to Pepper happily.

“Tony…” Pepper cautioned.

“Lemme guess… this festival entails booze and lots of it?” Tony asked happily.

“Yes,” Loki grimaced, “and drunken antics. And brawls. There is a reason why it’s Thor’s favorite holiday.”

“It is also the time when the eating of the sacred apples occurs,” Sigyn nodded. “I must admit, the Asgardian fall festivals are much more boisterous and much less solemn than the ones on Vanaheim. Though, the Vanir celebrations of the coming of spring are much more wild by comparison.”

“Yes,” Loki smirked, sending his wife a lascivious wink. He had very good memories of spring festivals in Vanaheim with his wife.

“So… you guys aren’t big on Haustblót?” Clint asked curiously.
“The whole thing is a farce,” Loki humphed.

“Loki,” Sigyn cautioned.

“Odin, the magical mystical Allfather, begins the day by using some golden scythe kept in the back of the royal treasury to cut the ceremonial first sheaf of wheat, officially declaring the harvest has begun,” Loki rolled his eyes. “It’s the closest he gets to menial labor all year. For the midday meal, Mother leads everyone in eating a piece of bread, the sacred apple, and drinking a tankard of ale to honor the work of the harvest and hope that the stores of food gathered during that time will stave off the winter. Then everyone proceeds to consume about half that store and spends the rest of the day getting drunk, hitting each other, and fornicating, even though they know it is something they will later regret. It is a good time to catch up on research in the palace library, however. So long as no one thinks to come there for an ill-planned liaison.”

“You mean to tell me you’ve never had a liaison in the palace library?” Tony snorted with a raised brow.

“Not during Haustblót,” Sigyn muttered bitterly. Tony raised both of his eyebrows at that, though Loki seemed ignorant of his wife’s comment.

“You mean to tell me that the alcohol festival - possibly the one weird Asgardian festival I could get on board with - is the one you don’t celebrate?” Tony gaped.

“Tony,” Pepper cautioned.

“It’s not fair, Pep!” Tony moaned. “It’s not fair!”

“It’s their holiday, and they can choose how to celebrate it,” Pepper replied. Tony opened his mouth again, but Pepper quickly silenced him. “And I am not letting you appropriate Asgardian culture just so you can have an excuse to get drunk.”

“How exactly do you plan to celebrate?” Bruce asked curiously. “If at all?”

“Perhaps some nice mulled apple cider and a quiet evening in,” Loki shrugged thoughtfully.

“Ugh, lame,” Tony pronounced.

“I suppose a nice, quiet evening at home wouldn’t be such a bad thing,” Sigyn admitted to her husband with a kindly smile. Loki took her hand in his own and then kissed each of his wife’s knuckles. Sigyn giggled and Loki began mentally crafting plans for their calm evening together.

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A howling storm cropped up that afternoon and while the majority of the Tower’s residents thought this was just a typical September rainfall - possibly giving way to an major Nor’easter - Loki and Sigyn could both instantly tell there was something different about this storm. It only took a few loud crashes of thunder and some spectacular and too-close-to-home lightning before Sigyn and Loki found their way onto the party deck. Certainly enough, a well-placed flash of lightning gave way first to a few shadowy figures. When the fog from the mix of rain and hot late September weather cleared, Thor was standing there, holding a barrel of mead balanced on each shoulder. Behind him were Sif, Fandral and Hogun. Sif and Hogun both had barrels of mead of their own under their arms while Fandral looked half-drunk and positively humiliated, carrying a dainty picnic basket full of apples and various apple-made treats.

“By the Nornir,” Loki cursed under his breath.
“Brother!” Thor addressed him chipperly. “Since you could not attend the celebrations at home, I have brought Haustblót to you!”

“And when will you be departing this time?” Loki asked, irked.

“Tomorrow noon,” Thor replied.

“And does Heimdall enjoy being your personal taxi service between the realms?” Loki snorted. “One might think he has better means of spending his time.”

“Be not cross, brother!” Thor chortled happily. “For today is a day of feasting and celebration!” Loki looked to Sif and Hogun, knowing they might be easier to communicate with.

“And how much has he had already today?” Loki inquired.

“Enough,” Sif admitted.

"Where is Volstagg?" Sigyn asked.

"He stayed home," Sif replied at the same time Loki muttered, "probably making another babe with his wife." Sif and Loki then proceeded to glare at each other in annoyance.

“Thor, you said there would be comely wenches here!” Fandral moaned, depressed.

“Sigyn and Lady Pepper are comely,” Thor retorted.

“I’m not a wench,” Sigyn said, annoyed. Thor offered her a lopsided grin of consolation while Loki tapped his foot angrily at his older brother.

“They are already spoken for,” Fandral sighed dramatically. “You said there would be wenches I could woo!”

“Hey!” Tony said, making his way onto the landing deck, Pepper, Banner and Barton hot on his heels. “Thor brought booze!” Thor cheerfully bounded down and set down the two massive barrels before Tony.

“The finest Asgardian meads!” Thor pronounced. Sif and Hogun followed Thor’s examples while Fandral stumbled forward with his picnic basket of apples and apple-related confections.

“Let me take that,” Sigyn said to Fandral, concerned that in his present state he would topple over and spill out the basket’s contents. Sigyn had instantly recognized the picnic basket as one belonging to her sister Idunn and could tell from the smells the treats within where Idunn’s craftsmanship as well.

“Ah, sweet Sigyn,” Fandral grinned brightly, handing her the basket and then making an intricate, flourishing bow before her. “I could never mean to insult you. My lady, Asgard’s gleam is much more dim and dull without your presence. ‘Tis a great stain on the reputation of Asgardian manhood that more of us were to blind to seek out your sweet affections before your husband swept you off your feet and bound you to his troth…”

“Fandral, I know it is in your nature to attempt to seduce anything that might have at one point possessed a pulse,” Loki grimaced, “but if you do so admire my wife, I suggest you do so silently and from afar so as not to subject her to embarrassingly rejecting your odious ardor in public. I daresay she has much more important and fulfilling things to do with her time than put you in your place.”
“The old ball and chain!” Fandral said, just as happily as he had addressed Sigyn. He clapped Loki on the back and then attempted to lean on him for support, only for Loki to brush Fandral off of himself and then brush where Fandral had patted him off his clothing. “Tell me, old chum, is Midgard treating you well?”

“You must be intoxicated,” Loki huffed, “to think we were ever friends.”

“Aaah, that classic wit!” Fandral laughed until he let out a shrill giggle. He then wandered off to greet the various Midgardians congregated around Thor and his barrels of mead.

“How hard it is to send a message ahead of time so one might prepare for Thor’s oafish presence,” Loki muttered to himself. “He is fortunate Sir Stark is a gracious host and not at all offended by his penchant for coming and going as he pleases with nary a word to those who would shelter and feed him during his stays that he might be coming.”

“Come my love,” Sigyn said, sensing her husband was on edge, “I believe Idunn has managed to tuck more into this basket than I realized. I will need some help retrieving and organizing it all.” Still casting angry looks at where Thor was educating his Midgardian compatriots about Haustblót, Loki dutifully followed his wife and began helping her sort out the various apple treats Idunn had sent for the celebration.

“I am totally down for apple and beer night,” Tony exclaimed happily to Thor, drawing Loki’s attention from where Sigyn was arranging various apple tarts and pies. “I’ll get us some steak wrapped in applewood smoked bacon to celebrate. It’ll be great! Let’s do this!”

“Well,” Loki grumbled to Sigyn in annoyance. “So much for our quiet evening in.”

Loki sneered behind his glass of mulled apple cider as he surveyed the antics of those around him. Fandral was falling all over himself flirting with some of the catering staff who had brought up the various foods Stark had ordered for the meal. Hogun seemed to be the only one keeping an eye on Fandral from behind his own cup of cider. His face flushed red, Thor was drunkenly teaching his Midgardian friends one of his favorite dwarven drinking songs while Sif and Sigyn discussed the latest gossip from Vanaheim over their own tankards of ale. Pepper seemed to be eavesdropping on them slightly while working away at something on her StarkPad.

Had this been the typical Haustblót festivities on Asgard, Loki would have long abandoned the drunken revelries for the silence of his own personal inner sanctum, most likely spending the evening experimenting with new potions, catching up on diplomatic correspondence, reading the latest texts on a variety of subjects or working on one of the myriad of projects he usually had ongoing. He was very tempted at this very moment to abandon Thor’s impromptu Midgardian Haustblót celebrations and head back to his chambers to do basically anything but listening to Thor’s drunken singing and encouragement of his friends to ingest more of the Asgardian mead their Midgardian constitutions were obviously unsuited for.

The only reason why Loki hadn’t bolted for his rooms at the first possible moment was Sigyn. She was always much more social than he was and seemed to get along with everyone. And despite Thor’s gatecrashing and luring of his Midgardian friends into a veritable cabal of drunken shenanigans, Sigyn seemed to be enjoying herself. For the life of him, Loki never could seem to figure out how Sigyn managed to find a semblance of enjoyment in festivities like these. That fact that Thor was slamming himself around the room, butchering a few verses of Sigyn’s musical heritage made the situation even more perplexing. Yet there she was, nibbling on some of her sister’s apple confections and listening to Sif’s latest tales from the Asgardian court.
Apparently bored with teaching everyone dwarven drinking songs, Thor instructed Jarvis to queue up the playlist of traditional Celtic and Scandinavian songs Thor enjoyed so much when he was on Midgard. Thor then announced that he was going to teach his Midgardian friends some traditional Asgardian harvest dances. Pepper used this as an excuse to leave the room, citing an early meeting the following morning and a need to get to bed. Bruce also seemed ready to duck out from the shenanigans, but found himself clapped on the back by both Thor and Tony and then forbidden to leave until he had learned at least one dance.

Thor paired the group ups together, putting Bruce and Sigyn together, Tony with Sif, Clint with Hogun and Fandral with himself. Fandral let out a slight whine that he was going to have to do the feminine part of the dance and again complained to Thor about the lack of comely wenches in the tower. Tony offered to call up some model friends of his, but Thor then decided that Fandral could teach Clint to dance and he himself could partner with Hogun. For his part, Hogun didn’t seem to care one way or another who he was dancing with. Loki was certain Hogun was more focused on how Thor was going to make this situation humiliating. One of the things Loki liked about Hogun is that he sometimes had the good sense to let Thor do something stupid on his own and then be there to laugh when things went wrong. Hogun was also one of the few of Thor’s friends who actually seemed to think before he spoke, and when he did have something to say, it was usually valuable to listen to it.

The fact that half the participants were inebriated and that two thirds of them had never participated in the wild twirling, quick-paced partner-changing dances of the Asgardian harvest festival meant that Thor’s attempt at teaching quickly devolved into drunken stumblings and laughter. Bruce was at least attempting to learn the steps from Sigyn while Sif found herself more trying to keep Tony upright than help him dance. Clint, who had a fair amount of square dancing experience, was faring much better than Fandral, who had done this type of dancing all of his life. Hogun had casually let go of Thor and then just stood off to the side, letting the Crown Prince of Asgard drunkenly twirl around on his own for a while. The last semblances of the dance devolved into uproarious drunken laughter when Clint spun Fandral straight into a large ornamental vase, which then cracked and spilled dirt and some type of fern out all over the floor.

“Well, I suppose that is as good a sign as any to call things a night,” Loki announced, standing up and heading toward Sigyn to collect her.

“Come brother!” Thor said happily, having somehow manifested another tankard of ale and sloshing it around. “The night is young.” Loki sidestepped to avoid a small puddle of ale Thor had just made on the floor.

“Then let it age without me,” Loki informed Thor snippily.

“Ah, come on Lokes,” Tony slurred, putting his arm around Loki as best he could. “We’re just having some fun! Don’t be an ol’ stick in the mud!”

“As you are obviously inebriated, I will allow you the courtesy of removing your hand from my personage on your own instead of removing it for you,” Loki informed him.

“Sheesh, you’re touchy, or not as the case may be...” Tony grumbled, removing his arm from Loki then offering up his stein of honey mead. “You need this more than the rest of us so you can lighten up.”

“A require nothing you have to offer,” Loki replied before turning to his wife. “Sigyn, I believe it is time for us to retire for the evening.”

“Go ahead,” Sigyn waved him off. “I will join you later.”
“Sigyn…” Loki began, again annoyed.

“I said I would join you later,” Sigyn said dismissively.

“Come, Sigyn,” Loki ordered, ready to sweep out of the room.

“I am not a dog, Loki,” Sigyn said, annoyed. “Do not expect me to come when called like some well-trained pet.”

“Please do not make me ask again,” Loki said to her through gritted teeth. Sigyn eyed him up and then gave a dismissive toss of her hair.

“I am not tired and do not wish to retire for the evening,” Sigyn informed him. “You may do so if you like. I will be down later.”

Biting back a tart retort, Loki quickly turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. He wished he could teleport himself back to his chambers, but instead found himself stewing in the elevator as he waited for it to descend. He wasn’t sure if it was his fury or if the means of conveyance was traveling slower than usual. Upon arriving back in his chambers, Loki strode forward, paced back, and then picked up vase on the table next to him. It wasn’t of any value. Some trinket he had spied once in a shop and thought Sigyn might like. Without a second thought, he hurled it toward the wall. Despite what he had hoped, watching it shatter did nothing to make him feel better.

Rather than destroy any more personal property, Loki took to pacing back and forth in the living area until Sigyn returned home. Skata occasionally squawked at him in annoyance, seeming to indicate that Loki’s pacing was making it hard for his mate to get to sleep. While Skara didn’t express any of her own annoyance, Loki could tell she was watching him pace back and forth with a modicum of suspicion. It seemed like an eternity but was really only a little under an hour when Sigyn danced into the room, obviously a little bit tipsy on the mead Thor had brought. For some reason, this grated on Loki’s nerves.

“Where have you been?” Loki demanded angrily.

“You know exactly where I’ve been,” Sigyn retorted just as angrily.

“Oh yes,” Loki spat. “You’ve been with Thor. But why wouldn’t you be? He always succeeds in making everything about himself!”

“If anyone has been making things all about Thor, it has been you!” Sigyn snorted. “You are forever blaming him for everything that goes wrong, and you are so busy watching his behavior, cataloging his wrongs, and trying to convince others of his faults that you pay no mind or thoughts to your own actions! If Thor is so responsible for your every misdeed, your every torment, then he must be the most powerful being alive!”

“So, is that it now? You prefer him to me?” Loki challenged.

“You speak nonsense,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “you are so blinded by your hatred that you cannot enjoy anything that Thor might also find pleasing.”

“Like you,” Loki growled.

“Like hogwash,” Sign glared back. “If something were to ever drive us apart, it wouldn’t be Thor but your own actions.”
“Oh, yes, I’m the one to blame here,” Loki huffed. “Not the one who showed up invited and then got everyone soused in a pathetic attempt at introducing some ‘traditions’ into this Tower. I am the one who is uncouth and out of order here.”

“Do you even care?” Sigyn asked, near tears. “Do you even care why I wanted to stay?”

“Why in the Nine would you want to participate in such a farce as Thor’s drunken attempt at a Midgardian Haustblót festival?” Loki snorted. “What could possibly compel you to think it would be a good idea?”

“Loki, who organizes Haustblót each year for the palace of Asgard?” Sigyn asked him, her voice with an icy edge to it.

“My mother,” Loki snorted.

“No,” Sigyn shook her head. “Your mother hasn’t organized a Haustblót festival since before we were married. She handed that duty over to my sister Idunn once she became the official keeper of the royal orchard. Every year since then, Idunn has taken on the main responsibilities for the festivities, though she seeks out our help and advice from time to time. The year Idis was born Nanna, Var, Syn, Snotra and I chipped in quite a bit…”

“Sigyn…” Loki began.

“You know Haustblót was the first major festival we attended in Asgard after we were brought there?” Sigyn continued. “I remember it very well. I was very small and things were very bright and loud and frightening. Certainly, I had encountered such behavior in a dwarven mead hall before, but never such behavior from those so much larger than myself. But Idunn was there and she was a friendly face. She was much older than the rest of us and kindly explained all about the way the harvest was celebrated on Asgard and then she took us into the orchards and we played hide and seek until it was time for us to be sent to bed.”

“You’ve never told me that story before, Sigyn,” Loki pointed out.

“It isn’t just Thor’s favorite holiday, Loki,” Sigyn said. “It has always been Idunn’s as well. And for me… for me and my sisters, too, I suppose, it has a different meaning than just the harvest. It is a time that we were reunited, a celebration that requires us to spend time together. To us, I suppose it is about what little family we have close to us and keeping them close to us. I guess I have been feeling a little homesick lately, and by bringing the celebrations here… well, I think Thor was just trying to give us a little bit of home back.”

“I’ve never known you or any of your sisters to celebrate Haustblót by getting embarrassingly inebriated,” Loki pointed out with a scoff. As soon as the words left his lips, he knew it was the wrong thing to say to his wife. Sigyn glared at him furiously and then pulled something into her pockets. She handed it to him and Loki unfolded the paper.

“I found this in the bottom of Idunn’s basket she sent us,” Sigyn informed Loki. “She said Idis sent it for you.” Loki looked down at the childish drawing depicting himself and Sigyn as well as Jor, Kolr, Fenrir and magpies Skara and Skata. In her uneven and slightly misspelled runic script, Idis had written “Have fun in Midgard” and signed her name at the bottom of the page.

“She definitely has artistic talent,” Loki muttered.

“Yes,” Sigyn said, before storming off toward the bedroom. “Perhaps you can better admire it from the sofa where you will be sleeping tonight.”
With a whiff of seiðr, Sigyn closed the door behind herself. Loki didn’t need to check to know it was magically locked. Had he been in possession of his own magic, he might have unlocked it and then attempted to seduce his wife into a better mood. As it was, he sat down on the divan behind him, Idis’ drawing still in his hands. From the corner of the room, Skata and Skara both angrily squawked from where they were cuddled up together in their cage. It was obvious they were very disappointed with their master’s handling of the situation before him.

“Yes, yes,” Loki muttered to them. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

Waking up the next morning, Tony and Clint found they had hangovers similar to how rattled their brains would probably feel if Thor personally smashed them over the head with Mjolnir. Even Bruce, who had only had about half a cup of the Asgardian mead to be polite, felt like he had just come through some kind of meat grinder. But the worst part was the sound of banging pots and pans coming from the communal kitchen that was sending a loud ringing through all of their heads. Slowly, the group one up one by one and made their way into the kitchen, finding Loki going through all the drawers of pots, pans and various kitchenware like a madman.

“Dude,” Clint moaned, “can you not?”

“What is going on?” Tony grimaced.

“Is there nothing of use here!” Loki grumbled, tossing a cake pan over his shoulder and having it narrowly miss Fandral’s head.

“What are you looking for?” Bruce asked, curiously.

“There isn’t a decent cake pan in here!” Loki huffed.

“For what?” Bruce prompted.

“Apple cake,” Loki huffed.

“You’re going to make an apple cake?” Sif asked Loki, confused. Fandral and Thor burst out laughing at this, only for Loki to lob a cookie tray at them, narrowly missing Thor but striking Fandral in the gut. Hogun laughed at that.

“What is going on?” Tony demanded to know. “Why are you up at the ungodly hour of… holy shit, it’s nine in the morning…”

“I have to make Sigyn an apple cake!” Loki said dramatically.

“What did you do?” Sif asked with a groan.

“What makes you think I did something?” Loki shot back.

“You left in a huff last night,” Sif pointed out, “and Sigyn’s mood was not much better when she departed.”

“What happened, brother?” Thor asked worriedly.

“You! You are what happened!” Loki fumed. “Sigyn and I had planned a nice quiet even with some mulled cider, apple cakes and no boisterous shenanigans. Then you showed up with your casks of ale, your drunken friends, and your utter disregard for the plans of others. And now my wife is not
speaking to me and I have to sleep on the sofa because you cannot leave well enough alone. You must simply stick your big, fat nose into everything and assume everyone is willing to go along with whatever half-brained scheme you have cooked up this time!”

“Loki…” Thor began.

“Did you not once stop to think how rude your sudden appearance here was?” Loki continued. “Stark had no way of expecting you would come, and yet you crash into his house and upend the entire evening, never stopping to check if anyone else had plans or things that they needed to do.”

“Hey, come on,” Tony insisted. “Don’t drag me into this. And Thor knows he’s always welcome here…”

“I meant no malice by what I did,” Thor said, trying to stay calm and not be drawn into his brother’s anger. “If I upset anyone or did anything rude, I apologize, but what I did I did because I wanted to show you some kindness. There is much of home you are missing during this exile, and I had hoped that bringing a bit of it back to you would help.”

“You should know by now that Asgard was never truly my home,” Loki spat.

“Come now, brother, you cannot mean that,” Thor insisted. “Haustblót is a great time of togetherness and revelry! You’ve always enjoyed it!”

“That shows how little you know of me,” Loki growled back. “If you had been paying attention all these years, you would know that Haustblót is my least favorite celebration and that I only stay long enough that Mother considers I have put in an appearance before disappearing off to my rooms for the rest of the night. However, I suppose you have always been too busy with your drunken revelries and asinine games during this festival to ever take stock of the fact that this is the one holiday I simply loathe.”

“He is right,” Hogun spoke up suddenly. “I’ve never known Loki to stay past the first few toasts.”

“He usually swipes a tray of desserts and heads up to the libraries or his rooms,” Sif agreed.

“Save for that one year he snuck a laxative into some of the mead barrels and waited around to see what would happen,” a still somewhat drunken Fandral laughed from the floor where the cake pan had felled him. “That was a fun year. The Allfather was so angry I could have sworn is functional eye was going to pop out of his head.”

“Dude,” Clint said to Loki, extending his fist for a fist bump. “Props.” Loki looked tiredly down at Clint’s hand, but knowing the archer wouldn’t relent, he sighed and returned the gesture.

“I am sorry I ruined your plans, brother,” Thor said finally. “I did not mean to do so, and I am sorry I did not realize you felt this way about Haustblót. I obviously still have much to learn about you and further to go to make things right. And I will start now with helping you repair things with Sigyn. Perhaps we should…”

“If you are about to finish that sentence with ‘make her breakfast’ I’m going to shut this thing down,” Tony shook his head. “I just replaced the stove you electrocuted the last time the two of you were let loose in the kitchen up here, and while Pepper and I both secretly love all those HGTV shows, I think having to completely remodel this brand new building twice in one year is enough for both of us.”

“Dually noted,” Loki frowned. “No, I shall apologize myself. I shall slip her a letter under the door and then, if she is agreeable, we shall all take her out for the Midgardian ritual meal known as
“Brunch?” Fandral and Sif as at the same time, confused.

“Ah, brunch,” Thor agreed happily. “It is a most delightful Midgardian meal held between breaking one’s fast and the midday meal.”

“No… it’s supposed to be a meal you have instead of those two meals in between them,” Tony frowned. He looked over at Barton, who was playing Candy Crush on his phone. “Have you been giving them bad American culture lessons?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Clint snorted. “I always eat brunch between breakfast and lunch.”

“Whatever,” Tony sighed. “I’ll go get us a room reserved at the Garden at the Four Seasons. Reindeer Boy, you go fire up that magic quill and craft a helluva apology.”

“If I had the magic quill,” Loki muttered under his breath, “I probably wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.”

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Tony, Bruce and Thor all offered to proofread Loki’s apology note before he handed it over to Sigyn, but Tony and Bruce gave up when they realized it was written in runes and the only person in the room who knew the magic Asgardian rune to English conversion spell was the one person currently not in possession of his seiðr. Thor gave up after the third paragraph, citing the increasing nature of both the sexual undertones and overtones in the letter as discomforting. Fandral took it from Thor’s hands and approved it, but then Sif snatched it and pointed out a split infinitive in the fourth graph. Over Sif’s shoulder, Hogun also pointed out a dangling modifier. Angrily, Loki snatched the letter back and headed off to send it under the still locked bedroom door.

Forty-five minutes later, the group found themselves in a backroom at the Garden. Loki and Sigyn were the only members of the Asgardian continent not dressed in festival wear that smelled like alcohol. Loki had donned one of his expensive suits while Sigyn was in one of the fancy, flowing couture gowns she had ordered. Pepper had come along in a nice skirt and suit set while Tony and Bruce each wore suit jackets, t-shirts and jeans. Oddly enough, Clint was the one who seemed most out of place in the restaurant, donning sunglasses, a tac suit and fuzzy bunny slippers he didn’t realize he had forgotten to exchange for his boots until the food arrived.

Sigyn still wasn’t talking directly to Loki at the end of this apology breakfast, which Tony realized was going to set him back a pretty penny. He, Thor, and Fandral had all gotten hanger steaks with eggs while Sif and Hogun had each ordered the branzino with pommery emulsion and grapefruit and fennel salad on the side. Loki had stuck to the relatively cheaper haricot vert smoked Catskill trout with Bibb hearts in a tarragon vinaigrette, letting Sigyn nibble from his plate. However, Sigyn had unusually ordered two dishes as if she needed the extra food to fuel her anger. In addition to picking apart most of her husband’s brunch, Sigyn had gotten both the Catskill smoked salmon pizzette with wasabi cream and shaved onion and the brie stuffed French toast with berry compote. Not even the restaurant’s indoor trees seemed to be putting Sigyn at ease. Everyone at the table - save for Clint who was too busy chugging $13 buck a cup coffee - could feel the tension between the couple.

Before the check could come, Sigyn announced that she and Loki would be leaving the meal early in order to do some shopping. Loki didn’t protest, merely rising up from behind his wife and waiting patiently for her to lead the way. With a sigh, Tony handed over his credit card. Thor offered to go with them on this venture, but Sigyn suggested Sif accompany them if she and Loki needed someone
to monitor them. Tony then insisted that they take an actual Midgardian along just in case, and Sigyn asked Pepper to come along in that case. The reason why became ultimately clear an hour and thirty minutes later when the three women returned to the Tower, followed behind by Happy, Loki and two other security guards carrying enough Victoria’s Secret bags to keep all three women in new undergarments for the better part of a year. Tony was not at all displeased to learn that about a third of the bags belonged to Pepper and vowed he would take everyone out for expensive brunches each Sunday morning if it kept Pepper in sexy underthings.

Only one of the bags belonged to Sif, who lamented the fact that - while appealing and somewhat more supportive than Asgardian underthings - Midgardian lingerie had no modifications useful for the storage of weapons. Hogun merely nodded his head at this pronouncement while Thor blushed bright red, embarrassed at the mere thought of Sif’s underthings being discussed so publicly - even if by Sif herself. It was the same look Thor got on his face whenever Sigyn or Frigga talked about underthings or anything remotely sexual in nature. Fandral, for his part, asked if he could get a demonstration in Midgardian lingerie. In response, Sif threw a pair of pink sweatpants at him and suggested he get on with it.

For his part, Loki was trying not to look too smug or excited by the fact that his wife had purchased an entire new trousseau of Midgardian underthings and nightwear in a variety of delectable fabrics, patterns and cuts. As entertaining as it was to watch Thor turn prudish when women he considered to be sisters discussed underwear or for Fandral to try and wedge himself into a pair of Sif’s lounge pants with "Juicy" written on the posterior, Loki was much more eager to get his wife and her new purchases back to the privacy of their rooms. However, Thor stopped him from doing so, coming to speak to Loki and Sigyn just before the headed back toward the elevator and their rooms with Sigyn’s collected bags.

“We shall be returning now,” Thor said to Loki uneasily, “now that Fandral has recovered from the last of his ill effects of the previous evening.”

“May your journey be safe,” Sigyn nodded to him.

“I promise that I will send forewarning before my next arrival,” Thor pledged. “You were right, Loki. It was rude of me to expect Sir Stark to host us without taking into account he might have other plans or duties to attend to. I should not assume my own whims are more important than the plans of others, especially not those I would call friends.”

“I wouldn’t send an eagle,” Loki informed Thor. “Stark is apparently not partial to them, despite their being the symbol of his nation state and his shield-bearing compatriot.”

“So I have heard,” Thor nodded. A farewell was on the tip of Thor’s tongue when Loki again spoke up, shifting the bags into one hand so he could pull something from his coat pocket.

“Would you see Idis gets this?” Loki asked Thor as he handed him the neatly wrapped present. “And if her mother asks, it is a toy horse and a doll, not confections. Sigyn and I promised her a gift from Midgard, and I don’t want her to think we’ve forgotten her.”

“You promised her a gift from Midgard,” Sigyn pointed out.

“You picked out the toy horse,” Loki smirked back at his wife.

“She will be delighted,” Thor grinned.

“Say hello to Mother for me,” Loki continued.
“I shall,” Thor nodded.

“And…” Loki began. He trailed off, frowned, and then began again when he saw Sigyn’s encouraging smile out of the corner of his eye. “thank you for attempting to lessen our homesickness, even if you went about it in… your own strange way.”

“You will both be home sooner than we all realize,” Thor said comfortingly. “After all, things in the palace are getting rather boring. I think the Allfather might call you back early just to stop everyone from falling asleep during court proceedings.”

“I suppose they have grown soft and lazy without my tricks to keep them on their toes,” Loki scoffed. “Though you think keeping Asgard running smoothly would be enough motivation to keep Odin’s councilors from falling asleep at their posts.”

“You’ve obviously not heard the latest, most absolutely riveting reports on grain production,” Thor rolled his eyes.

“How will I ever endure,” Loki laughed. Thor reached his hand forward and Loki clasped him on the forearm, shaking it once. Thor then mock saluted his brother and headed back to his friends to get them ready for their departure.

“It is nice to see the two of you getting along again,” Sigyn said as she and Loki headed into the elevator. “Despite what you think, I have always believed Thor has always thought of you as not only his brother but his best friend.”

“Well, he has a funny way of showing it sometimes,” Loki snorted.

“So do you,” Sigyn pointed out with a grin.

“Come now, my love,” Loki said, changing the subject, “let us go see which one of your new purchases best compliments you.”
Loki and Sigyn had been in residence for about five months when the infestation of stray cats at the Avenger’s Tower began.

It started small enough with a couple of homeless cats attempting to sneak their way into the building’s lobby. It wasn’t that unusual for there to be stray animals around downtown Manhattan and when the weather started to turn colder - which it was - these animals often tried to stay warm by any means necessary. The first cat that relentlessly evaded security and managed to get into the lobby was taken home by one of the lonely receptionists in the front lobby, and the incident faded into memory.

However, when three stray cats rushed the building and led the lobby floor security team on a Benny Hill-type chase through the ground floor, something seemed a little odd. The security footage was leaked - possibly by one Tony Stark himself - and went viral within 48 hours of the incident. Concern from animal rights activists prompted Pepper to begrudgingly make a statement that the two cats who were captured had been checked for tags and microchips before they had been sent home with loving Stark Industry employees. The third remained at large. Mostly everyone laughed it off, save for the security detail who were still nursing their bruised egos.

By the end of the next week, the feline-related incidents would be no laughing matter. It was become rapidly apparent that the arrival of cats at Stark Tower was not confined to the ground floor, and it almost seemed like the furry creatures were banding together in a coordinated attack against the daily working lives and general sanity of the tower’s employees. First, a senior accountant opened his door only to step on cat feces and then find a fluffy ragdoll cuddled up on his desk. The accountant’s cat allergy made it hard for him to initially communicate what had happened. Then, four calicos nabbed a tuna sandwich from one of the break room refrigerators and led an entry level data input specialist on a wild goose chase through the twelfth floor. On the third day of the cataclysm, the men’s bathroom closest to the elevator on the twenty-fourth floor was deemed off limits because of the vicious Maine coon guarding it. A phantom Manx cat had been spotted on the thirty-first floor, playing with shiny decor on desks and coughing up hairballs into chairs before flitting away once it was spotted.

The Avengers themselves soon found they were not immune to the catastrophe overtaking the tower. Clint was the first to have an encounter. It was in the air ducts, of all places, where he had built a secret nest stashed with some of his favorite snacks - the kind that always seemed to disappear out of the communal fridge, especially when Thor was about. After seeing his secret snack stash had been broken into and his cans of sardines missing, he went to find the culprit only for two massive Norwegian Forest cats to chase him through the ventilation system. He ended up taking an emergency exit via falling from the ceiling onto the floor in a room where Pepper and Tony were talking. He didn’t bother to tell either one of them what had happened; they wouldn’t believe him.

Steve was next. He had come back to New York briefly for the weekend to visit his parents’ and
Bucky’s graves to make sure they were being taken care of and decorated. He had slept overnight in the tower and awoke to something bumping him and licking him in the face. He was startled to meet the eyes of an equally confused brown Scottish fold, much like the stray one Becky Barnes had tried to convince her parents to adopt after she and Bucky found it wandering in the rain one evening. Steve had picked up the cat and brought it into breakfast in the common room, but no one had any idea where it had come from. The cat had gone home with one of Stark Industries accountants, who had three daughters under the age of eight at home.

Tony checked the security footage and couldn’t find any sign of the cat entering the lobby, going up the elevator to the restricted Avenger’s section and coming out. It was as though the cat had mysteriously appeared in Steve’s room. The next morning, Natasha arrived to breakfast with a Russian blue under one arm and a black Turkish Angora under the other. There was still no way of telling how they had gotten into her room, though both creatures seemed particularly fond of their temporary roommate. It was then that Clint finally confessed to his air duct encounter.

Bruce and Tony were the next victims. Coming into the lab at four o’clock in the morning, both of them assumed they just hadn’t drunk enough coffee when they saw eight cats milling around the lab. Bruce counted a Siamese, Burmese, Abyssinian, Birman, Himalayan, Cornish Rex, Bombay, and Tonkinese among the creatures walking over lab results and knocking precious instruments onto the ground. Trying to coax them all out of the lab and away from the research material was literally like herding cats. It was then Tony called an emergency meeting of his security staff and his larger staff in general. There had to be something behind the cat invasion, but no one on his staff seemed to know what that was. With everyone employed at the Avenger’s Tower now fully engaged in the game of cat and mouse with the felines, Tony decided to see if his fellow Avengers had any ideas. He even managed to get Steve and Natasha on a teleconference from D.C.

“This stuff’s the cat’s pajamas,” Steve mentioned, flipping through an illustrated children’s book on how computers work Tony had sent him somewhat as a joke.

“That’s sort of why I have called you all here today,” Tony nodded. “The tower has been invaded… by felines.”

“You’re still having the cat problem?” Natasha frowned.

“They destroyed my lab!” Tony fumed.

“They knocked over a few things and possibly tampered with some results, but nothing that will be hard to replicate,” Bruce corrected. “But there is a definite issue. And the dander is getting to some people…” Clint let out a huge sneeze. The leftover fur in the ventilation system was not helping his allergy.

“You’ve checked the building to make sure it’s secure, right? No uncontrolled entrances or exits?” Steve asked.

“I have, the security team has, and JARVIS did a sweep,” Tony groaned.

“You made sure to look for small areas,” Natasha mentioned. “Cats can squeeze through some pretty tight areas if they want.”

“Everything!” Tony groaned.

“Maybe we should start laying traps,” Clint grumbled, getting an eyebrow raise from everyone. “I wouldn’t mind putting a few of those hairball coughing, bird-killing…”
“There is more than one way to skin a… you know,” Steve suggested. “Figuratively speaking, of course.”

“Humane traps then,” Clint snorted.

“It doesn’t help to trap them if they’re still getting in,” Bruce shook his head. “It’s like killing flies but not getting rid of the rotten meat they’re coming from. It doesn’t do any good.”

“Does SHIELD have any information on any super villains that can mind control felines or something?” Tony asked. Natasha messed around on her StarkPad for a bit.

“Get this,” she snorted. “There is some sort of cat burglar in Manhattan known as the Black Cat… but it’s more of a Robin Hood type thing. Robs from the rich… well, doesn’t exactly give to the poor. SHIELD believes she’s Felicia Hardy, originally from Flushing, a former Olympic gymnastics contender who had a spell of bad luck. Broke her ankle right before nationals, dropped out of Empire State after being drugged and sexually assaulted in one of the college’s bathrooms… Administration didn’t do anything because the guy was on the football team…”

“Jeez,” Steve said in disgust.

“Went off the radar and now she fits the profile of his burglar,” Natasha shrugged. “But no cat manipulation abilities listed.”

“I wouldn’t rule her out just yet,” Tony shrugged.

“JARVIS has been uncharacteristically quiet,” Bruce mentioned.

“Yeah, cat got his tongue?” Clint smirked before going off into a sneezing fit.

“Anything to report, JARVIS?” Tony asked.

“Sir, there seems to be no consistency in when or where these felines or appearing or even the type of cat that is found in the Tower,” JARVIS explained. “In fact, the only thing the cats have in common is where they don’t appear.”

“And where is that?” Tony asked.

“The suite Prince Loki and Princess Sigyn have occupied,” JARVIS said, pulling up on a screen an image of a couple felines running toward the pair’s door and then jumping back as if scalded.

“It looks as though they’ve got some sort of forcefield around the door,” Natasha commented. “Something that stops cats from coming in…”

“More like a spell,” Steve grimaced.


“I think I owe my special guests a visit,” Tony remarked, getting up from his seat.

When Tony opened the elevator, he found a ragamuffin already inside, licking itself. With a sigh, he walked in and hit the button for Sigyn and Loki’s floor. The cat stopped its grooming and stood up, almost as if at attention. With all of the mild inconvenience turned seemingly unending annoyance the pack of wild cats had created for Stark Industries, Tony was starting to believe that the ability to...
control animals wasn’t as lame of a superpower as he had once thought. When he arrived at Sigyn and Loki’s door, he heard faint giggling from the inside. Part of him grimaced at the thought the pair were in there laughing at their cat invasion prank while part of him was concerned that he might be breaking up something more intimate. Thor had indicated that if Loki and Sigyn were interrupted during moments of marital bliss they may not stop until finished, even if unexpected or highly important guests arrived. Thor, apparently, had personal experience with this.

The door quickly opened to reveal a happy Sigyn, smiling from ear to ear. Loki was reclining on one of the couches, tossing grapes up into the air and catching them in his mouth. The television was playing a mid-day marathon of “America’s Funniest Home Videos.” Loki let out a laugh as a child was knocked over by a goat at a petting zoo on the screen. Tony decided that the comedy found in children falling down and men being hit in the crotch must transcend language, culture and even plane of existence.


“Here to drag me off to some menial task?” Loki snorted at Tony, popping another grape in the air and catching it in his mouth.

“Actually, I was wondering if the two of you knew anything about the infestation the tower has been experiencing,” Tony asked.

“Infestation?” Sigyn said worriedly.

“I saw a roach in your dining hall the other day,” Loki commented, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Perhaps your automatons are failing in their duties?”

“I’m not talking about roaches,” Tony snorted.

“An infestation of what, then?” Sigyn asked.

“It’s an infestation of cats,” Tony grimaced. Loki and Sigyn turned to look at each other, both paling and a slight look of fear passing between them. Tony was intrigued.

“How… how long has this been occurring?” Sigyn asked Tony nervously.

“About a week now…” Tony began. He had barely finished before Sigyn yelped and ran into the back bedroom. It sounded as though she was packing or unpacking something. Tony turned to Loki for an explanation into his wife’s stranger than usual behavior. With a sigh, Loki set aside his package of grapes and stood up.

“It appears that word has reached my mother-in-law of her daughter’s exile to Midgard,” Loki groaned.

“What?” Tony asked.

“We should perhaps gather your compatriots?” Loki suggested. “I do not care to explain things more than once.”

“I guess…” Tony said as Loki continued.

“Sigyn, dearest, we will be in the common room when you find it,” he said before turning back to Tony. “Lead the way, jailor.”

Tony rolled his eyes and then headed back into the hall with Loki. The ragamuffin he had left behind
in the hall was now joined by a black British shorthair and a freakishly hairless cat. All three creatures stopped their grooming routines, reared back and hissed at Loki as he passed them. Loki rolled his eyes and then turned to the assembled felines with a ferocious glint in his eyes.

“Begone foul creatures,” Loki hissed back at the cats. The three creatures went running down the hall and then seemingly vanished into nothingness.

“How…” Tony began as the elevator doors started to open.

“While they may have the guise of your Midgardian pets, I have no doubt those creatures originate somewhere else,” Loki grimaced. “From someone else, more specifically.”

“Found it!” Sigyn exclaimed, running out of the room and managing to slide into the elevator before it closed.

In her hands she held a hand mirror that seemed to be covered with rose gold and encrusted with pinkish gems. She twisted it around in her hands nervously. Loki seemed to offer her a calming smile and she returned his gaze with a tense smile of her own. When the three of them returned to the meeting room, Bruce was explaining the discovery of corticosteroids and the advent modern over-the-counter allergy medicine to Steve.

“That would have made things a lot easier when I was kid,” Steve shook his head. “I swear, I’d walk by someone’s flower bed or past someone sweepin’ out their front walk and be coughin’ till I was weak as a kitten.” Tony cleared his throat and Bruce and Clint looked up as Sigyn and Loki approached. Natasha and Steve also turned their heads to see Tony’s guest.

“Our Asgardian friends may have the source of the cat outbreak,” Tony announced.

“It’s my mother,” Sigyn sighed. “Checking up on me. She just can’t leave well enough alone.”

“I wouldn’t describe imprisonment here as well enough…” Loki began, but Sigyn cut him off with a glare.

“My mother… Freyja… She is very fond of felines,” Sigyn mentioned. “Even has a chariot pulled by two rather large ones…”

“You mean lions?” Steve asked.

“No, they are oversized house cats,” Loki harrumphed. “Rude creatures, too. Of course, I suppose anyone would be rude if they were castrated. Gib cats, you see. Freyja seems to prefer her men castrated, if you ask me.”

“And she sent the cats to stalk us?” Clint asked before blowing his nose.

“Odin most likely didn’t tell anyone outside of Asgard’s court that we were here,” Loki said. “Probably didn’t want to upset his friends in Vanaheim, and there is no doubt that Freyja wouldn’t be pleased to find Sigyn exiled here. She isn’t particularly fond of Midgard, and she is even less fond of me. Of course, rumors do get out, and I would not be surprised if the news of our banishment has reached Freyja’s ears.”

“She has probably been sending her minions to check up on me,” Sigyn sighed. “I actually anticipated this. That is why I cast a spell around our quarters to prevent her creatures from getting inside and spying. I didn’t think she would try to torment anyone else.”

“Why don’t you want your mom to check in on you?” Steve asked, confused.
“My mother and I... haven’t always had the best relationship...” Sigyn winced.

“Best relationship?” Loki snorted. “She abandoned you as a baby and then once again when you reached your maturity in Asgard. She made no attempt to stop her estranged husband from marrying you off to an oaf. She almost didn’t show up to your wedding ceremony because leaving her precious hall might mean she had to interact with said estranged husband. She has no regard for marital fidelity and is constantly trying to pair you off with one those simpering idiots from the Vanahaheim guard to annoy me. And the only time she ever wants to visit is to terrorize me or to use your good nature to her own advantage. For Hel’s sake, the woman hasn’t remembered your Name Day in the past twenty years!”

“She does have ten children to keep track of,” Sigyn said quietly.

“That’s no excuse,” Loki snipped.

“We can have the neglectful parents support group later this evening,” Tony interrupted. “I’ll even bring the snacks. But first, can we get the cats out of my tower?”

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded.

She held up the pearlescent mirror and muttered something in a strange tongue. The mirror began to glow and leaning over Sigyn’s shoulder, Tony could see the image of a beautiful woman having her long blonde hair combed by two younger maidens, both of whom resembled the woman in question. Golden blonde hair and luminescent skin seemed to be a family trait. Upon closer inspection, it was easy to see that one of the handmaidens was only a bit taller than Sigyn while Freyja and her other handmaiden were much taller. Seeing Tony’s interest, Sigyn shook the mirror slightly and its image appeared up on one of JARVIS’ screens. Tony wanted to get a hold of that mirror if it was some sort of computer technology.

“My sisters Sjofn and Hnoss are the ones combing my mother’s hair,” Sigyn explained. “Gersemi and Lofn should be around somewhere - unless Mother has sent them on an errand. Hnoss and Gersemi are my mother’s children by her husband. Sjofn, Lofn and I have the same father.”

“I’m getting Sjofn is the one closer to you in height?” Bruce asked.

“Yes,” Sigyn said, biting her lip. “I am the shortest of my sisters.”

“They are in Sessrumnir,” Loki observed.

“My mother’s hall,” Sigyn explained. “In her land of Folkvangr. My grandfather gave it to her so that she may have some respite from her marriage. She spends most of her time there now.” Sigyn whispered some more words into the mirror and then held it out.

The mirror let out a tinkling sound that was the cross between a bell and a woman’s laugh. A woosh of pinkish seiðr ushered forth from the mirror and soon formed into the woman who had been inside the mirror not a second before. Freyja materialized in a nearly see-through gown made from a billowy, clear fabric and smattering of ethereal glitter and sequins. She wore a solid gold breastplate over the dress that looked like a medieval-style bikini or the type of armor designed for overtly sexualized female characters in video games. Either way, chances were slim this outfit would actually protect her chest cavity.

Somehow, the dress managed to hide anything that would have gotten her arrested for indecent exposure. Still, the ensemble dropped the mouths of all of the men in the room, save for Steve and Loki. Steve tried to politely avert his gaze from anything inappropriate, instead focusing on the
headband of gilt leaves Freyja wore in her hair while Loki crossed his arms and tapped his foot exasperatedly at his mother-in-law. Natasha, for her part, wondered what sort of Asgardian magic was keeping Freyja’s decolletage so well lifted and separated. Judging by the narrowness of Freyja’s waist and her supple hips, she certainly didn’t look like a woman who had given birth to ten kids.

“Daughter,” Freyja greeted warmly opening her arms.

“Forgotten her name, already?” Loki snorted. Sigyn embarrassedly gave her mother a slight squeeze and then backed away.

“Even if I had trouble remembering the identities of my children, I could never forget that it is Sigyn who is married to the likes of you,” Freyja replied haughtily.

“Please, mother,” Sigyn begged. “Be civil. We are guests here…”

“Ah, yes, here,” Freyja said, “Imagine my surprise to find out my daughter has been banished to Midgard of all places because of the actions of her husband…”

“Mother, this is not exactly the time nor is it the place…” Sigyn began.

“Oh, no,” Loki smirked, flopping into one of the meeting room chairs. “Do go on about my many faults. I believe last time you visited you left off somewhere around why I couldn’t use my seiðr and shapeshifting abilities to transform myself into something more palatable. Perhaps a statuesque blond like my brother?”

“I think perhaps we should go,” Steve announced at the same time Natasha slapped his hand away from the controls.

“Are you kidding me?” Natasha snorted. “This is better than TV.”

“When, exactly, were you going to inform me of your… temporary relocation,” Freyja asked. “It is temporary, isn’t it?”

“Yes, mother, it is temporary” Sigyn sighed. “Things have been… rather hectic lately, and I didn’t think you would want to be bothered by my petty concerns.”

“Now, now, you know that I care about all of my children and their problems,” Freyja clucked.

“When it’s convenient or beneficial to you,” Loki snarked.

“I heard Odin took away his seiðr, though I see not his capriciousness,” Freyja remarked. “If you would like, I’m sure your father could arrange to see that mouth of his sealed… again…”

“And what would you exchange in the stead of such a favor, I wonder,” Loki shot back.

“You with your cruelties have no capacity to criticize me,” Freyja shot back.

“Mother…” Sigyn attempted to interrupt. A large white Cymric decided then was the time to jump on the table and began heading toward Clint, who was slowly backing away from it.

“Of course you would think that,” Loki snorted. “No man has the competence to judge you unless he has bedded you and even then it must only be praises and accolades.”

“Loki, please,” Sigyn begged.

“Unlike you, I am in full possession of by seiðr,” Freyja said, collecting a ball of her pinkish magic in
her hand, “and unlike Odin, I am well prepared to send you back from whence you came.”

“Please don’t destroy my tower,” Tony interrupted, seeming to remind Freyja and Loki that the Avengers were assembled both in the room and on the screen. Somehow, Natasha had slunk away and come back with popcorn, which Steve seemed to be reluctantly sharing with her.

“You may fool these mortals,” Loki snorted, waving a hand through the image of his mother-in-law, “but I know you are merely an illusion. Though, I’m sure killing me in the midst of Midgard with all these witnesses would earn you Odin’s eternal favor. After all, it’s not as though you are indebted to him for anything… Oh, wait. You are.”

“I am well aware of that fact, Loki Odinson,” Freyja simpered. “Or is it Laufeyson now? Hmm? Which is it you prefer?” Loki gritted his teeth and clenched his fist as Sigyn attempted to distract her mother-in-law from her husband.

“Both of you, please!” Sigyn said. “Mother, I asked you here for a specific purpose. I know you were just trying to keep an eye on me, but your messengers are creating a rather difficult time for our host. And I know you wouldn’t want me to be inhospitable.”

“Well, why didn’t you say something,” Freyja snorted. She snapped her fingers and the cat on the table disappeared. Clint uncovered his nose and breathed in with a deep sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” Sigyn said.

“Of course, since I am here,” Freyja continued, “I would be in remiss in my motherly duties if I didn’t ensure you were doing well.”

“I am well,” Sigyn assured her.

“I’m not so sure, dearest,” Freyja shook her head. “You haven’t been outside much. I can tell. Your hair has lost that glow. As has your skin. Perhaps it is the dreary atmosphere here on Midgard.”

“Yes… well,” Sigyn began, biting her lip.

“And you know I detest you in dark colors,” Freyja sighed, motioning to the hunter green and black dress Sigyn was currently sporting. “You should wear more pastels. Yellow, I think. What happened to that beautiful buttercup color dress I gave you?”

“Yellow makes me look sallow, mother,” Sigyn insisted.

“Nonsense,” Freyja snorted. “All of my girls look well in yellow. Honestly, I don’t understand why you and Snotra insisted on becoming healers. That awful turquoise color does nothing for your complexion.”

“Nanna and I are healers, Mother,” Sigyn pointed out. “Snotra and Syn still serve Queen Frigga.”

“Sometimes I wonder why it has taken my girls so long to find husbands,” Freyja sighed. “And then I remember the ones that have are married to a poet and a convicted traitor.”

“Mother!” Sigyn gasped.

“Better than a dirty old man who marries his young daughters off to even dirtier, older men,” Loki huffed, earning a glare from Freyja.

“Loki,” Sigyn cautioned him.
“And your hair,” Freyja tutted, running her fingers through some loose waves that had escaped from Sigyn’s simple braid. “Could you do something more with it? It looks so unkempt braided that way...Like a commoner...”

“I don’t mind as long as it is out of my face...” Sigyn tried to explain before her mother cut her off.

“Are you chewing your nails again?” Freyja sighed, lifting up her daughter’s hands to study. “You know that is hardly attractive. Or have they forced you into menial tasks alongside your husband for his impertinences as well?”

“That is enough, Freyja,” Loki pounded on the table. “You may come here and insult me, but I will not sit by while you pick apart my wife.”

“Had Odin sent me to work alongside my husband, I would have done so and proudly,” Sigyn proclaimed, lifting her chin up at her mother.

“I do not understand why you insist on standing behind him,” Freyja sighed. “But I suppose I must support my children, even in their mistakes...”

“Mother,” Sigyn pleaded.

“Well, I suppose I have been gone from my duties long enough,” Freyja sighed. “Perhaps when your confinement on Midgard ends you can come to visit your sisters and I in Folkvangr. I’m sure your husband could spare you for... a few fortnights at least.”

“Farewell, mother,” Sigyn sighed. The same tinkling laughter was heard and Freyja disappeared just had she had come. The room was silent for a moment.

“So... that was your mother?” Clint asked.

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded. She paused. “Pardon me.” With that, she tore out of the room and eventually disappeared into nothingness.

“Is she alright?” Steve asked, worriedly.

“Sigyn is never in a good mood following a visit from her mother,” Loki sighed. “Freyja has a way of tearing her apart that no one else does. She has always taken her mother’s criticisms to heart. Now, if our business here is concluded, I should tend to my wife.”

Loki followed the path Sigyn had just taken but instead had to take the elevator down to their rooms rather than teleporting. Steve and Natasha said their farewells and then disappeared from the screen. Clint left, saying it was time to take his antihistamine, and unceremoniously headed into the kitchen where he climbed on the counter. He removed a ceiling tile and then headed up through the space in the ceiling, placing the tile back once he had disappeared into the ceiling itself. Only Tony and Bruce were left in the conference room. Suddenly, Bruce let out a short bout of laughter.

“What is it Bruce?” Tony asked curiously.

“I was just thinking... remember when I compared Loki to a bag of cats?” Bruce asked.

“Cause you could smell the crazy?” Tony nodded.

“I’m not so sure anymore,” Bruce said with a slight smile. “Maybe he had just come from visiting his mother-in-law.”
It didn’t take Loki long to find his wife after he returned to their rooms. Sigyn was nothing if not a creature of habit, and after every gut-wrenching visit with her mother she tended to return to her rooms, snuggle up in bed and have a good cry. He found here there, burrowed among the masses of blankets and pillows, watching her mother and four frolicking sisters through that damned mirror her mother had given her. Only Freyja would be so selfish as to give someone a mirror that operated as a spyglass, allowing the holder to view Freyja wherever she was. Sigyn could contact her mother by use of it too, but Freyja rarely used the mirror to speak or visit with her daughter. While the image had been of Freyja, it had only been a projection not flesh and blood. In some ways, it managed to pain Sigyn even more that her mother preferred to visit her as an illusion rather than in person. If Freyja did understand how such a gift might hurt Sigyn, Loki doubted she would care.

Hnoss and Gersemi, Freyja’s two eldest daughters by her husband Odr, had always been with their mother. However, when Freyja found herself pregnant by her lover Iwaldi again and again, she sneaked off to Niðavellir to give birth to her illegitimate daughters, leaving each successive infant in the care of their father, his sons by his long-dead wife, and their dwarven aunts. At that point in time, the Aesir and Vanir still thought romances between themselves and the dwarves scandalous. Oddly enough, marriages between Aesir, Vanir and the elves had never been frowned upon, perhaps because the elven magic was seen as more of a boon to a bloodline.

Even if there had not been scandal attached to the fact she had borne eight half-dwarven daughters, Freyja would have probably been fine abandoning her daughters in the dwarven realm for the rest of their lives. Her plans to cover up her affair might have succeeded, too, had it not been for Idunn, the eldest of the half Vanir, half-dwarf children. Idunn had fallen in love with Bragi, an up-and-coming poet and skald in the Asgardian court, when he came to the realm of the dwarves searching for inspiration. Bragi had been enchanted by Idunn as well, regardless of the fact that most would frown upon her heritage. She quickly became his muse and after marrying in a dwarven ceremony, he took her back home to the Realm Eternal.

No one had known of Freyja’s children by the dwarf lord outside of Niðavellir before that. Freyja was incensed that one of her daughters had married and run off to Asgard without her knowledge and more importantly without giving her enough time to cover up the incident so her own public image would not be damaged. Pressure from King Njörð, her father, also put Freyja in an awkward position concerning her illegitimate offspring. The king thought it unfair that the bulk of his grandchildren had been hidden from his sight. So, Freyja had come to collect the two eldest of her remaining daughters, twins Lofn and Sjófn, to reside with her. The original intention had been for the remaining five girls to accompany their elder sisters when they were mature enough.

Instead, some minor squabble erupted between Vanaheim and Asgard, threatening to cause the old wounds of the war between the two worlds to bubble up. The new conflict was ultimately determined to be the Vanir’s fault and, as recompense for his countrymen and to show good faith, King Njörð had offered for the court of Odin to host his granddaughters. Njörð had hinted that, perhaps, some of Asgard’s nobility might enjoy having the granddaughters of the Vanir king as wives - even if they were born on the wrong side of the sheets. So, soldiers from Vanaheim arrived in Niðavellir and removed the five remaining daughters of Freyja from their father. Iwaldi had protested to his king - who was also his distant cousin - but the king of Niðavellir was in no position to refuse both Vanaheim and Asgard. Tearfully, the five small girls were taken from the only home they had ever known.

That was how Sigyn and her sisters had come into his mother’s care, serving as her handmaidsens and as her pupils in the ways of seiðr. Born of Vanaheim herself, Frigga’s father was a distant cousin of the present Vanir king and she was seen as the perfect mentor and matron of the five small charges
brought from the dwarven lands. Freyja, at least, seemed thankful that she could come visit her daughters in the luxury of Asgard rather than the dank, underdark of the dwarven lands. However, her visits to them in the City Eternal grew less and less as the novelty wore off. It soon became apparent - in Asgard at least - that Freyja had hidden her daughters away not to protect them but rather because she did not want to exert the time and attention it required to mother them.

The youngest, Sigyn had not learned the harsh truth about her mother that her sisters had figured out at early ages. Freyja was not the unconditionally loving mother that Frigga was, nor was she as steadfast in keeping her promises to her children. She was self-absorbed and self-serving, often forgetting her daughters’ Name Days and even confusing their names, ages and other small facts one would think a mother would know. One by one, Sigyn’s four elder sisters reached the same age Lofn and Sjofn had been when their mother carted them away to Vanahem and later Folkvangr, but Freyja never arrived to take any of her five youngest with her. Sigyn had just assumed her sisters enjoyed Asgard and Frigga’s company so much they didn’t want to leave.

The signs had all been there, but Sigyn had blinded herself to them, wanting so deeply to believe that her mother loved her in the same way Frigga loved her children. As Sigyn was the smallest and most sensitive of their number, Sigyn’s older sisters in Asgard had also worked together to somewhat protect her from their mother’s true nature. So, when Sigyn’s Name Day came and the year of her maturity was reached without the arrival of her mother, she was crushed. She held onto hope that maybe Freyja was late or had forgotten, but when three weeks later the tiny pink mirror had arrived with a short note from her mother wishing her a happy Name Day, Sigyn could no longer ignore the gnawing feeling within her. Instead of her mother coming to fetch her, she had been given a way to always see her mother and elder sisters in their happy little realm without her.

She had been devastated and Loki still remembered watching Frigga comfort her, soothing away the pain and drying the girl’s tears. Thinking back, Loki believed it was one of the first times he had realized that tugging sensation in his chest was, in fact, his deep love for Sigyn. Loki had wanted to seek Freyja out himself and punish her for the way she had seemingly destroyed her own daughter, but Sigyn, as it turned out, was made of sterner stuff. She swallowed her heartbreak and went on with her duties. Loyal to a fault, she still would not speak ill of her flighty and feckless birth-giver. However, whenever she saw Freyja, Loki still saw a brief flash of that heartbroken young girl in her eyes.

Loki slowly approached the bed where his wife was wrapped up in blankets, sheets and comforters. She tended to cocoon herself whenever she was feeling sad or depressed, going back to even when they were small children. He knelt on the bed and then awkwardly crawled around his wife. Gently, he plucked the mirror from her hands and then set it aside. Over the years, he had the inclination several times to smash the thoughtless present from Freyja, but he knew doing so would upset Sigyn so he had refrained. Turning back to his wife, he cradled her tearstained face in his hands, using a finger to wipe away the still flowing tears.

“Oh, my dove,” Loki clucked at her, “why do you allow her to hurt you so?”

“Why doesn’t she like me?” Sigyn asked, her voice wobbly from crying. “What have I done to make myself such a disappointment in her eyes? Why did she never come for me like she said she would? Why is it my sisters were chosen to join her and not me?”

“You ask the wrong questions, sweetling,” Loki shook his head, settling into the bed beside her and wiggling his way under the same covers his wife was attempting to hide in. “You should want to know why she cannot see how wonderful you are, why she is so blind to the loving, intelligent, magnificent woman you are. Of course, Freyja has always been interested primarily in herself. She is probably jealous that you and your sisters turned into such capable women without her help.”
“I wish I could be like them,” Sigyn admitted, “not caring if she remembers me or takes an interest in me…”

“I suspect they care a bit more than they let on,” Loki shrugged. “They have always tried to protect you, but I think in protecting you from your mother’s true nature when you were a child they did more to hurt you in the long run.”

“I must be a fool for wanting to know why she never came for me all these years later,” Sigyn sighed.

“I, for one, am glad she did not,” Loki smirked. “I would have become quite a lonely man without that pretty little handmaiden of my mother’s to keep me entertained. I wouldn’t have been able to watch you running around the palace halls in a tizzy because you were late for something or find you hiding out in my mother’s gardens. I wouldn’t have been able to see that adorable face you always made when you were furious at me for not returning some book to the palace library you had been wanting to read. You wouldn’t have been around to for me to sneak kisses from in the palace cloisters while everyone else gathered at a feast.”

“I suppose my life wouldn’t have been as nice without the boy who always teased me but would never let anyone else do the same,” Sigyn admitted. “The one who always helped me sneak out of the palace and away from my sisters so we could go on adventures. The boy who used to disguise himself as a magpie to bring me gifts because he was too shy to admit he loved me.”

“Should I be worried that my wife seems to know all my tricks?” Loki snorted.

“It’s only fair as you seem to know all of mine,” Sigyn smiled in return.

“Ah, yes, you daughters of Freyja and how easily you enchant men with your sweet smiles, melodious voices, easy charm, those deep soulful eyes, and those plump, kissable lips,” Loki grinned predatorily before bestowing his wife with a long, languid kiss. “I must say, of all your mother’s daughters you are definitely my favorite.”

“I should say so,” Sigyn laughed with a playful slap against her husband’s chest.

“Anyone who does not love you cannot be capable of the emotion,” Loki insisted, “you, who love the most fragile, haunted and monstrous of souls without reservation or second thought.”

“Loki…” Sigyn began, running her fingers through his hair to offer him some comfort.

“Do not argue with me on this, lykyng,” he replied with a slight smile. “You have the kindest heart of anyone I have ever known, Sigyn.”

“Thank you, husband,” Sigyn smiled. “You always know how to cheer me.”

“How about you thank me properly?” Loki grinned lasciviously. Sigyn giggled as her husband pulled the comforter over them both.
Five months into his exile from Asgard and Loki had to admit there were certain things about the Realm Eternal he had come to miss. There was something comforting about going back to his rooms at the palace and slumping into his favorite chair, Fenrir curled up at his feet before a roaring fire and Sigyn singing sweetly with the magpies as she brushed out her hair. Loki missed riding with his wife through the forests outside the palace, her laughter echoing in the trees. While there was something intimate about sharing the household chores like making the bed and cooking with Sigyn, Loki decided he much preferred those tasks being done by servants so he and his wife could take time for other, more pleasurable things.

There were even some things not relating to his wife that he missed from Asgard. He missed taking a private afternoon tea with his mother, listening to her latest gossip or soliciting her advice on matters that were bothering him. He might have even missed Thor at this point had the big oaf not insisted on making his surprise visits every month or so. He somewhat missed his ridiculous sisters-in-law. Snorra and Syn were always a source of entertainment and Nanna could be as well when the mood struck and she was not frazzled from her work as a healer. But he even found himself missing Idunn, the old stick in the mud, and Var, one of the few people who truly had an ability to unnerv him.

Access to the palace’s library and its massive magical reference section were chief among the things Loki wished he still had on Midgard. While the Midgardian technology known as “the Google” made it far more easy to search for what one wanted than going tome by tome in hopes of stumbling across the right incantation or herbal remedy, Loki found that what Midgard had to offer in terms of seiðr was sorely lacking. Certainly, Midgard had plenty of information regarding magic from sections of its populace who professed to be magical experts, though Loki was sad to find that perhaps only 10 percent or less of what was available had any roots in accuracy. What magics the old gods had taught to Midgardians had largely been lost, replaced by a mix of superstition and technology that was seen to be good enough. It seemed Midgard had forgotten more in a thousand years than most Asgardians learned in a lifetime.

However, at the present time the thing Loki was missing most about Asgard was how few people had direct authority over him and could order him about. Typically, the only three people who had any type of power over him were the Allfather, the Allmother and Thor. Of the three of them, Odin was the only one who made demands and gave orders. Frigga always had a way of making things she wanted him to do seem like requests or favors he could carry out to warm his mother’s heart. Very rarely did Frigga use her authoritative voice and when she did, it was most certainly more frightening than the Allfathers. In fact, Frigga was the only person capable of bossing Odin around and most of the time, she did so in such a sweet way the Allfather seemed to think her demands were his own ideas.

Thor, technically, was also superior to Loki in Asgard. As the older brother and crown prince, he had more authority and as a lesser member of the royal family, Loki was bound to Thor’s command. Despite this, Thor didn’t seem to have a commanding bone in his body. Much like their mother, if Thor really wanted someone to do something he found a way to coax or cajole them into it willingly.
Rather than motherly guilt trips, however, Thor’s method was more along the lines of insisting they were bound by brotherhood and friendship or being so over exuberant that one simply couldn’t tell him no.

Things were not so on Midgard. If he was ordered to do something by an Avenger or SHIELD, Loki simply had to acquiesce because of the terms of imprisonment. Stark was kindly enough that he always at least seemed sympathetic when he had to tell Loki to do something, though Loki knew Stark was also used to getting his way and probably would react poorly if pushed. The Captain treated him like a subordinate soldier and though the Captain’s orders were few and far between, Loki didn’t much feel like testing the man who’s shield had gone toe-to-toe with Mjolnir and come to an uneasy truce. Loki did anything the Widow requested without comment or complaint out of a sheer sense of personal survival instinct. The person who irritated Loki the most with his requests was Barton, though the ever-present shadow of the Widow made Loki complain much less than he ordinarily would have.

But right now there was one person in particular who had authority over him that Loki found most irksome. If it was known on Asgard that he was supposed to report to this person and obey their every whim, he would be made a laughingstock. He was almost positive that was Stark and the Allfather’s aim when they had assigned him to this person’s stead. When Huginn and Muninn appeared at the Tower with a missive asking how Loki’s present employment as a drink peddler was going, Loki discovered that Tony was more afraid of Odin than previously suspected. Tony had written back the truth - albeit a version that was a little kinder to Loki than need be - and now the Allfather insisted Loki find some other gainful employment. Stark insisted it was better not to keep the Allfather in the dark, especially since he had his seeing-eye Heimdall to let him know what was going on everywhere. Loki had accused Stark of being terrified of the Allfather and eagerly bowing down to the one-eyed dictator. That rash outburst of anger upon finding he would again be employed with some menial Midgardian task was probably why Stark had assigned him to his new position and his new overlord: Reggie, the night janitor.

Well, technically, Reggie was Stark Tower’s custodial supervisor for the third shift, overseeing fourteen other employees with Loki making fifteen. Reggie had been working in some sort of janitorial position at Stark properties in Manhattan since he had dropped out of school at the age of sixteen and now, having gotten a GED and associate’s degree in business administration thanks to Stark Industries’ employee education program, Reggie found himself the night supervisor nearly 50 years later. Stark had informed Loki that he would immediately start as Reggie’s assistant. Barton had then taken the opportunity to remind Loki that he was not the assistant custodial supervisor but rather the assistant to the custodial supervisor, which Loki assumed was some sort of inside joke based on Midgardian language construction.

To be fair, Loki didn’t exactly dislike Reggie. He was a nice, grandfatherly old man who had grown up in Harlem and was a year away from retirement. He worked nights so that someone could be home with his children while his wife worked her day job at a local beauty parlor. Together, they had raised five children - four of of whom had gone to college and been the first generation in their family to do so. He and his wife Lavelle currently had ten grandchildren, two of whom they were now raising. Despite the ups and downs they had been through, Reggie was very proud of his family and didn’t seem to mind his job. He was quick to inform Loki the first time Loki complained that while picking up after the hot shot business folks who worked for Stark wasn’t exactly glamorous, it was a lot better and more honest way to earn a living than many people were able.

His third night on the job, Loki found himself assisting Reggie in one of the janitorial team’s “special projects.” This project involved attempting to clean up a rather stubborn ring of debris in one of the research and development labs caused by a pair of entry-level scientists doing some sort of alternative heating experiment. Loki rather thought the pair responsible for the mess should be cleaning it up
themselves. After all, he always had to clean up the results of his own experimentation on Asgard - albeit usually with the aid of seiðr - and didn’t understand why Stark’s Midgardian underlings were above such work. However, Loki decided against bringing up such a thing with Stark. Sigyn might overhear and then demand that Loki clean their rooms as well instead of leaving it to the palace servants and then complaining that their work wasn’t immaculate enough for his fastidious self.

“This is useless,” Loki grumbled from where he was scrubbing at the ash and grease stain. Reggie had finished sweeping up what loose particles remained. After emptying them into the trash can on his cart, he paused and rubbed his chin.

“I might have something for this beyond soaps and sponges,” Reggie said.

Loki stood up and gazed in wonder as Reggie pulled out a bucket and began mixing various chemicals into it. All the mixture Reggie was making consisted of was cold water, dish soap, and some sweeping compound, but the way he carefully measured each ingredient seemed to Loki like the work of an advanced potion maker. After a swirl and shake, the mixture was deemed ready. Reggie put the bucket on the floor, dipped a mop in it, and with one swoop of the mop half off the ash and grease was wiped clean from the floor.

“How did you know to do that?” Loki asked, awed.

“Years of experience,” Reggie laughed, wiping away the rest of the ash. “I have seen every kind of stain, smudge, goo and goop you could imagine here. After a while, you learn things. White vinegar and water for wine, paint, ink and mud. Ammonia and water for chocolate, blood, vomit and coffee or tea. Rubbing alcohol for glue. Warm up a paper towel for oil. Freeze wax and gum. When in doubt, vinegar and bleach for everything.”

“Must have taken you years to perfect this craft,” Loki noted as he moved on to helping dust the rest of the room.

“Craft? I don’t know if I would all it a craft,” Reggie laughed. “I suppose over time everyone finds what works and what doesn’t.”

“Yes, but you know how to make the cleaners by hand,” Loki said. “You do these things yourself. I my… homeland, that is what we refer to as a craft.”

“Well, I don’t think custodial arts and crafts is something that will really take off here,” Reggie laughed.

“I suppose not,” Loki agreed.

After cleaning up the remainder of the lab, it was time for the night shift workers to have their midday - or midnight as it were - meal. Hunched over the table in the custodial offices on the twelfth floor that had all of the cleaning equipment and such, Loki unpacked the lunch of deli meats, newly baked bread, and veggie sticks with dipping sauces Sigyn had made for him. A thermos of still perfectly warm tea was also included as well as a few pieces of chocolate, obviously hidden toward the bottom of the lunch satchel in the hopes Loki would not find and eat them first. It was, as always, a fruitless effort.

“Fresh baked bread again?” Reggie said, letting out a low whistle. “That little lady of yours sure keeps you spoiled.”

“Yes,” Loki smiled, as the other members of the custodial team came into the room to consume their own lunches.
Reggie, at least, had taken a shine to Loki, particularly when he found out his new young employee also had a young wife. Reggie remembered what it was like to be young and married, the sweet moments stolen between Loki and his wife reminding Reggie of his own early days with Lavelle. The first night of his employment, Loki had forgotten his pack lunch and Sigyn had appeared with it for him, absolutely delighting Reggie and drawing some rather lusty glances from a few other members of the janitorial staff. It had been Reggie who had laid down the law about ogling women, especially married ones, to the other staff members before Loki could get a chance to seek his revenge. The one known as Paulie would be terribly surprised when he opened his locker later on. Naturally, any favoritism from the boss seemed to make the other employees annoyed with Loki, especially since he was working in Reggie’s shadow for the time being.

Loki sat quietly through the meal and the mediocre conversation at best that his fellow janitorial staffers engaged in during it. Reggie contributed somewhat to a conversation about some sports player accused of using illegal substances and some sort of recently premiered form of entertainment, but otherwise let the other young men do the talking. Loki was certain none of his fellow opinions had a high opinion of him, a scrawny and waifish alleged-Norwegian, but this didn’t bother him much. He didn’t exactly have a high opinion of any of them either.

After another few hours of emptying trash bins and vacuuming office floors, Loki clocked out for the evening and wearily trudged his way toward the elevator and up to the chambers he and Sigyn shared. His wife had obviously attempted to stay up to greet him when he returned from work but had been unable to. She was slumped against the propped up pillows, a book still in her hands. Gently, Loki took the book, closed it up with a bookmark, and then tucked his deeply sleeping wife more comfortably into bed. After a quick, hot bath to clean up all of the dirt and grime from his janitorial work, Loki changed into his sleep pants and crawled into bed, cuddling up behind his wife.

For much of their married life, Loki and Sigyn had never really had sleep schedules that were completely in sync. Sigyn usually rose early in the morning to conduct her daily princess and healer duties while Loki preferred to sleep late and then spend much of the evening and night working on things. Occasionally, he had to wake up early to participate in some sort of political meeting or perform some princely responsibilities, but he mainly woke an hour or two before the midday meal and slumped into bed a few hours after midnight while Sigyn was up with the dawn and usually in bed a few hours after dusk. Despite their varying sleep schedules, the pair still found time to enjoy each other. Naturally, the period they were both awake between the evening meal and Sigyn’s normal bedtime was also very pleasurable. But it wasn’t the only time they made for each other. Despite the fact she was an extremely heavy sleeper, Loki could usually wake Sigyn up enough for a bit of marital bliss before he collapsed into bed and the one thing Loki didn’t mind being woken up for early in the morning hours was a quick romp before his wife went off to her duties.

Over the years, in fact, Loki’s subconscious had developed some sort of sense that Sigyn was stirring awake next to him. He believed it was all the positive reinforcement he had received because when he awoke alongside her, there was usually pleasure to be had by both. As a result, his body seemed to develop a natural response in the hopes the events of the past would be repeated. This time as Sigyn woke an hour or so before noon was no exception, Loki slowly going from sleep to consciousness as he felt his wife try to quietly crawl over him and exit their marital bed. Instead, Sigyn found that as she sat atop her husband his strong arms came around her waist to embrace her and a pair of lips met her own. Loki could feel the slight smile and giggle escaping from his wife’s lips as he kissed her.

“Good morning,” Loki said when they pulled apart, his voice gravelly from sleep.
“Good morning,” Sigyn replied, stroking her fingers through the hair at the side of his face. “Now, go back to sleep. You need your rest.”

“And I will get it. Later,” Loki informed her, sneaking his hand under the hem of her nightdress.

“I have work to do,” Sigyn pointed out, still not moving from where she was straddling her husband. “And I must get ready to do it.” She let out a gasp as Loki’s hand trailed up her right leg under her nightdress and then gave her a gentle pinch on her posterior.

“And waste this wonderful opportunity we have together?” Loki smirked, sliding his hand from his wife’s backside around her to her front and then dipping it between her legs as he began nuzzling the area under her left ear. “Alone, together in this bed… no Thor or palace servants to make any inopportune interruptions…”

“I would hate to make you overtired before you have to work,” Sigyn replied, leaning in to her husband’s attentions. “It would be most unkind of me…” Her voice trailed off into a gasp and Loki smirked as he began trailing kisses down the side of her neck.

“If anything I might need help getting back to sleep,” Loki offered as his wife’s hands trailed down his chest and toward his trousers. “Do you have any ideas how you could help me, perchance?” Sigyn smirked down at him, her hands at his waist and leaned forward to kiss him. Almost as soon as their lips touched a gentle ping followed by the smooth, British intonations of JARVIS’ voice filled the room.

“Your Highnesses, Sir would like your presence in the communal living area as the both of you are awake,” JARVIS announced. Sigyn let out a groan and Loki was ready to throw something toward the source of the disembodied voice.

“Tell your mechanical overlord we are busy,” Loki hissed at JARVIS.

“I would,” JARVIS replied almost immediately, “but he is very insistent that everyone residing here be present for his announcement. If you do not oblige, he may come down to fetch you.”

“Tell him he’ll get an eyeful,” Loki huffed.

“Loki,” Sigyn groaned, annoyed. Sometimes she wondered if her husband had more than a penchant for exhibitionism with the way he never seemed to mind if the two of them were caught in flagrante delicto.

“Stark can wait,” Loki informed her, rolling them both over in one swift move so his wife was below him, the hem of her nightdress riding up past her knees. “You and I have much more pressing matters to attend to.”

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“You should probably just let them be,” Bruce warned Tony as Stark marched toward the elevator after being informed that Loki and Sigyn would be up “whenever they felt like it.” Bruce had a feeling his attempts to de-escalate the conflict were going nowhere, especially as Clint followed Tony into the elevator, drinking a giant mug of coffee. Bruce sighed and followed the two men inside.

“This is important,” Tony grimaced. “And it involves them, so they should deign to participate.”

“I’ll have you know I have four doctorate degrees,” Tony huffed.

“So? I think I’m still technically a licensed and bonded plumber in the state of Missouri,” Clint scoffed. “Don’t ask.”

“One of these days you and Widow are going to have to divulge some of your lesser SHIELD shenanigans,” Tony snorted. “I mean, I don’t care to know about any high-profile assassinations or busted up drug-trafficking rings, but I would like to know more about why you guys have an inside joke about commandeering jet skis in the name of Hungarian royalty.”

“Up your clearance level,” Clint shrugged.

“Up yours,” Tony replied as the elevator dinged and he exited onto Loki and Sigyn’s floor. He approached the door and ordered JARVIS to open it.

“Sir, I do not believe that is a wise decision,” JARVIS said. “It is in direct violation of my privacy protocols.”

“I set those protocols,” Tony pointed out.

“Yes, Sir,” JARVIS agreed, “to avoid situations like the one you are about to walk into. The privacy protocols are in place for a reason.”

“Well, I’m overriding your privacy protocols,” Tony informed him.

“Sir, I must ask again that you reconsider,” JARVIS said tiredly.

“Should an internationally and possibly intergalactically-wanted fugitive have privacy protocols?” Clint asked aloud.

“Regardless, I think Sigyn has a right to privacy,” Bruce pointed out.

“Damn it,” Tony grimaced. “What happened to teaching Loki about consequences? Open the door. And any other doors I need to get to them, JARVIS. I’m not having this conversation at every door you’ve kept locked.”

“As you wish, sir,” JARVIS said with a sigh.

Tony stormed into the living area and then toward the bedroom, Clint and Bruce on his heels. However, when Tony opened the bedroom door, screeched and then tumbled backward as if blinded, Clint and Bruce jumped out of the way. Bruce stealthily hid behind the bedroom door while Clint tried to see what Tony had seen without getting the same eyeful. However, before Clint could see anything a way of pearly gold seiðr came forth and slammed the door shut and locked it. Clint turned around to find Bruce attempting to help Tony to his feet, Tony rubbing his eyes as if they were in pain.

“I’m blind! I’m blinded forever!” Tony exclaimed.

“I did try to warn you, Sir,” JARVIS intoned.

“You didn’t warn me that was going on in there!” Tony shouted back, still rubbing at his eyes.

“I thought were able of deducing such a thing on your own, Sir,” JARVIS replied. “You do have four doctoral degrees, after all.”

“What? Were you trying to punish me or something?” Tony said, blinking as if he had just come out
of darkness for the first time in a long while. “Don’t answer that, JARV. Rhetorical question.”

“What did you see?” Clint asked.

“Loki’s lily white butt,” Tony shivered.

“So they were…” Clint began.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded.

“How bad?” Clint asked curiously.

“Limbs shouldn’t move that way,” Tony choked out, sounding near tears. “And the butts of megalomaniacal alien princes shouldn’t have such distinctive nail or teeth marks in them.”

“Way too much info,” Clint shook his head.

“You asked for it!” Tony replied.

“Thor did warn us they wouldn’t stop if interrupted,” Bruce pointed out. “I think it’s best we let them… uh, finish…”

“I think I’ll just let Foster and Lewis surprise them when they move back into the Tower as payback,” Tony grimaced.

“That was the big announcement?” Clint said with a snort. “I already knew that. Processed their clearances for SHIELD and everything.”

“Yeah, and Jane said they planned on coming here to finish up some research since her lecture tour is over and they need somewhere to crash for the holidays coming up,” Bruce said. “They’ll be here before Thanksgiving, right?”

“I hate all of you,” Tony grumbled.

Blissful thoughts of his wife earlier that day helped chase away the monotony as Loki found himself sweeping and then mopping the halls of various floors of the Tower’s legal, accounting and business services divisions. It was hard to have anything but a serene smile across his face as he thought back to the absolutely glorious ways his wife could contort her body or the way she could positively undo him with a gentle roll of her hips and the sensation of her finger being traced up and down his backside. Sigyn was undoubtedly the most talented and devoted creature in all the Nine Realms, and it made Loki both beam with pride and roil with lust to know she was all his.

“Thinking about that wife of yours?” the grating voice of Paulie echoed from behind Loki. He didn’t need to turn around to sense Paulie was smirking at him. “I would be too, if I were you.”

“What is your business here?” Loki gruffed back, not bothering to face the slimy scumbag behind him.

“Just sayin’,” Paulie shrugged. “If I had a fine piece of ass like that back at home I wouldn’t be wasting my fucking time here.”

“You might consider wasting your time elsewhere regardless,” Loki replied coolly, still not bothering to give his full attention to the man behind him.
“Aw, come on man,” Paulie snorted. “Don’t act like you weren’t all up in that tight pussy…” Loki whipped around, brandishing the end of his mop at Paulie like he might have a glaive or a halberd at an enemy on the training fields of Asgard. Paulie instinctively stepped back, sticking his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“You will not speak about me wife to me or anyone,” Loki said to him threateningly. “You will remove her from your thoughts completely or I swear on the bones of my ancestors I will make you rue the day you first laid eyes on her.”

“Jeez, man. No need to get all sensitive,” Paulie scoffed. “I was just trying to make conversation.”

“Make it with someone else and about something else,” Loki hissed at him. “for in my homeland there are those who would see your innards plucked from you by birds while you yet lived for such callous insults.”

“Shit, no wonder the other guys say you’re a freak,” Paulie spat out before storming off. Normally, Loki might have taken such a thing as an insult, but he was just glad to have the peace and quiet back so he might continue his mopping.

It was after his midnight lunch that Loki found himself pulled back by Reggie as the rest of the guys went back to their various assigned duties. Loki at first feared he was being reprimanded for his work. As menial as it was, Loki did take pride in outperforming the others in his cleaning duties. This was the first time Reggie had let him work alone on something, and he didn’t want to disappoint the man who had shown such confidence in him and his abilities.

“Paulie talked to me earlier,” Reggie informed him. “Said you threatened him.”

“Yes,” Loki said, seeing no reason to lie. “After he made various sexual and vaguely threatening comments about his intentions regarding my wife. I merely informed him of how his words would be handled where I am from.”

“I figured it was something like that,” Reggie sighed. “Did he seek you out?”

“Yes,” Loki nodded.

“Well, try to avoid him from now on,” Reggie instructed. “And if he does pester you, Loren, try to just ignore him. I already told him that I can’t write you up based on a conversation no one else witnessed. But if you were to have any sort of physical reaction to something he said… no matter how bad it was… company policy indicates I would have to take disciplinary action as your supervisor. And from now on, if he says anything like that or starts in on you, immediately come to me and let me know.”

“I shall,” Loki nodded.

“You’re a good kid, Loren,” Reggie informed him. Loki couldn’t help but smile at that regardless of the gravity of the situation. It was really the first time anyone remotely resembling a father-figure had said such a thing to him. He would have to tell Sigyn later.

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Three days later, Loki had woken up in the middle of the afternoon, much earlier than he normally did now that he was required to work through the night. He briefly allowed himself to inhale the sweet smell of his wife that emanated from the sheets on their bed before uncovering himself, getting out of bed and proceeding to dress himself. After performing his usual cleaning rituals upon having awoken from a full slumber, he sauntered into the living area to scrounge up some breakfast. Sigyn
was in the dining area, arranging some freshly cut though albeit a bit strange flowers from her garden into various vases that would then decorate their rooms. She was deeply concentrated on her task and Loki retrieved a package of grapes from the cold-keeping device in the kitchen, not wanting to disturb her. She was truly adorable when she was concentrating on something.

“Good morning,” Sigyn said to him as Loki attempted to tip-toe back to the living room divan to eat his breakfast appetizer.

“Good morning, lykyng,” Loki responded. “Your arrangements are looking lovely.”

“Thank you,” Sigyn replied, moving on to the next vase. “I thought they might brighten up the rooms a bit. It is starting to get colder and darker here. I believe the climate of this section of Midgard is much more similar to Vanaheim’s than Asgard.”

“One might think the Allfather had better things to do than control the weather,” Loki harrumphed. Sigyn looked over and noticed her husband’s snack for the first time.

“When I am finished here, perhaps we should make your breakfast,” Sigyn mentioned.

“There is no rush,” Loki informed her. “I daresay I will need the coffee later on if I am to remain awake through my work. Cleaning is dreadfully dull, I have learned.”

“Perhaps Sir Stark thought you were better suited to tasks that kept you from dealing with the public,” Sigyn smirked at her husband.

“It is almost as if Stark enjoys watching me pick up refuse,” Loki harrumphed, tossing up some grapes and catching them in his mouth.

“You say that is if you do not enjoy cleaning,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “We both know that you find it soothing. I daresay if you showed Sir Stark or Sir Bruce your labs on Asgard they would marvel at how well arranged and sterile they are.”

“It doesn’t do one any good when they cannot find the materials they need,” Loki pointed out. “And if you do not have a clean workplace, it can contaminate your results.”

“I know,” Sigyn smirked, “but you are the only person I know who has devised his own recipe for pewter polish.”

“Yes, well,” Loki frowned, tossing up another grape. A knock on the door interrupted the conversation followed by JARVIS announcing his master’s arrival outside their chambers.

“Is everyone clothed?” Tony asked, covering his eyes with his arm as he walked into the room. Happy was on his heels but was busy watching something on his phone.

“Yes,” Loki rolled his eyes as Stark headed further into the room and Happy paused at the doorway.

“Good,” Tony said, uncovering his face and then his voice going quite serious. “I have something I need to tell you.”

“If it is about Lady Jane and Lady Darcy returning to the Tower, we already know,” Sigyn informed him.

“What?” Tony said, surprised.

“We have been using your pocket-sized talking boxes to communicate,” Sigyn informed Tony. “We
already have made plans for the first ladies only evening we will have upon their return during the next moon cycle.”

“No, I wasn’t coming to tell you about that,” Tony shook his head. “Though, I should have known the two of you would have figured something like that out before I could surprise you with it.”

“Well, then,” Loki said, tossing up another grape into the air and catching in his mouth. “What is so urgent that you must tell us.”

Tony nervously walked down and pulled one of the big, strangely shaped chairs forward so it was closer to where Loki was reclining on the divan. For her part, Sigyn seemed to sense something was amiss and left where she had been arranging her flowers to sit beside her husband. For his part, Loki sat up to see what was so serious that Sigyn seemed worried. The Vanir predilection towards precognition Sigyn had inherited made her easily sense the mood of a room and she usually could tell if the news about to be delivered was good or bad before it arrived. The look on her face indicated to Loki that something bad was about to be said.

“I just got a call from Jamal Robinson, Reggie’s oldest son,” Tony informed Loki. “Reggie had a pretty serious heart attack earlier today. He’s not going to be in to work tonight. In fact, it might be a while before he comes back… if he comes back…”

“What do you mean?” Loki asked worriedly.

“How is his condition? What have the Midgardian healers done?” Sigyn demanded to know, going into healer mode instantly.

“He’s alive, conscious and talking,” Tony informed her. “He started feeling chest pains and his family rushed him to the hospital. He apparently went into full cardiac arrest soon after they arrived and they had to defibrillate him. The doctors are waiting to see if they need to go forward with any surgeries, like an angioplasty. They also want to ensure that he doesn’t have any neurological effects or paralysis from the attack before they send him home. It might be a couple of days before all that can be determined. After that, it might be six weeks before he comes back. However, Pepper is working with the HR folks and since Reggie has been such a loyal employee all these years, we might be able to work out some sort of health-related early retirement package for him that won’t bankrupt his family or make it hard for them to make ends meet. I know he didn’t want to retire just yet because they need the money.”

“But he will live,” Loki prodded.

“That seems to be the consensus so far,” Tony nodded.

“May we go and visit him?” Sigyn asked gently.

“I was about to ask if you guys wanted to go with me,” Tony smiled, “but first… there is another… sort of kink in this whole thing?”

“What is that?” Loki asked morosely.

“Well, with Reggie out of the picture, the most senior staff member of the night time custodial team is Paul Luciano,” Tony explained.

“Paulie?” Loki responded, horrified.

“I understand the two of you had some sort of… encounter a few nights ago?” Tony winced. Sigyn looked at her husband curiously, causing Loki to look anywhere but at his wife.
“He made inappropriate sexual comments and I informed him they would not be tolerated in my presence,” Loki replied, miffed.

“Yeah, Pepper didn’t tell me that part,” Tony frowned. “Look, he’s going to be your boss from now on… unless Reggie comes back.”

“No,” Loki shook his head defiantly. “I will not work for that insipid, slovenly, goat-faced buffoon. Even if he were not the walking definition of a fecal stain, I would never allow myself to be bossed about by one who is so sloppy and ill-fitted to his work while being simultaneously the most inappropriately crude person I have ever met. And that includes Fandral before he met Sif and every man Sif has ever physically throttled for his behavior toward her.”

“I’ll get Pepper to see what she can do, but he has the most seniority of anyone on the staff and has been with the company the longest,” Tony pointed out. “But even until we can post the job and conduct interviews, there needs to be a supervisor and he’ll have to be it. It might take six weeks to get the position filled once we know whether or not Reggie wants to come back.”

“Why do you simply not have your automatons clean things?” Loki grumbled. “They are good enough to clean your own facilities. Why not those of your underlings? I am sure your automatons would provide better leadership than this Paulie.”

“Because, A, the stuff I deal with here is not stuff I want people snooping around on, so it’s better to have bots than people clean it up,” Tony argued. “And, B, for every job I give a robot, I put a hard-working person like our buddy Reggie out of a job. And robots don’t have families to feed or kids to put through college or retirements to plan. And C, all of the bots that work to clean up my labs are of my own creation and therefore basically my children. So they get to work in my labs because of nepotism. Happy?”

“Yes?” the bodyguard-turned-security-head replied from where he had been watching something on his phone in the doorway.

“Not you,” Tony groaned.

“Are we ready to go, boss?” Happy asked.

“Look, let’s finish this discussion later, okay?” Tony said to Loki tiredly. “I’ll talk with Pepper and we’ll see if something can’t be rearranged or whatever.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed.

Loki visited Reggie in the hospital that first afternoon, though Reggie was rather tired from everything and barely awake during most of the visit. Loki did get to meet Reggie’s wife, three of his children, his son-in-law, daughter-in-law, and six of his ten grandchildren, including the two living with Reggie and his wife. Reggie had apparently told his family about Loren, the young man who was working with him, which surprised Loki. Of course, most of the family was more interested in Tony Stark, surprised that such a titan of industry would bother to visit a lowly janitor in the hospital. While Tony took pictures with the grandkids and chatted to Jamal and his two sisters about their father’s prognosis and care, Loki and Sigyn sat with Lavelle, who seemed devastated as she held her husband’s hand while he slept.

When he returned to the Tower for his evening shift, Loki was glad to see Pepper Potts had been on top of things and not given Paulie the supervisory role in Reggie’s absence. Instead, Pepper had
pulled a guy with even more seniority than Paulie off the day shift and given him the night shift duties for the foreseeable future. While Loki didn’t exactly mind working under the leadership of the cantankerous old man - Stanley he believed the man called himself - it wasn’t the same was Reggie who had always spoken to him in a caring, fatherly manner.

Loki and Sigyn also visited Reggie’s hospital room the next afternoon, Sigyn bringing some heart-healthy snacks she had cooked up for Reggie and his visiting family members. He was in better health and better spirits that afternoon. Surgery was not going to be necessary at that point and while he had some initial difficulty with his left hand following the attack, he was doing better. All signs pointed to Reggie being released at the end of the week and then going home for a minimum of two weeks. He was now under a strict diet and orders not to take on anything stressful. It seemed as though he would not be returning to work, instead taking the very generous early retirement package Stark Industries had offered him.

While he was glad that Reggie was better and going home, Loki couldn’t help but feel sad that he wouldn’t be seeing the man regularly any more. While he had been invited to come visit the Robinson home any time, it was different than getting to talk with Reggie daily and learn from him during their work together. Loki now felt more alone than ever in work at Stark Tower. While Reggie had taken him under his wing, the rest of Loki’s fellow employees just thought he was an odd duck and to be avoided at best. There were no friends to be made here as there had been at the coffeeshop. The new boss was uninvolved in workplace politics, keeping to himself as well and more interested in taking inventory in the supply closets than monitoring his employees.

Things came to a head five days after Reggie’s hospitalization when Loki was busying himself by mopping up another hallway. He didn’t much care what his fellow employees were up to, taking his nightly job assignments, completing them, and eating his lunch alone out in the hallway. Of course, Loki was used to such things. After all, he had spent many a day during his childhood alone because Thor was out with his other friends and didn’t want his embarrassing younger brother to tag along. However, it was when Loki garnered the sensation he was no longer alone in the hallway that things began to go wrong.

“So, he’s not coming back?” one of the other workers - Loki couldn’t remember his name but it was something like Brandon, Brennan, or Braydon - said. “Like, for good?”

“Yeah, man,” Paulie replied. “and good riddance if you ask me. He was such a hard ass. Always giving me a rough time and shit.”

“Oh yeah,” the other worker agreed. “Remember when he wouldn’t give me that sick day?” Loki grumbled under his breath. The ‘sick day’ just happened to coincide with the evening of a popular Midgardian sporting event.

“Never liked the old bastard,” Paulie agreed. “Glad he’s gone. I’m not going to be bossed around by no…” Loki was unfamiliar with the word Paulie used, and there was no direct Asgardian translation. But it was one of the terms Rhodes had previously told him he was not too repeat off of any rap records. It didn’t take long for Loki to process that Paulie had just used a slur about Reggie.

The next thing Loki knew he was being pulled off Paulie by the joint forces of three of the other janitors and a pair of disembodied Iron Man gauntlets. Loki was still in a daze as Stark finally arrived, Happy and Barton behind him. While Barton stood over where Loki was sitting on the floor, seeming to guard the otherworldly fugitive, Happy and Tony went over to where the three other janitors were checking out Paulie. Finally having awoken from his nap, the new supervisor Stanley emerged from his office to see what was going on. Paulie had two black eyes, a busted chin and a look of abject terror on his face.
“What the fuck is wrong with you, you little fucking freak?” Paulie screamed at Loki, obviously not caring that his playboy billionaire philanthropist boss was crouched next to him. “I’m going to turn your motherfucking freak ass in for assault!”

“Good luck with that,” Tony said to Paulie calmly. “Our friend… Loren, here, technically has diplomatic immunity. So… nothing will stick.”

“Then me and my boys will whoop your motherfuckin’ ass!” Paulie threatened.

“Threatening other employees is in direct violation of the Stark Industries Employee Code of Conduct,” Happy pointed out.

“He fuckin’ assaulted me!” Paulie shouted. “He threatened to gut my innards with the dull end of a broom!”

“Did you seriously?” Tony asked Loki, trying to hide the fact he was mildly impressed.

“I don’t remember what happened. I blacked out,” Loki answered, honestly. “One moment he was saying he was glad Reggie was gone and then he referred to him by a racial epithet. The next thing I knew, I’m on the floor over here.”

“That’s a pretty sensitive charge,” Happy said. “Using racial slurs at work are grounds for dismissal.”

“You can’t fire me on hearsay,” Paulie said defensively.

“No, but after that last fighting incident between members of the janitorial staff, we upgraded our security cameras to include sound,” Happy said. “So, if that comes back, we’ll be having a discussion.”

Happy directed the other janitors to take Paulie down to medical while he reviewed the incident footage in his office. Loki was then escorted back into the living space of the Tower and to Tony’s personal office to learn his fate. Trudging behind Stark, who had equipped the floating Iron Man gauntlets for the ride back up, Loki couldn’t help but think about how disappointed Sigyn was going to be. This was this third Midgardian job since their arrival, and the second he would be fired from. He knew the Allfather would find some way to use this against him, too. Sitting across the desk from Stark, Loki wondered if he could pull out the fake tears Thor always pushed him to use against their mother when they were children and got into trouble. Loki’s childish fake sobbing and Thor’s own attempts at sniffling had often gotten them out of some of their harsher punishments from their father, the Allmother beseeching her husband that they were just little boys.

“So, I guess it goes without saying that you’re going to be fired,” Tony informed Loki. “There is no legal way I could keep you on staff without some sort of investigation that would probably involve SHIELD and Asgard and a bunch of stuff neither of us wanted to get into. And I’m sure even a meathead like Paulie might figure something out if we just changed your name and had your wife change your face and have you start back tomorrow like nothing happened.”

Loki merely nodded morosely in response.

“I mean, I can’t exactly say I’m mad at you,” Tony admitted. “Sure, maybe beating the guy to a pulp wasn’t the most adult or responsible thing to do, but I honestly can’t fault you for punching a guy in the face because he said something racist. I mean, hell, if more people got punched in the face for saying racist things the world would be a better place. Not to mention it’s Cap’s whole schtick. You’ll probably get a gift basket from him after I tell him about this. Hell, he’ll probably show up at Paulie’s house, punch him and then give him an All American lecture.”
“So what happens now?” Loki asked.

“Happy reviews the tape,” Tony replied. “Paulie gets fired and a more decent severance package than he deserves. If he tries anything, we’ve got him on video violating our employee code of conduct, which everyone signed off on. And the fact that you got fired means he can’t argue unfair treatment. Besides, the SI lawyers are a pretty scary bunch.”

“And what of me?” Loki asked.

“Well, you won’t be a janitor here any more,” Tony said. “Which really sucks because you’re kind of awesome at it. I know, weird, right? Maybe we can find something else for you to do in the meantime.”

“And you are going to tell Odin,” Loki said.

“I kinda have to,” Tony said awkwardly. “But I’ll do it in a way that puts you in a positive light. I mean, you were trying to do the right thing just not… in the best way? But it’s growth, right? I’m sure he’ll see that.”

“What do you think I should wear to my execution?” Loki mused with an annoyed glare. “Black is traditional, but red would really turn heads. Of course, it’s not exactly my best color…”

“You’re not going to get executed for getting fired from a janitorial job,” Tony rolled his eyes.

“No, you are right,” Loki harrumphed. “After I see the disappointed look on my wife’s face, I will simply have to take my own life.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t joke like that around her,” Tony pointed out. “Apparently, she really likes you for some reason and the thought of bad things happening to you really upset her.”

“Am I free to leave?” Loki sighed.

“Sure,” Tony said. “But don’t worry, okay? This thing will get figured out. I mean, Christmas is coming up. There’ll be tons of holiday retail jobs that need someone with your lackluster approach to customer service and complete disdain of the human race. You, my friend, have everything it takes to be a middle manager in corporate retail.”

Loki trudged back to his chambers and despite his hopes that Sigyn was safely tucked into bed, found the lights in the room were on. Sigyn was curled up in one of the chairs, finishing up a book. Oddly, she didn’t seem surprised to see him home so early. In fact, she looked like she had been expecting him, setting her book aside and slowly walking toward him with a look of sympathy on her face. Loki held his breath, worried that Sigyn was disappointed.

“Sir JARVIS told me what happened,” Sigyn informed him. “I am not disappointed with you. I am proud you tried to defend someone…”

“Even though I handled it poorly,” Loki nodded.

“By Midgardian standards, perhaps,” Sigyn shrugged. She leaned up and gave her husband a soft kiss. “Now, how about you get a nice warm bath? I have some tea brewing in the kettle and you can have some before bed. We can go and visit Reggie tomorrow.”

“That sounds lovely,” Loki smiled at his wife.
As it often did, breakfast the Saturday morning before Halloween began with Tony and Pepper arguing over the annual Stark Halloween bash to be held for the first time ever in the Tower. Decorations would be going up that afternoon and the following days in preparation for the big event Wednesday night. Tony had invited a who’s who of friends and acquaintances for a costume-clad bacchanal. The only rules were that no one could dress up like an existing superhero and wet blankets like Bruce and Steve had to spend a minimum of thirty minutes at the party before disappearing off to do the simple, quiet horror movie marathon the pair of them had initially proposed for the night.

“But Pep!” Tony pleaded.

“No,” Pepper shook her head. “You yourself said no wild animals in the Tower, and I think having them as decor borders on animal cruelty. Besides, there are several diseases and dangers of having humans and actual bats intermingling. Bats don’t come into your labs and bug you, so you shouldn’t go into their caves and do the same. Besides, you cannot give me one good reason for why your party should have live bats besides ‘I want them.’”

“Bats are adorable,” Sigyn offered. “They have sweet faces and are very intelligent hunters.” Pepper gave Tony a pointed look.

“Fine, no bats,” Tony agreed.

If Sigyn wanted them in the Tower, it probably was a bad idea considering her weakness for troublesome animals - her husband included. Tony was certain Loki had utilized the magpies at one point to rewire one of his new Iron Man gauntlets into a nearly-impossible-to-override stopping-hitting-yourself mode. The magpie feathers he found in his lab and Loki’s guffawing for days after the incident were his main clues.

“And no tarantulas,” Pepper nodded as she headed out of the kitchen.

“But Pep!” Tony said, stalking behind her and beginning the argument again.

“What was that all about?” Loki asked Clint and Bruce curiously.

“What was that all about?” Loki asked Clint and Bruce curiously.

“Tony’s planning his Halloween party,” Bruce explained.

“What type of party?” Sigyn asked confused.

“For Halloween,” Bruce explained. “It’s a holiday… sort of…”

“You guys don’t have Halloween on Asgard?” Clint asked.
“Why would they?” Bruce pointed out. “The festival is Gaelic in origin and didn’t really gain steam until long after Asgard had abandoned Midgard the first time.”

“Does this… Hallowed Ween celebrate the end of the harvest?” Loki asked, the word feeling strange on his tongue.

“I’m guessing you guys have a harvest-end festival?” Bruce asked curiously.

Sigyn then launched into a very detailed description a festival called Vetmær or Winter Nights. It was the bookend festival to Haustblót. While the Oktoberfest-style party celebrated the start of the harvest, Vetmær celebrated the end of the harvest period and the coming of winter. It was also a bit less free-wheeling and a tad more solemn than Haustblót. Bruce, as a result of his interest in Asgardian culture, made the mistake of asking how the Vetmær festival was done. He had assumed it was more akin to the American Thanksgiving than a Halloween celebration.

Initially, Bruce was interested to learn it was one of the few Asgardian festivals where women took the lead, Frigga leading the public ceremony and then the oldest woman of a family leading her own, smaller in-house ceremony. Only members of a family were allowed to be present during a familial Vetmær ceremony, and it was considered bad luck to have any non-relations present for them. However, Bruce was not prepared for the part of the rituals that involved bloodletting and drinking beer with blood in it. Nor was he prepared for the origins of the whole blood-letting ritual, which had something to do with a long-forgotten elvish princess who was accidentally executed by her father during some bizarre elfish ritual. There was also another tale of an elfish king who had refused to perform the ritual and had died under mysterious circumstances - cutting himself and then slipping on his own blood, leading him to crack his skull open. The entire festival was actually originally from Alfheim and one of the few that had trickled down to other realms from there.

With Bruce reeling from the darker side of the religion of Asgard - and to some extent most of the other Nine Realms - Sigyn and Loki had begun peppering their Midgardian hosts with questions about Halloween. The thought of ending the harvest season with cobwebs, black cats, goblins, ghosts and bats seemed odd to them. The word Halloween itself seemed hard on their tongues - even with the advantage of Allspeak. Sigyn in particular sometimes slipped into referring to it as The Old Holy Evening, which apparently was a more accurate translation by Asgard’s standards.

“Well, there are really two types of Halloween,” Clint explained. “The kind you do when you’re a kid and the kind you do when you’re an adult.”

“Explain,” Loki demanded.

“Kids dress up in costumes, go door-to-door saying ‘trick or treat’ so their neighbors will give them candy,” Clint began.

“Where does the trick come in?” Loki wanted to know.

“I was afraid you’d ask that,” Clint sighed. “Used to, if the neighbor didn’t answer or didn’t have treats, the kids would play a prank on them. Like egging their house or setting dog poop on fire in a bag on their stoop. Nowadays, we just assume those houses belong to pedophiles and steer clear.”

“And for adults?” Sigyn asked. “Do they also ask for candy?”

“Not exactly,” Clint said. “Adults dress up in costumes, but usually it’s like the one night of the year where you can dress as revealing as you want and no one can shame you for it. Adults then get drunk and usually make bad decisions. And sometimes there is also candy.”
“I do not wish to participate in the adult version,” Sigyn frowned. “I want the candy.”

“And playing tricks on others so they will learn the value of generosity does sound appealing,” Loki amused.

“But their bites aren’t even deadly!” Tony shouted, following Pepper back into the kitchen. “I had JARVIS look it up. At most, they just cause muscle cramps or paralysis for a few days!”

“I, for one, do not want to have to explain to our insurance company why we are being sued by people who claimed a tarantula bit them at your Halloween party,” Pepper shot back. “And before you start, we are not having decorative black widow specimens on display so Natasha ‘can feel at home.’ It’s not kind and it’s not safe.”

“Ugh!” Tony said, collapsing onto a sofa like a depressed teenager. “This is going to be the worst Halloween party ever!”

Having been fired from the janitorial staff and with Tony too busy focusing on his Halloween party to help find him a new job, Pepper decided Loki would be put to work with the event planning department to help prepare the Tower for the night in question. While the Tower’s event staff had been rather impressed by the dedication and attention to detail Loki had displayed when planning his wife’s birthday party, they were a little concerned that the alleged son of a Norwegian billionaire who was couch surfing with Tony Stark for the better part of the year might let any party planning power he was given go to his head.

Some members of the staff were surprised to learn that Norway - if that really was where Stark’s newest houseguest was from - didn’t celebrate Halloween. The fact that his language seemed to not have any translatable term for it and that he kept calling it “Hallowed Evening” was a source of entertainment to most of them. Of course, the alleged Norwegian scion’s hilarious mistranslation had to remain an inside jokes because of the extremely thick and legally binding NDA’s everyone who worked in Stark Tower had to sign. Even if members of the staff had suspicions that Loren and Victoria Olsen weren’t who they claimed to be, any attempt to voice their concerns would be met by swift and harsh action from one of the most terrifying legal teams in the business - as well as a possible interrogation by SHIELD.

And so, Loki found himself helping Suze and Whitney hang cobwebs all over the Stark Tower party deck. Occasionally, they would tie into the webbing one of the completely fake yet hyper-realistic plastic spiders Pepper had allowed Tony to get for his party. Each spider had to be double checked for any potential microrobots on them as Pepper wasn’t putting it past Tony to turn his fake spiders animatronic to terrorize party guests. Naturally, Loki was not checking his spiders as thoroughly as everyone else. A good fear-induced panic had livened up many dismal occasions in his experience.

So far, the most interesting part of the decorating process was watching Pepper and Tony fight over how the place would look. Pepper wanted a more classy, adult, somewhat Pinterest-inspired setting whereas Tony wanted animatronic nightmares a la the Haunted Mansion ride, strobe lights, and hyper realistic blood and gore. Pepper would give a direction to the staff, only for Tony to show up five minutes later with an order that was the complete opposite and remind everyone who’s name was on the building. Pepper would then show up, regive her initial order and remind everyone who’s name was on their paychecks and that Tony himself had decided to rename the building in honor of the Avengers.
Currently, Pepper and Tony were arguing over a series of gothic-looking painted portraits Tony had brought in to be hung in the room - paintings that bled from their eyes when he pushed a small button in his coat pocket. Finally, Tony acquiesced and told Pepper he wouldn’t hang the paintings but might show them off to select party guests who were interested in the technology. While Pepper thought the last thing Stark Industries needed was a new line of horror-based technology projects, she had won the argument and therefore decided to quit while she was ahead. Pepper walked off to take a call from the caterer and Tony pulled Loki aside.

“Okay, so we need to hide these portraits around the room so I can pull them out last minute,” Tony said. “If they’re hanging up when the first guests arrive, Pepper won’t have them taken down.”

“That is your brilliant plan?” Loki rolled his eyes.

“What,” Tony gruffed. “It’s foolproof. It’s easy as pie!”

“Easy as pie,” Loki repeated. “Is this another one of your Midgardian nonsense phrases? Like when you said it was raining cats and dogs but it were merely a large amount of rain? Or the one about handheld birds versus those to be found in bushes?”

“Just help me hide these damn bleeding eye paintings from my girlfriend already,” Tony groaned.

“Isn’t that a bit dishonest?” Loki asked curiously.

“Aren’t you like the god of lies?” Tony huffed.

“I’ll tell you what I’m not,” Loki huffed. “I’m not the god of bad relationship advice. So I feel compelled to remind you this is a great way to start an argument with your keykeeper.”

“But she won’t let me have anything gory!” Tony moaned. “Halloween is about getting scared shitless, not candles in cutesy holders, glittery skulls, painted gourds, and antique bottles with witchy-sounding ingredient labels written in calligraphy! It’s about blood, guts, bones, ghouls and goblins!”

“I should hope you haven’t invited any goblins,” Loki frowned. “Oh, niðsi and tuftekall are fine as long as you don’t do anything to anger them. Believe, me I couldn’t devise a trick as good as they can. However, you have to watch those kobolds. Sigyn still has nightmares about the stories her aunts used to tell her as a child. A kobold as soon cause a mine shaft to cave in your head as look at you and for no reason. Nasty little buggers.”

“Okay… I am going to digest the whole goblins exist thing and process that later,” Tony said. “In the meantime, please do not let my horrific Halloween art go to waste. I know Pepper wants this party to be classy, but that’s why we have the New Year’s Eve party. Halloween is about dressing up as someone else and getting shitfaced.”

“Barton told us it was about candy,” Loki pointed out.

“Okay, yeah, candy and dressing up and getting drunk,” Tony sighed.

“Are you sure you want me to participate in this?” Loki asked. “Lady Pepper will most certainly be cross with you. And perhaps with me for aiding and abetting your mischief. And then Sigyn will be cross with me for helping you and making Lady Pepper cross.”

“And when was the last time you let the fear that your wife would be upset with you stop you from doing something mischievous?” Tony snorted.

“Perhaps I am trying to turn over a new leaf,” Loki huffed. “That is the Midgardian phrase, correct?”
“Yeah,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I swear, I’m getting you an idiom dictionary.”

“See if they have more coloring books for Sigyn while you are at it,” Loki said. “She goes through them faster than I can have them delivered.”

“Look, are you going to help me hide this creepy painting or not?” Tony groaned.

“Fine,” Loki huffed, “but if Lady Pepper is cross I reserve the right to say I only did it under duress and the fear you would return me to Asgard with claims I had failed my attempts at redemption.”

“Cool,” Tony agreed. “I’ll just say you mind controlled me.” Loki rolled his eyes and then helped Tony stash a painting under a very expensive antique coffee table. He had a feeling he was going to rue this particular act of mischief, and decided to begin mentally preparing his excuse and then apology speeches for Sigyn right away.

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Tony had managed to finagle Cap, Widow, Coulson, and Maria Hill out of their duties for his Halloween party, as well as the day before and after. Stark liked to think it was his own negotiation skills, but Hill was quick to inform him that Halloween pranks were some sort of ritual in their upper echelons of SHIELD with the high level agents competing to see who could pull the best one over on the director. Apparently, the all-time record to break was some lucky Level 7 who had managed to pull Peggy Carter - in full Wonder Woman costume - back into the office sometime in the 1970s over claims that a real War-of-the-Worlds scenario was taking place in Iowa. The young spy in question had received a commendation on his cleverness and trickery then was demoted to a level six and tasked with helping clean all of the bathrooms in SHIELD headquarters for the foreseeable future. However, Director Carter had remained very impressed with Agent Fury from then on.

Before supper that evening, Tony took his guests on a quick tour of the still-as-yet-unfinished party deck and its decor. Pepper had relented somewhat, allowing for some fog machines, a few skeletons and some not-too-gauche fake tombstones with comical names written on them. She had even given Tony full reign over the musical playlist, knowing full well it might only contain thirty plays of “The Monster Mash” followed by various 1980s horror film themes. Of all his guests, Steve seemed the most genuinely interested in the decor and Tony was absolutely delighted to learn that Steve was a fan of a lot of the old horror movies, like the 1931 Dracula, the original Frankenstein with Boris Karloff, The Wolf Man and the silent film version of Phantom of the Opera with Lon Chaney.

Coulson was also polite seeing the decor, though he seemed surprised that there wasn’t more blood and gore. He had heard about Stark Halloween parties in the past, and this had nothing like he had heard described of those. There were far more silver and glittery pumpkins and far less screaming ghost standees and scare jumps. Hill seemed completely unimpressed with everything, but it was hard to tell if that was her general impression of the decor or just the way her face looked. Natasha seemed bored - again possibly just the way her face looked - though she did seem intrigued by the realistic looking spiders clinging to the various cobwebs Loki had helped the other event staffers spread throughout the rooms.

“I thought they would make you feel more at home,” Tony commented as he noticed Natasha inspecting a particular spider cluster.

“You should add in some fake flies to make it more realistic,” Natasha said. “The terrifying part of the spider is the way they completely paralyze and incapacitate their prey before consuming them alive.”
“That’s a thought,” Tony nodded. He noticed that Steve - after several months of working with Natasha and the STRIKE Team - was no longer getting the slight look of terror across his face when Natasha said something utterly creepy like that.

“Will there be a chocolate fountain?” Hill finally inquired.

“And cheese fountains - both cheddar and white queso,” Tony nodded. “And there are finger sandwiches that literally look like fingers, ‘poison’ candied apples with black-dyed caramel, And Pepper got these bakers from some reality show to do a whole host of spooky cake pops and cupcakes. There will also be plenty of creative cocktails, all served in mad scientist lab equipment-style cups.”

“And I’m guessing you’re the mad scientist,” Hill snorted.

“Nah,” Tony shook his head. “I went as one years ago anyway. Can’t repeat costumes.”

“Really?” Clint yelled from his spot in the rafters. “I’ve been Robin Hood sixteen years running.”

“I honestly believe that,” Tony agreed.

“He even showed up to a mission in the costume once,” Natasha nodded.

“Hey, that was when we were going undercover at the Renaissance faire!” Clint shot back.

“Yeah, and you nearly blew our cover because your costume wasn’t historically accurate,” Natasha shot back. “You spent two hours being harangued by that history-professor-turned-cooper about how Robin Hood was medieval at best, not Renaissance and that guy running that rare bird feather smuggling ring almost got away!”

“I maintain that Robin Hood could be presented as a Renaissance figure!” Clint shouted down. “He’s mentioned in Shakespeare, for Christ’s sake!”

“You only looked that up after the mission,” Natasha huffed. “You haven’t read a word of Shakespeare in your life!”

“This is exactly why SHIELD stopped running ops at comic conventions,” Hill sighed.

“Someone needs to write a SHIELD-tell-all book,” Tony said. “They could publish it as fiction and everything would be so ludicrous that no one would actually believe it happened.”

“What makes you think someone hasn’t?” Coulson asked with a raised brow.

“Don’t ask,” Hill replied as Tony opened his mouth. “You don’t have a high enough clearance level. Besides, you’re technically only a civilian contractor.”

“Hey, I invited you to my super sweet Halloween party,” Tony pointed out.

“I got invited to the White House, too,” Hill rolled her eyes. “And one in Hollywood. Fury only made me come to this one because he had a feeling it’ll go tits up.” Hill then stalked off to inspect the room for bugs - both of the technological and entomological kind.

“Is it weird that the more she hates me, the more I want her to like me?” Tony asked Coulson.

“No,” Coulson shook his head. “Most people experience that.”

“Yeah,” Clint nodded, parkouring down from the ceiling. “I call it the Mean Girl Effect. The more
Hill disapproves of you, the more you want her to like her. Carter had the same thing in a way.”

“Alright,” Pepper called from the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready!”

In line with preparations for his holiday bash, Tony had decided all of the Tower’s residents would carve pumpkins. After supper, Tony decided they would hold a pumpkin carving party as one of those “team-building” exercises Cap was always going on about. There had been some initial concern about what might happen if Loki was given sharp knives to carve his pumpkin, but it was ultimately decided that his desire to see Sigyn happy would override his desire for murder. Not to mention Natasha would be there with equally sharp knives, and she had no qualms about gutting Asgardians along with seasonal vegetables. After dinner, pieces of newspaper were placed around the floors of the living area and various pumpkins, knives, and other carving tools were laid out. Each one of Tony’s bots was also going to carve its own pumpkin, albeit from the safety of the lab where the occasional explosion and resulting pumpkin goop wouldn’t bother anyone.

Loki had not been happy when he had been forced to dress in some of his rattier Asgardian wardrobe he typically wore on days he slipped into one of his melancholies and spent most of the day sleeping. Sigyn, however, had seemed to misunderstand the order and had dressed in one of the oldest dresses she owned, a very elaborate Asgardian dress with various precious gems sewn into it using silver thread. When Pepper clarified Tony’s suggestion of old clothes meant ‘clothes you won’t mind being damaged,’ Sigyn quickly swirled around and appeared in another pair of Loki’s ratty old Asgardian pajamas. The two of them looked like a weird of set of twins in the same outfit, Loki’s clothing ironically dwarfing his shorter wife. The rest of the group had also shown up in various holey shirts, old workout gear, and Clint, for some reason, in a tie-dyed 80s crop top. Oddly enough, it looked just like the sort of thing Clint would have stashed away in the back of a closet or bottom of a drawer.

“Why must we wear ‘old clothes’?” Loki asked Stark curiously as he helped Sigyn help Steve and Bruce clear the table of its decor for better pumpkin carving space.

“It can get messy,” Tony pointed out.

“Yeah, there’s a lot of goop inside pumpkins,” Steve nodded. “Though the seeds are great if you toast them…” Steve looked at Tony expectantly.

“Of course we’re toasting the pumpkin seeds after,” Tony rolled his eyes. “What do you think I am, a heathen?”

“What does one’s tribe or clan have to do with whether or not they eat seeds?” Sigyn asked, curiously.

“Is it like why Sigyn’s uncle will not allow vinegar on his ship?” Loki asked curiously.

“No, that is because foods with vinegar make him seasick,” Sigyn shook her head. “And it would be a truly shameful thing if he were to appear seasick.”

“No… I just meant that we are hip people and eat baked pumpkin seeds,” Tony groaned. “Not lame people who don’t.”

“Only those with functioning hips are allowed to have baked seeds?” Loki asked, even more confused. “Midgard has very strange culinary rules.”

“Why are the lame singled out? Those with lame hips have just as much right to eat seeds!” Sigyn said indignantly. “They may even derive more benefits…”
“I think all Tony is trying to say is that yes, he likes to bake pumpkin seeds,” Bruce interjected, “and that only people who don’t bake pumpkin seeds are not fun people to be around.”

“Well, why didn’t he just say that,” Loki huffed.

“Okay, I really need someone to invent and Asgardian-to-English dictionary, like pronto,” Tony groaned. “Either that or the whole Allspeak thing needs to get updated for the modern era.”

“Perhaps it is your language that needs updating,” Loki huffed. “I have traveled the Nine Realms far and and nowhere have I had such trouble with translation than on Midgard.”

“Fine,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I’ll get right on changing the entire English language. In the meantime, any more questions I can help you with?”

“So, what exactly is a pumpkin?” Loki asked

“You guys don’t have pumpkins in Asgard?” Clint frowned.

“They are native to the Americas,” Bruce pointed out. “Perhaps they hadn’t spread to Europe in the times Asgard and Earth were still in contact with each other.”

“They have pumpkins,” Coulson insisted. “We ate a pumpkin pie when we were there.”

“Oh yeah,” Clint nodded. “It was pretty good.”

“I have never heard of a pumpkin before,” Loki shook his head. “And I have traveled greatly in the Nine Realms.”

“This,” Tony said, producing a pumpkin from where he had stashed them so no one could get a jump on carving, “is a pumpkin.”

“That,” Loki replied, “is not a pumpkin.”

“That is a winter squash,” Sigyn agreed.

“A what?” Tony said.

“I mean, technically she’s right,” Steve agreed. “It is a type of squash that is harvested toward the winter.”

“There are many types of winter squash,” Sigyn nodded. “Some are long and thin. Some have crooked necks. Some are orange or yellow or green. Some are round and some are oblong.”

“You don’t have different names for them? They’re all just winter squash?” Pepper asked, curiously.

“Yes,” Sigyn shrugged. “They are squash. They are harvested in the winter.”

“And so all the squash harvested in summer is summer squash?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Yes?” Loki snorted. “What would you call it?”

“So… Asgard has fifteen different words for sword, eighteen words for boat, and a term that literally translates into English as ‘yelling horn,’” Tony surmised, “but only one word for every type of squash in existence?”

“No,” Loki replied. “We have several terms for every type of squash in existence. Winter squash and
summer squash. And I suppose you could just say squash as a third.”

“Gourds,” Sigyn offered up. “Sometimes we use the word gourds.”

“Four words,” Loki simpered in Tony’s direction.

“This is madness,” Tony grumbled.

“It is Asgard,” Loki shrugged.

“The Russian language does not distinguish between pumpkins and other kinds of squash,” Natasha pointed out, setting out her own knives for pumpkin carving. No one was brave enough to question why she had her own set of high-end carving knives ready to go. Especially not after she pulled out a mini knife sharpening wheel from somewhere in her baggy sweatpants.

“Okay, that’s it,” Tony grumbled. “I’m hiring a linguist on staff.”

“Natasha’s got a doctorate in linguistics,” Clint said.

“Did she get it the same way you got your GED?” Tony asked, curiously.

“That’s classified,” Hill pointed out. Tony let out a long, annoying whine.

“Perhaps we should get to carving the pumpkins before they decide to carve up Tony,” Steve stage whispered to Pepper.

“Excellent,” Loki grinned, mysteriously producing two knives from the folds of his pajamas. “Where should I begin?”

“I am not putting my hand in there,” Loki shook his head as he cut the lid off of Sigyn’s pumpkin and then his own.

“But sticking your hand in the pumpkin goop is one of the best parts!” Tony complained.

“It’s nice and squishy,” Clint nodded, taking a handful of pumpkin goop and bringing toward Loki’s face.

“It is disgusting,” Loki huffed, setting both pumpkins aside. “I shall not participate.”

“Are you really going to quit something because one part of it isn’t easy?” Pepper pointed out. Loki frowned as Sigyn began rolling up her sleeves. While on Loki the shirt sleeves only came to his elbow, they nearly went down to Sigyn’s wrists.

“Here,” Sigyn offered, taking the pumpkin in her lap, “since you removed their tops, I shall remove the innards. I think they feel fun!”

“You are the most spectacular creature alive, my dove,” Loki said to his wife lovingly as she began pulling out tiny fists full of pumpkin goop and setting it aside.

“Please tell me this is the first time the two of them have dismembered something together,” Tony groaned. Loki and Sigyn each bore conspiratorial grins, making Tony groan even louder.
Loki ended up shielding himself from behind a cabinet as Clint, Tony, Coulson, and briefly Steve got into a pumpkin goop throwing fight. The men were frighteningly accurate with their throws, being careful to bean each other and not a knife-wielding Natasha or Maria Hill. The pumpkin goop was then set aside so the seeds could be picked out later for toasting. When the hollowing out of pumpkins was complete, few of the assembled group were clean. Hill and Natasha had no pumpkin on them though Pepper did have some in her hair from where she had absently tucked a strand behind her ear. Sigyn had pumpkin up to her shoulders while most of the guys were covered in the stuff - either from their goop fight or in Bruce’s case just being messy when emptying out pumpkins.

With a bit of seiðr, Sigyn cleaned up herself and a very thankful Bruce. Pepper got up and washed her hands while the remaining pumpkin-goo-covered carvers seemed fine to be filthy. Loki did his best to distance himself from anyone who might accidentally rub their nastiness on him and held his knife rather threateningly any time one of them headed to the dining room table to fetch a new carving knife or tool. When Tony asked Loki what his deal with pumpkin innards was, Loki merely responded:

“Do you not say cleanliness is next to godliness?” with a quirk of his mouth and brow. Tony then launched into a fifteen minute diatribe on the need for an Asgardian-to-English dictionary and perhaps an idiom dictionary as well.

Pumpkin carving - or decorative gourd carving as Loki referred to it as he refused to say a word as ridiculous as pumpkin - served as a reminder for most of the Avengers team and liaisons as to who in the group was handy with a knife. While artistic in most things, Steve was on the average side when it came to carving and whittling. He did manage to carve a 3-D looking skull out of his pumpkin, but his one year of art school was nothing compared to the apparent innate knife-related talents of Natasha, Maria Hill and Loki. Hill had carved out one of the most demonic faces anyone had ever seen on a pumpkin while Natasha’s had a very realistic spiderweb and spider on it. Loki had carved a wolf that looked startlingly like Fenrir on it, causing Sigyn to laugh and clap with approval when he showed it to her.

The other carvers were somewhat less ambitious. Bruce carved a simple, ordinary jack-o-lantern with Sigyn following his lead. Clint carved not with any of the equipment provided but with one of his arrows. His only unique addition was an eyepatch on his pumpkin, which made Hill, Coulson, and Natasha all snicker. Coulson gave his pumpkin vampire fangs and Pepper carved a cat out of hers, which looked rather cutesy. Tony resisted the urge to go “aww” when he saw it the first time, but did compliment Pepper on her skill. Tony was informed he could not carve a pumpkin that was barfing out pumpkin goop and so restrained himself to carving the “pi” symbol into his pumpkin.

Finally, the candles were lit and lights turned off to give the Asgardians a demonstration of the lantern part of the term “jack o lantern.” The lights were turned back on and candles extinguished after a few minutes when Tony noticed Sigyn was making deep, romantic sighs at the flickering candlelight and that she and Loki were becoming increasingly entangled, inching closer and closer toward one another in the soft light. Weird hookups were only okay in Stark Tower on Halloween, not on Halloween Eve. The pumpkins finished, those who were not grossed out by pumpkin goop or preparing for early meetings the next morning began sorting out pumpkin seeds for baking.

“I must admit,” Loki said, sitting far across the room from those doing the sorting, “your art of decoratively carving gourds into lanterns is quite interesting. I am sure Mother would like to hear of this. She is always trying to find new and interesting ways to spice up the palace decor in the fall months.”

“Oh, yes,” Sigyn nodded. “Though I do not think she would want to carve faces in them. Perhaps more artistic patterns…”
“We should suggest it as a family activity first,” Loki grinned.

“Yes, because your mother will not see through your thinly veiled attempt to have Thor cut himself,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “You know he isn’t very handy with small knives.”

“I imagine Thor isn’t handy with a small anything,” Hill commented. She then sent a glare around the room, as if challenging anyone to derive a sex pun out of what she had just said, and returned to her sorting of seeds.

“Yes, well,” Loki said, looking as if he was trying to read Hill’s mind all of a sudden, “he isn’t. Nearly sliced his arm off the first time he tried to filet a fish on his own during one of our ill-fated father-son bonding trips with Odin as boys. I later twisted my ankle in a rabbit hole and it rained the entire trip, giving all of us colds. And yet that doesn’t even break the top ten of misguided familial bonding hunting trips Odin took us on. You’d think a man would know his own son from a moose before firing a crossbow.”

“Your posterior healed,” Sigyn shrugged before continuing to line up some of the seeds she had sorted.

“Please tell that story in its entirety and leave out no details,” Clint begged.

“You brought it up,” Sigyn reminded her husband. “Either one of us can tell him the correct version or he can beg Thor for the highly exaggerated version at a later date.” Loki looked thoughtful for a moment, but his thought process was interrupted by Pepper storming into the room.

“Edward Anthony Stark!” Pepper fumed. “Why did Happy just call me downstairs to sign off on a delivery of forty-five black cats for the party tomorrow?”

“Uh…” Tony said, trying to think up a plausible excuse before just putting on his boyish charm and shrugging. “Happy Halloween?”
The Old Holy Evening

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Loki doesn’t mind when Sigyn gets his goat

The person who invented the phrase “like herding cats” had obviously never seen a daughter of Freyja with the creatures. With nowhere to ship the cats off to that evening, it was decided that they had to reside in the Tower at least for the night. Tony got an earful from Pepper about the quasi-legal status of where the cats had come from, the fact that his money may have supported an illegal kitten mill and that the idea of everyone taking their own black cat home as a party favor was grossly negligent and probably animal cruelty. The fact that Clint - and at least fifteen other party guests by JARVIS’ reckoning - were allergic to the animals just hammered home how irresponsible the idea had been. Pepper momentarily regretted not letting Tony have his tarantulas.

Now, the cats were happily milling about Sigyn and Loki’s chambers, and honestly looked like they fit in there. Sigyn had utilized her magic to make delicious saucers of milk and cream for the cats as well as protect any furniture it was not okay for them to scratch. When Tony followed Pepper into their chambers later that evening to plan what was to be done with the cats, he resisted the urge to take a video of the current scene. Sigyn had conjured twenty-odd Asgardian cat toys and was using her seiðr as entertainment for those not interested in Asgardian playthings. Loki was sprawled across his usual divan, reading a book, sipping from a cup of tea and seemingly ignorant that a dozen different cats were climbing over him, kneading his clothes or curled up against him. While Tony had gotten the initial impression Loki hated cats, it was quick to deduce he only disliked the creatures that were servants of his mother-in-law.

“Thank you for taking care of them,” Pepper said to Sigyn, “especially on such short notice.”

“It is no problem,” Sigyn smiled. “They are such sweet creatures.”

“I must say, it is the oddest proposal I have ever witnessed,” Loki said, not looking up from his book.

“Proposal?” Tony and Pepper said at the same time, bewildered.

“Was that not your intention?” Loki said, flopping his book on his chest and looking at Tony inquisitively. “I had thought your wealth had something to do with the amount of cats. Am I mistaken?”

“What do cats have to do with…” Tony said, his commitmentphobic self not even able to get out the words “marriage proposal.”

“My dear,” Sigyn said, “I believe this is one tradition that only Asgard carries?”

“Oh,” Loki frowned.

“On Asgard, it is common to propose to a woman by giving her a kitten,” Sigyn said. “It is a symbol of the new home you will built together. It is merely an Asgardian custom, though.”

“No,” Tony insisted. “I just made a mistake and ordered a lot of cats.”
“I suppose it happens,” Loki shrugged, having returned to his book. Tony wondered if there was a story there.

“I take it you didn’t get a cat?” Pepper asked Sigyn curiously.

“I got Jor,” Sigyn smiled, stroking the snake bracelet fondly. “At any rate, it is merely an Asgardian tradition. In Niðavellir it is traditional to gift jewelry as a means of proposal. In Vanaheim, a man doesn’t give a woman anything. He typically just launches into negotiations with a woman’s father, and if her father is smart, he will get her a nice brideprice, some lands, boats, and other items of wealth from her intended. Of course, naming a boat or ship after one’s love is considered the height of romantic sentiment.”

“Not usually the woman’s actual name,” Loki pointed out. “It is unlucky to name a boat directly after a person for some reason. Instead, one names a boat after a nickname or a possession of the loved one in question. King Njörd's ship, the *Iron Boar*, was named for one of his wife’s pets - who was an iron-colored boar. The warship was apparently as ferocious as the creature himself.”

“ Járn was a sweet, old lazy thing by the time I first met him,” Sigyn recalled. “Grandfather has a boat named after both of his children and all of his grandchildren. And one named after Idis as well.”

“Sigyn’s boat is a fierce little cutter that can about outrun every ship in Vanaheim,” Loki smirked as he turned the page. “It is called *The Fetterer.*”

“I also had a great uncle once who had two boats named for his wife,” Sigyn said. “One was the Pearl, his nickname for her, which he took out when she was pleased with him. He took his smaller craft, the Sea Witch, out when they were in the midst of a fight.”

“You are not buying me a boat, Tony,” Pepper threatened him.

“Are you sure it wouldn’t make you the teensiest bit less mad?” Tony asked hopefully. Pepper ignored him.

“Well, until we can get the Tony Stark Home for Unexpected Black Cats up and running,” Pepper said, side-eyeing Tony. “Do you think you could keep them here? It’s nigh on impossible to adopt out black cats around this time of year because so many people are out there wanting to hurt them. And I am not letting these kitties into already overcrowded shelters.”

“I said I’m sorry!” Tony sighed. “And I’m putting out the memo first thing in the morning to see if anyone else on staff wants a cat. They’ll probably just think it’s an aftershock of earlier this month.”

“If you cannot find anyone to take them,” Sigyn said, “my mother has never turned down the offer of a cat in her life.”

“There are a lot of things your mother has never turned down in her life,” Loki grumbled. “A sycophantic compliment and an offer of tumbling around in the bed chief among them. It would be unfair for these poor creatures to wind up the care of such a dangerous being. Unless of course we can train them to relieve themselves in her shoes. Then I think they would make her fine pets.”

“We’ll keep your mother in mind,” Pepper said to Sigyn. She hoped Sigyn was able to prevent Loki from teaching the cats any bad behaviors in the next few days.

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Last minute preparations for the party were in full swing, and Loki found himself in the midst of things. He had been helping the various members of the event staff put some finishing touches on
things and get everything set up on the party deck for the caterers when Loki realized one of the
black cats Tony had adopted in a storm of Halloween fever had snuck into his pocket. The calm cat
had just relaxed himself in the pocket of the black knit cardigan Loki was wearing and was contently
snuggled up there. He only hoped Sigyn didn’t panic when realized one of the furry felines had gone
missing. He had argued against leaving her alone with forty-odd cats, but Tony had insisted Sigyn
was an animal whisperer and Loki had a debt to pay back to society.

Of course, the prince of lies could hardly see how helping prepare a party was paying a societal debt.
Certainly, a portion of society - namely friends of the Man of Iron - would benefit, but fake cobwebs
and spiders along with ghostly-themed hors d’oeuvres and modern Midgardian music were hardly
what Loki would call a show of sincere apology. He was pretty sure the social event could easily fit
in with the punishment theme of his Midgardian banishment, however. The thought of putting in his
mandatory hour’s appearance at the fete where drunken Midgardians in costumes would grind up
against each other and then regale him with tales of previously inebriated exploits struck more fear
into his heart than any instrument or torture in the Asgardian dungeons. Scars, cuts and bruises
would heal but the emotional torment of being forced to socialize for someone of Loki’s caliber of
misanthropy was forever.

“So, what are you going as?” Whitney asked as the group went over the final table settings. Loki
took in a breath, but soon realized the question was not directed at him.

“Well, I had a great idea for this Black Widow costume,” Suze replied, “but then Stark handed down
that ‘no living superheroes’ rule so, I decided to go as a flapper. It’s not risque or anything. I mean, I
am not freezing my ass off on the subway from Wilmington just to spend like three hours here. Still, I
bet Cap’ll like that.”

“He’s from the forties, not the twenties,” Whitney rolled her eyes.

“What are you going as, then?” Suze huffed.

“I thought about using my sexy stewardess get-up from a party one of my friends had last year, but
this is a work thing, so I decided against going slutty,” Whitney replied. “So I’m going in this greaser
get up - leather jackets, black leather pants… I mean, if I’m going to have to work tonight I might as
well wear something I’m not going to have to be pulling up or readjusting all night.”

“Did you see what Bethany is wearing?” Whitney said in a low whisper.

“That slutty Cinderella costume?” Suze rolled her eyes. “You’d think she’d stop trying to sleep with
the boss now that the boss is technically just some guy who lives above the shop.”

“I mean, really,” Whitney snorted. “Who in their right mind thinks it's a good idea to try and hook up
with the boyfriend of the woman who signs your paychecks?”

“She’d be much better off going after Banner,” Suze agreed. “Do you think he’s a Hulk where it
counts?”

Loki resisted the urge to shove a few cake pops in his ears to drown out the sounds of the two
women giggling and critiquing various costumes suggestions. Certainly, similar conversations had
abounded in Asgard among Sigyn and her sisters - even his own mother along with them from time
to time - critiquing the apparel or behavior of a member of court, particularly one who had caused
any of them woe in the past. It still irked Loki that a well placed curse, a subtle itching potion or the
threat of being turned into any number of small, palace vermin didn’t seem to detract the women of
the court from insulting his beloved wife or her sisters in the same manner, either. While the gossip
between Sigyn and her sisters was usually in regards to something completely outre or ill-mannered,
the gossip about them was usually tactless and meant to make it apparent that they were not the class of women who belonged in Asgard’s court.

The concept of a costume party was unfamiliar but intrigued both Loki and Sigyn. Asgard had masques, the type of masked balls where everyone wore fancy dress and intricate masks similar to what one might find in Midgard’s Venice or New Orleans during Mardi Gras. Loki’s favorite personal mask was an ornate creation by his father-in-law shaped like a fox and he liked to wear it while doing the Asgardian version of dirty dancing with his wife, giving Sigyn a rather vulpine smile indeed as the evening wore on. Usually, the pair of them didn’t make it to the evening’s end. Sigyn was always happy to prepare for these masques and would prattle on about them for days afterward. When the evening was over, she always lovingly packed away the delicate masks they had worn.

Perhaps that was why masqued balls were so popular on Asgard and with his wife. They allowed one to be someone they were not and pretend that all was right with the world, even if for only a little bit. Loki knew that it was not rare for Asgardian commoners to sneak into the masques thrown by courtiers or even the Allfather himself - a la the Midgardian fairytale Sigyn now adored - but it seemed strange to him that there was a Midgardian holiday that revolved around pretending to be someone else. Or at least he thought that was how the holiday functioned. Loki was starting to wonder if the holiday had started out as some sort of masqued fete and devolved into a day wherein one could wear the most scandalous, xenophobic and inappropriate garb yet not be shamed for it.

After Loki had bookmarked several rather revealing costume choices as suggests for the evening, Sigyn had taken away his costume-choosing privileges. Loki knew that meant there were now good odds he would be dressed up in something utterly ridiculous - probably something terribly colorful or in the form of a Midgardian animal Sigyn found cute - but there wasn’t much he could do going forward. He had not yet asked what his wife had found for him to wear that evening and was honestly a bit fearful of the conversation. Worst of all, he knew that hopeful, sweet look on her face his wife would get when she presented his costume to him, and Loki knew that - no matter out ridiculous or embarrassing his outfit was - he wouldn’t be able to say no to his wife. His one consolation was that whatever outfit or costume his wife put on him she usually took off later.

Loki began humming to himself, hoping that whatever attire his wife provided might lead to some intimate play betwixt the two of them. Something about having her identity concealed made his wife very confident and just the right amount of naughty. For this reason, he sometimes made up a need to work with her on various concealment spells and potions or shapeshifting for that reason. Loki was startled out of his pleasant reverie when he noticed Maria Hill not-so-subtly glaring at him out of the corner of his eye. At least when Barton or the Widow attempted to spy on him, they did so without being painfully obvious about it. Well, except for the few times he told a joke Barton found funny.

“May I help you?” Loki asked her, annoyed.

“No,” Hill responded emotionlessly. Loki harrumphed and then went back to ensuring the newly delivered flower arrangements were set in their proper places. Still, he could feel Hill’s eyes on him as he worked.

“Am I the only member of the Stark staff you are stalking today?” Loki said. “It might seem quite odd if you just followed me around all day.”

“Why? Is it bothering you?” Hill scoffed. “I didn’t think that, as a mere mortal, I would be able to get under your skin so quickly.”

“Careful,” Loki warned, “you might get accused of sexual harassment with comments like that.”

“Please,” Hill snorted. “All anyone would have to do is take one look at you and see there’s no case
“And to think my wife considers you a friend of some sorts,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I know plenty of smart, funny, capable and badass women,” Hill retorted, “who have shitty taste in men.”

“I am starting to believe you do not get this calibre of witty repartee at your place of business,” Loki said, looking to find a space for the next flower arrangement he had just picked up. “In my experience, those useless grunts your Furious One employs can barely eke out more than few words before their miniscule brains give out from over exhaustion.”

Hill actually had to try very hard not to smile at that. She might even borrow the phrase or at least the overall sentiment the next time she had to yell at some of SHIELD’s overly-muscled and under-educated agents. To be fair, Loki had been somewhat entertaining her all day. Hill actually had to compose herself after seeing the so-called god of mischief donning a too-big black knit cardigan, unbuttoned and serving as something like a bathrobe over the gray t-shirt and twill pants he was wearing. He looked like a grad student or a Brooklyn hipster in a coffee bar. Hill desperately needed to know if this was Loki’s personal sense of style of his wife was dressing him.

In the midst of her internal debate over Loki’s fashion sense, she noticed something in Loki’s cardigan pocket was moving of its own accord. Stark was known for his technology that basically ran amuck, and Hill had more than enough experience with Barton and Romanoff - though mainly Barton - bringing back weird things in their tac suites they had forgotten about, Hill knew that strange things and Loki were never a good combination. She was instantly on alert.

“What’s in your pocket?” Hill asked, her hand going to where she had secretly holstered a gun beneath her leather jacket. Before Loki could respond, the cat that had made itself at home in his cardigan popped its head out of the pocket and let out a gentle meow.

“He apparently tired of our chambers,” Loki informed Hill as she relaxed. “I suppose he thought hitching a ride with me was a good way to see the sights.”

“I’m still not letting my guard down with you,” Hill warned him.

“Your threats petrify me,” Loki said sarcastically.

“Don’t think that because you get to play dress-up tonight you can create any shenanigans,” Hill warned him. “I’m here tonight to have fun, so I’m going to be really pissed if I have to clean up any of your messes.”

“I can assure you, madame,” Loki replied, “the only shenanigans I will be getting up to tonight will involve my wife and our marital bed.”

“If she’s smart, she’ll keep you tied to it,” Hill snorted as she started to walk away. “Remember, I’ve got my eyes on you.”

“Well,” Loki said to the black cat as it curled back up in his cardigan pocket, “let us get the rest of these bat orchids arranged. I am sure Sigyn will request a few for her garden.”

After returning the stray cat and himself to his chambers, Loki heard his wife humming in their bedroom. The cat bounced out of his hands and over to the giant pile of blankets were the other forty-odd black cats were snuggled up and asleep. Sigyn might have put a sleeping charm on them so
they would stay out of trouble for the duration of the party or she might have simply just tuckered the creatures out. He followed the sound of his wife’s humming only to find her putting the finishing touches on what appeared to be his apparel for the evening.

“I hope you like your costume,” Sigyn said happily. “I made it myself.” Loki held up what appeared to be a pair of goat legs that were intended to be the breeches of his costume.

“I am going as a goat?” he asked his wife, confused. He really hoped she hadn’t consulted Thor on good costume ideas.

“No, silly,” Sigyn laughed as she headed into the bathroom to get into her own costume. “You are a faun.”

Loki wasn’t sure how to react to his wife casting him the role of a Vanir forest pest. Well, they appeared on Asgard occasionally and frequently in Alfheim, but not in as great a numbers as on Vanaheim. The creatures referred to as mimmings or mimmingus on Asgard were known as fauns on Vanaheim and Alfheim, but Midgardians called them satyrs. While not nearly as lustful as the Midgardian variety, the fauns of the other realms were just as annoying. They loved nothing more than to spy a group of people on a hunt and then make a big kerfuffle of shouting, flute playing and general noise at just the right moment to scare away the game. They also liked raiding picnics and general mischief.

Oddly enough, Loki didn’t particularly like fauns though he did appreciate some of their tricks. Of any humanoid-like forest creatures, he felt more a kinship with the knoggelvi - known on Midgard apparently as centaurs. These creatures were very intelligent, and like the Vanir and Elves whose homeworlds they shared loved nothing more than staring at the stars, telling riddles and giving ominous, confusing and often nonsensical predictions of the future. Naturally, the knoggelvi were not to be confused with their terrifying Muspel cousins, the nuckelavee. While a knoggelvi, like a Midgardian centaur, had a horse body and a man’s head, a nuckelavee had a man’s head growing out of behind where the horse’s head was and were generally covered in intense flames. They also had a penchant for kidnapping people, dragging them off, and then throwing them in volcanoes.

As he heard Sigyn messing about in the bathroom, Loki pushed down his skepticism about the costume and ignored the voice in his head that pointed out how terribly he was going to be ridiculed for his apparel. It would make Sigyn happy, and besides, most of the mortals would probably be too drunk to even notice what was going on by the end of the evening. He put on the embarrassing pants and found, just like everything his wife made for him, it was exceedingly comfortable. He felt like he was cocooned in blankets atop his bed just before dawn. It was after putting on the hooved pants that Loki noticed the rest of his costume.

Sigyn had created for him a set of magical goat-like horns that resembled his beloved helm. All he had to do was put them where he wanted and they magically attached to his head perfectly, as if he had been growing them out of his noggin his entire life. She also had a pan flute he could tie to his faun belt and vambraces that matched the belt. He looked over himself in the mirror once the costume was fully assembled. One of the horns was slightly askew, but he thought it gave him a roguish countenance.

“Are you finished, dear heart?” Loki called once he was finished.

“Nearly,” Sigyn called back. A moment or two later, she emerged and Loki’s breath caught.

She had dressed herself as a Vanir forest fae, donning a beautiful dress that seemed to be made of mostly of flowers, leaves and a gauzy material that looked like fresh morning dew on blades of grass. She had woven flowers into her hair as well as one of her lovely flower crowns and used her seiðr to
manifest what seemed to be real yellowish-green wings like those of a dragonfly. The wings seemed to flick and move as if they were really capable of sending his wife into flight. He outstretched a hand to her and when she took it, made her do a little twirl so he could admire the full beauty of her costume. Errantly, Loki wondered if she might leave it on for a bit when they returned to their rooms that evening.

“You look simply radiant, lykyng,” Loki pronounced.

“And what do you think of your costume?” Sigyn asked him hopefully.

“Wonderfully made, as always, dearest,” Loki told her. “And extremely comfortable. I didn’t think it would be this easy to walk around with hooves. I just hope I provide a charming companion for you this evening.”

“Just one more touch,” Sigyn said, with a wave of her hand, she gave his face some of the traditional painting markings the Vanir fauns tended to apply to their faces and chest.

“I look rather wild now, don’t I?” Loki smirked at his wife as he glanced at himself in the mirror.

“You look extremely handsome,” Sigyn informed him, a hand against his bare chest.

It was then Loki realized that his wife had probably dreamt up this costume as a way to get him shirtless. Suddenly, he could picture her as she was hard at work during the past week creating their costumes, dreamily imagining what he would look like in this ensemble. She was looking up at him in a hopeful manner, desperately seeking his approval for her choice. Though he was glad Thor wasn’t here to see him in this particular getup, Loki had to admit he would wear just about anything to earn one of the sultry gazes his wife was giving him now. He smirked to himself, gave her a sly wink and as she began to laugh, swept her up into his arms with the full intention of carrying her all the way up to the party.

However, they were met in the elevator by Banner and Coulson in what must have passed for costumes on Midgard. Banner was wearing green sweat pants, a blue tie around his forehead and a shirt that resembled a turtle shell of all things. When Sigyn asked, Banner explained that he was a character from a Midgardian children’s tale. Loki swore Banner said the tale was about something called teenage mutant turtles that practiced some sort of martial artistry, but it had to be something Allspeak had mistranslated. Coulson was dressed up like someone named Captain Kirk from another Midgardian fictional tale set in a future where Midgardians roamed space. He showed a picture of Captain Kirk on his phone to Sigyn and Loki, who laughed mirthfully over how much the character somewhat resembled Thor. When the elevator finally arrived on the party deck, they found Stark - dressed as some sort of half-man, half-bat - arguing with someone hiding under a sheet.

“Steve,” Tony sighed. “This is the lamest thing I’ve ever seen. Really? A bed sheet with eyeholes cut out of it?”

“What? I’m a ghost!” Steve said.

“I get it that a bedsheet might have been the top costume of 1933,” Tony sighed. “But you could have gone with something… I don’t know… that made it look like you actually put in some effort?”

“Like what?” Steve huffed.

“I dunno, Popeye?” Tony shrugged. “You could totally pull off Popeye. And you love spinach out of a can!”

“Tony,” Pepper said, striding up in a costume that looked like it was composed of vines, “don’t
pester him. Just because you blew an insane amount of money to get your own, customized Batman costume doesn’t mean everyone has to show the same amount of dedication.”

“Says the sexy Poison Ivy whose costume I spent the same amount on,” Tony snorted. He looked at Cap and sighed. “Can I at least pin a bowtie on you so there aren’t pictures in the Post tomorrow asking why you dressed up like a member of the KKK?”

“Sure,” Steve said, grimacing under his sheet. “Wouldn’t want my name and those bastards said in the same breath.”

“Well, hello, Leonardo,” Pepper smirked at Banner’s costume.

“Oh, my god,” Tony grumbled. “Are those sweat pants and a sweatshirt? At least Coulson here went top of the line. Good going, Captain.”

“Huh?” Steve asked.

“He meant Coulson,” Bruce explained. “He’s Captain Kirk.”

“Oh yeah, from the Star Wars,” Steve nodded.

“Tony,” Pepper said, seeing Tony was about to bust a blood vessel, “how about you go get Steve that bowtie and I’ll handle things here.” Tony muttered something and then stormed off.

“Was it something I said?” Steve frowned.

“You are a spook!” Sigyn said to Steve happily.

“And you’re one of the fair folk,” Steve smiled. “My mother used to tell me stories about them all the time when I was a kid.”

“It’s a beautiful costume,” Pepper agreed. “Did you make it yourself?”

“I made both my and my husband’s costumes,” Sigyn nodded proudly. Everyone seemed to notice for the first time that Loki was half a goat.

“You have satyrs on Asgard?” Banner said, intrigued.

“A similar creature,” Loki shrugged, “but they are rare on Asgard. More prominent in other places.”

“The forests of Vanaheim are full of them, though they also dwell in the Elvish lands,” Sigyn nodded.

“It’s not a spell, is it?” Coulson asked curiously as Loki took a few steps further into the room on his cloven hooves.

“Just pants,” Loki replied, “though they are rather realistic. Sigyn is an extremely talented seamstress.” Sigyn blushed and then beamed up at her husband. The loving glances between the two were interrupted by Tony’s annoyed reappearance in the room.

“Is no one taking this seriously?” Tony grumbled.

As he returned with Steve’s clip-on bow tie, Tony found himself between Barton and Romanoff. Clint had dressed up in the same Renn-faire knock-off Robin Hood costume he had been wearing for ages while Natasha was dressed up as an FBI agent, complete with what appeared to be some actual FBI gear and an actual pistol attached to her hip. The only thing not standard issue about her costume
was the Ray-Bans sunglasses on her head. Later in the evening, she would reveal she had an actual facts FBI badge and ID within the costume with her picture on it, identifying her as Nadine Roman.


“Romanoff, you are a spy three-hundred and sixty-four days out of the year,” Tony said, “why, on the one day when you can dress up to be anything you like, do you dress up as a spy?”

“Technically, I’m dressed in the gear most fraud agents wear,” Natasha pointed out. “Though the pants belong to a guy I used to date from the human resources division.”

“So, technically, she’s not dressed as a spy,” Barton pointed out.

“What?” Tony grimaced as Banner, Coulson and Pepper began to laugh. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re the figurehead of a multibillion dollar corporation,” Steve explained, “and Natasha came to your Halloween party dressed like someone who investigates guys like you for financial crimes.”

“Oh, real mature, Natalie,” Tony snorted.

“Hey, I’m not the billionaire superhero who came to his own party dressed like a billionaire superhero,” Natasha snorted as she gestured to Tony’s expensive Batman costume.

“I think he just wanted to see if he could get me into this get-up,” Pepper admitted.

“She said no to Jessica and Roger Rabbit,” Tony admitted.

“Well, hopefully Hill at least put some thought into her costume,” Tony said. “Other than Coulson, I have a pretty low opinion of the costume division at SHIELD. Or at least it’s agents. If you guys don’t have a costume division you probably need one.”

As if summoned, Maria Hill appeared as the elevator doors opened. She was dressed as a pirate - complete with eyepatch - but there was something about her costume that was familiar. It was mainly black and didn’t look exactly in period with the golden age of piracy. It looked rather modern, in fact. She wasn’t wearing a pirate hat and it only took a moment before it dawned on the assembled avengers who she was dressed like. Barton doubled over in laughter and even Natasha broke out in a grin. Coulson smirked and shook his head.

“I thought you were banned from bringing out the Dread Pirate Fury costume ever again,” Coulson said.

“Only at SHIELD and SHIELD-related events,” Hill replied. “Though, if anyone asks, I’m just dressed as a pirate and any resemblance to the director of SHIELD is a mere coincidence.”

“Okay,” Tony pronounced. “Hill wins the costume contest of those already present. Next year, Hill, how about you take Rogers aside and explain to him that putting a sheet over your head doesn’t cut it any more.”

“I don’t know,” Hill mused. “He’s definitely the least recognizable of you. It could be any six-foot-two, two hundred and fifty pound super soldier under that sheet.”

“Sorry, but my ma would roll over in her grave if I spent any money on a Halloween costume,” the sheet replied.

“You went to art school,” Tony pointed out. “Couldn’t you have at least have papier-mâchéd
something? Or gotten Glinda the good fairy over there to conjure you up some ruby slippers?"

"Those would be most difficult to walk in," Sigyn frowned.

"Come on, Tony," Pepper said. "Guests are going to arrive soon."

"Alright," Tony said, "You sourpusses go get liquored up. Each of you have to mingle for a minimum of fifteen minutes."

"Mingle?" Loki frowned.

"Not you, Goat Man," Tony said. "You stay as far away from everyone as possible."

"That," Loki agreed, "I can do."

Loki had to admit this costumed party of Stark’s wasn’t as bad as it could have been. He had been sipping from a delectable, fruity Midgardian cocktail that Stark had named vampire’s blood or red devil or Satan’s curse or something of the like. It was largely composed of strawberry schnapps, vodka, gin, triple sec, and something called Southern Comfort. He had downed several drinks already, but didn’t feel anything from the Midgardian alcohol. Sigyn had been downing the candy corn jello shots all evening but the only thing they had done was make her slightly more hyper. Of course, that could have also been the massive amounts of sweets she had been indulging in.

While Sigyn had largely flitted around and entertained herself by meeting Tony’s guests and dancing around, Loki had remained a largely antisocial mystique about himself. While he had indulged his wife in a few awkward Midgardian dances and allowed her to introduce him to a few people, Loki was much more content watching her airily move around like the belle of the ball. She had gotten numerous compliments on her costume and had cheerfully shared each one of them with Loki, who had encouraged her pride in her accomplishments. Sigyn so rarely got these kinds of confidence boosts back in Asgard.

After about three hours, most of the party guests had were pleasantly inebriated or had affixed themselves to one person. There were quite a few of Stark’s guests who were singling out their hook ups for the evening, though none of them seemed to be any of the Avengers. Banner had already headed back to bed and while Steve looked like he would rather be back in his rooms, he was still hanging around to be polite. Clint was doing body shots with models while Coulson was chatting up with an old MIT professor of Tony’s. Natasha and Hill were over by the bar, shooting down everyone who dared approach them.

For his part, Tony was curled up with Pepper across the room. Loki had discreetly helped Tony hang his gory paintings and, if Pepper had noticed them, she was either too inebriated or too focused on what to do about Tony’s new cat collection to complain about them. As Pepper tried to stay awake in Tony’s lap, Stark himself was busy chatting to Rhodey and another man Loki didn’t know. Rhodey had shown up a little later than intended due to some last minute military business, and dressed like an astronaut - which Sigyn explained to Loki was some sort of Midgardian space voyageur. The other man Rhodey and Stark were talking with was some Midgardian astronomer friend of theirs, who was dressed up as an even older Midgardian astronomer. Sigyn informed Loki the astronomer’s name was Neil de Something Or Other and the two of them had a very nice conversation about spiral galaxies. He had also recommended to her a book on Benjamin Banneker, the Midgardian astronomer he was dressed as, and invited Sigyn to come tour his planetarium.

Despite the occasional glare from Hill, Loki felt quite satisfied that he had behaved himself admirably
all throughout the evening - particularly because he hadn’t moved from the same spot all night long. As his wife fluttered about in her magical wings, Loki had sat in the same big leather chair, his hoof-and-fur-covered legs spread uncomfortably wide for most of those around him. Sigyn had been bringing him drinks and food all evening, and when she grew tired of flitting around from person to person in her fairy costume, would position herself on his lap and flirt with him relentlessly. He rather liked how uncomfortable it made Stark’s guests to see his pretty little wife hand feeding him grapes while sitting between his widely spread goat legs like they were both some sort of actual lustful forest creatures. But now, since everyone else seemed either be winding down or too drunk to hold a conversation, Sigyn had retired from flitting about the room and was now firmly planted in his lap.

“This has been great fun!” Sigyn pronounced happily.

“I am glad you have enjoyed yourself,” Loki leered at her. “I have most certainly enjoyed watching you do so.”

“I was worried you might be bored,” Sigyn admitted as Loki curled her closer to himself.

“How could I possibly be bored with watching you walk around in such a delectable outfit,” Loki replied, running his hand up the thin fabric on her back. “In fact, do you think it is too early to bid our farewells for the evening?”

“I’m sure we’d be forgiven,” Sigyn giggled.

Loki rose up out of his seat, bringing his wife up with him. He received a mock salute from Tony and with gentle nods of respect to the other Avengers - including Hill who begrudgingly gave him one in return - escorted her out of the room. The second the elevator doors closed, Loki turned to envelop his wife only to find her already pouncing on him. After some kissing that definitely crossed the line into foreplay in the elevator, Sigyn led him on a merry chase to their rooms and around them. It was evident she had put the dozens of cats in their rooms under a sleeping spell as they were not awoken by Loki and Sigyn tumbling around various parts of their rooms. When all was said and done, Loki woke up very late the next morning to the sounds of Sigyn feeding the cats in the living area. She had already cleaned up their costumes from the previous evening and gotten them ready to pack into the trunk to return with them to Asgard. Slipping his hands behind his head, Loki couldn’t help but smirk. Perhaps there were some enjoyable things about Midgard after all.
While Coulson and Hill had returned back to D.C., Natasha and Steve decided to cash in on a few days of well-earned time off. They didn’t have any missions to prepare for in the coming days as there was still being a lot of work done to wrap up their most recent once. The pair had agreed to stay in Stark Tower for the rest of the weekend. Thursday, after most of everyone’s hangovers had cleared, Steve began talking about team-building exercises again. The groans and moans he received indicated to him easily that no one wanted something physical. As Steve had been working to catch up on the modern era, he suggested a “movie night,” a term that was completely different in his day and age. Tony was enthusiastic about the idea and began planning a snack-filled sleepover style party where all of the Avengers got to show their favorite films. The only question was when to hold the event.

“What about Saturday into Sunday morning?” Steve suggested. “Natasha and I don’t have to be on our train until late in the afternoon.

“Sunday’s no good if you want Sigyn and Loki to come,” Tony replied.

“Why’s that?” Steve asked.

“They always set aside Sunday for their weird couple activities,” Tony explained. “They paint each other’s nails, braid each other’s hair, cook weird Asgardian foods together, play these weird board games, and then they read out loud to each other from their book collection. It’s actually pretty freaking adorable. Total relationship goals. There is also a seventy-percent chance that at least one of them will be naked throughout all of this. I’m not making it up. I had JARVIS run the odds.”

“I wish you hadn’t, Sir,” JARVIS intoned, “though perhaps taking some other pages out of Prince Loki’s book might do you some relationship favors.”

“Hey,” Tony snorted in the general direction of the A.I.’s voice, “I built your CPU and I can take it out.”

“I guess it’s true what they say,” Steve shrugged. “Happy wife, happy life.”

“Maybe this makes me a bad person,” Tony said, “but sometimes I wish Sigyn would use her powers for evil just for a little bit. I mean, if she asked him to put on a sombrero and a pink ball gown and dance the electric slide in Times Square, he totally would with no questions asked. He’s pretty lucky the woman he’s totally obsessed with returns the favor.”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “Loki’s definitely got something figured out that I haven’t yet.”

“Maybe he missed his calling,” Tony said thoughtfully. “Instead of trying to become the supreme dictator of whatever world he’s currently on, maybe he should set up shop as a relationship
“I’m pretty sure they would revoke his license if his advice consisted of telling people to murder and maim anyone who slightly insulted or disrespected their significant other,” Steve pointed out. “Clint said you guys went out to a restaurant and he broke the maitre d’s hand in five places for asking Sigyn if she wanted a kid’s menu.”

“No, he yelled at the guy for asking if Sigyn wanted a kid’s menu,” Tony shook his head. “He only broke his hand in five places after the guy asked if she’d like a booster seat as well. I thought Loki was going to get slapped with an assault charge, but it turns out Pep’s favorite Italian place is a mafia front, so they didn’t want to get the cops involved. The maitre d’ is also getting some lessons in manners courtesy of the don, who Sigyn charmed the pants off. Though not literally, because if that I had happened Loki would be in the midst of a mob war right now. In the end, all I had to do was Instagram the oso buco and caprese salad and we were good. Might throw in a few pics and hashtags for them next time we go. You know, to show there’s no hard feelings.”

“You didn’t explain what the mafia was to Loki, did you?” Steve asked worriedly.

“What do you think I am, stupid?” Tony snorted. “The last thing we need is the mayor of Mischieftown recreating the Godfather. Speaking of whom, I think we owe him a visit.”

Somewhere on their way to Sigyn and Loki’s chambers, Clint randomly appeared and decided to tag along with Steve and Tony as “there was nothing interesting on TV.” Tony and Steve had already collected their favorite movies along with Pepper’s - Tony was very proud of the fact that he knew what it was before JARVIS could reply Steve’s question with the answer - and now began the process of picking everyone else’s favorite films. Steve had wanted to ask Sigyn and Loki if they had any suggestions - despite Tony pointing out the Asgardian pair had even less pop culture know-how than Steve himself - and so Tony figured it was best to get them out of the way before asking everyone else. For his part, Clint sort of wanted to see how insulted Loki would be that anyone would assume he would deign to participate in any form of Midgardian culture. He also was curious if Sigyn had seen any animal-focused movies she might declare as her favorite.

When the door opened to Sigyn and Loki’s rooms, the three men were met by about ten or so of the black cats, watching them curiously. Clint easily sidestepped the creatures, covering his mouth and nose with his sleeve, while Steve grinned at the speculative little creatures. Tony waded through the waves of cats now coming to investigate the noise of the door being opened, the furry creatures brushing up against him as he went. The meowing is what seemed to alert Sigyn and Loki to the presences of their guests, Sigyn waving to Steve, Clint and Tony before turning back to the television screen. She and Loki were watching some Animal Planet show about kittens Sigyn had mostly likely put on to help entertain their feline houseguests.

“What is it you require?” Loki sighed tiredly, changing his focus from the three intruders back to his wife.

Tony, Steve, and Clint paused for a moment to take in the scene before them before responding. The cats had been climbing all over the furniture, some asleep and others playing with each other or the various Asgardian cat toys spread throughout the room. Sigyn was sitting on the floor in front of the sofa, watching the TV and eating ice cream out of the carton. She seemed to be wearing a couture wedding gown and there were cats curled up asleep all over it. Loki sat behind his wife on the sofa and was creating a rather intricate braid with her hair. He had a StarkPad sitting beside him on the sofa and was clearly following some kind of Pinterest tutorial to make his creation. Upon closer inspection, it seemed Sigyn had already returned the favor for her husband. Loki also had a large intricate braid with several smaller braids tied to it to make one rather unique hairstyle. Loki was
wearing his typical Asgardian pajamas with a black terry cloth Midgardian bathrobe overtop. Beside him were also several sleeping cats.

“Have you come to collect the cats?” Sigyn asked, seeming a little disappointed.

“No, but Pepper is working on it,” Tony replied. “She may just get a few of them adopted out at a time, so it probably won’t be all at once.”

“I have named them all, if that helps,” Sigyn said.

“Regular names or hard-to-pronounce Asgardian ones?” Clint asked.

“I could translate them,” Sigyn shrugged. “They are all very darling creatures. If Lady Pepper needs help finding them good homes, I would be willing to volunteer my services.”

“I’m sure she would appreciate that,” Tony said. “But we’re actually here because starting tomorrow, we are going to have a movie marathon.”


“Yeah,” Clint agreed, “if there is going to be long-distance running, I’m out.”

“No, you clods,” Tony rolled his eyes. “Films. Motion pictures. And seriously Clint?”

“What? I zoned out for a bit,” Clint shrugged. “But there isn’t going to be any running, is there?”

“So we are going to see the moving re-enactments of Midgardian skald tales?” Sigyn said happily, doing a little cheerful clap.

“Yeah,” Steve said, just as excited. “Everyone has picked their favorite movie and we’re all going to watch them. So, we came to ask if you guys had a movie you wanted to watch.” Loki muttered something under his breath that earned him an elbow to the knee from Sigyn.

“We have not seen enough of your talking stories to have a favorite,” Sigyn admitted as Loki tried to keep from grunting in pain. “Though Thor does have a particular tale he loves from his time in the Newest of Mexicoes. He watches it frequently in his chambers, particularly when he misses Lady Jane.”

“Well, we’ll add it to the list,” Tony nodded.

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Perhaps it shouldn’t have surprised Tony as much as it did that the only movie Jane and Darcy had exposed Thor to was Tangled. He had apparently watched it several times during his stay with them and since, even to the point that Jane and Darcy had grown bored of seeing it so many times. Of course, Thor wasn’t the person with the most confusing or terrible taste in movies. As Tony and Steve collected suggestions for movie night, Tony quickly learned which Avengers could and couldn’t be trusted to pick out films.

Steve had gone with his favorite old standby The Wizard of Oz while Tony had selected the first of the Back to the Future trilogy since he was only allowed one movie. Bruce had picked a sensible family-oriented film that wasn’t too cheesy in E.T. while Pepper’s favorite film was the decidedly more adult The Bridges of Madison County. Natasha and Clint were the ones who seemed to have the weirdest taste in films, though. Natasha insisted her favorite movie was some Russian-language supernatural thriller about vampires in present-day Moscow. Tony was ready to give it a chance until
Natasha informed them the only copy she had was in Russian with English subtitles. Tony moaned for a bit about being made to read the movie, especially after Steve and Natasha informed him having JARVIS do the voices was not a good substitute for subtitles.

Clint, as it turned out, had the worst taste in movies Tony had ever seen from anyone. He was also one of the most indecisive people Tony had ever met - himself included. Clint couldn’t narrow down his favorite film of all time, so he brought Steve and Tony to the DVD tower in his room to pick from his collection. Clint’s favorite sci-fi films included *Battlefield Earth, Howard the Duck,* and *Van Helsing* - though he admitted he enjoyed them more for their comedic value. His favorite other comedies included *Showgirls* and *Little Nicky.* He also liked weird blockbuster sequels like *Jaws: The Revenge* and *Leprechaun 4: Leprechaun in Space.* He even had that awful made-for-TV movie about the *Fantastic Four* on DVD. Johnny Storm already looked freakishly enough like Steve that Tony doubted very much Steve would be able to handle seeing the actor who played Johnny in the film - who also happened to be a dead ringer for the Flaming Torch when he wasn’t set alight.

Clint then begged for his movie to be *Harry and the Hendersons,* which Tony vetoed despite Clint’s argument that “it has an Oscar.” It had been the last movie Tony had seen in theaters with Howard as one Maria Stark’s last ditch attempts to get her son and husband to bond. Finally, they were able to talk Clint down to *Air Bud,* though Tony knew it would probably take weeks to convince Sigyn that dogs couldn’t be trained to play basketball. Tony also briefly confiscated the little notebook Steve was using to write down things he was interested in learning more about until Steve promised not to write down any film suggestions that came from Clint.

As Tony and Steve - with some help from Clint when he wasn’t napping or nesting in the rafters - ordered the various food stuffs they felt their movie night would require, Sigyn worked with Pepper on ensuring the cats were properly rehomed. Pepper had worked on contacting a local animal shelter that Stark Industries had worked with before and asked them to advertise for the cats on their site. Stark Industries would waive the adoption fee for each animal and give a matching donation to the shelter in exchange for their help.

Sigyn had worked with JARVIS to take photos of each cat in a way that almost made it seemed the pictures had been done at a portrait studio. They had also taken brief videos of each cat in action. Sigyn then crafted bios for each pet along with their name - translated into English, of course. JARVIS was also running background checks on anyone who applied for the cats to ensure they would be given a good home. Sigyn and Pepper then divided up the various cat toys Sigyn had conjured along with some Midgardian cat toys, treats, and supplies to be given to each new family taking one of the cats home.

A vet recommended by the shelter also came by Stark Tower to make sure all the cats were spayed or neutered. Pepper had offered double the house call fee per cat as well as had Happy bring over and then ship back any and all equipment needed for the procedures free of charge. Sigyn had assisted the vet, leaving her to wonder if this strange woman had some sort of veterinary skills or training herself. Following the procedures, Sigyn and Pepper had both found themselves laughing uncontrollably at the site of all the cats clunking around in their plastic cones.

By Friday night, everything was set up for the first of the potential adopters to come by and spend some time with the cat of their choice. Sigyn was a little sad that the pets would soon be leaving her and Loki behind, but she knew it was for the best. After all, she wasn’t about to begrudge some Midgardians who needed a little feline affection in their lives from making a new friend or two. She was still a bit saddened about the whole thing, however, and Loki noticed this only after a good twenty minutes of laughing at the cone-covered cats milling about their rooms.

“You’re doing the right thing my love,” Loki said to his wife soothingly after she had confided her
worries in him. “Besides, these are Midgardian pets with Midgardian lifespans. You would have a very hard time seeing them age in what is a blink of an eye to us.”

“I suppose,” Sigyn sighed.

“And you said so yourself,” Loki continued, “this gives an opportunity to others to share in the joy of these creatures. You have given them a good start in life, and I am sure they are all very grateful for it. Besides, we could hardly give all the time and attention they deserve - especially when we have our own pets to think about. Fen and Kolr are probably jealous enough as it is.”

“You’re right,” Sigyn admitted begrudgingly. “And if we were to adopt another pet, I suppose one from Asgard would be best.” Loki grunted and mentally filed that comment away. He honestly thought they had enough pets as things were, but if Sigyn had her mind on a cat, they would probably end up with one. Hopefully, he could at least secure a cat for his wife without Freyja’s involvement in the process at the very least.

“Well, perhaps the plan for this small festival of Midgardian storytelling via talking boxes will take your mind off things,” Loki suggested. “I’m sure it will pale in comparison to any skalds’ tales we might hear at court, but I suppose one must make do with what one has.”

“Alright,” Sigyn agreed. “I suppose we should head to the evening meal.”

After Sigyn changed her clothing and Loki attempted to rid his apparel of the cat hair with the lint roller Stark had provided, the pair of them headed up to the communal supper. Burgers and hot dogs were on the menu for the evening, with Bruce manning a special George Foreman grill for the tofu and portobello mushroom burgers he and Sigyn preferred. Loki followed behind his wife with his own meat burgers and happily watched as she assembled her meal from the toppings provided. While Loki did not have the god-like appetite of Thor - who could have easily polished off five burgers, a cauldron full of fries and still had room for dessert - he did manage to eat three burgers, and even more fries than Steve. Before dessert could be served, Tony called everyone together for an announcement about the “movie day” they would be having.

“All right, everyone,” Tony announced Friday night at dinner. “Get ready. It’s up and at ‘em by six-thirty tomorrow so we can start watching promptly at seven a.m. It’ll be thirteen straight hours, give or take, of movie madness with all of the popcorn, candies, sodas, and various other foods you could only dream of. I even hauled by personal cotton candy machine and caramelizer out of storage and had them cleaned for the event.”

“You have a personal cotton candy machine and caramelizer and I’m just now finding this out?” Clint said, angry. “It’s not cool to hold out on your teammates like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said, slightly bewildered. “I wasn’t aware that was something you needed to know.”

“See,” Clint said to Natasha, “I would actually read SHIELD dossiers if they had important information like what culinary equipment someone is in possession of or how close the nearest roller coaster is to their lair.”

“I am telling you,” Natasha huffed, “that guy who built his creepy science experiment lab underneath an amusement park was a one-time thing and won’t happen again.”

“Back to the subject at hand,” Tony said. “Comfy clothes are preferable for the all-day binge-a-thon, so pajamas are cool. What is not cool is grossing out other people. I don’t want to see any under the blanket hanky-panky or thinly-veiled dry humping.”
“Why do I feel like that rule is made for two people in particular?” Loki muttered.

“What about nail painting?” Sigyn asked curiously. “And hair-braiding? Like at the last similar function?”

“Nail painting, sure,” Tony nodded. “Hair braiding will be approved on a case-by-case basis. You realize your husband can get a little creepy with his hair braiding technique, right?”

“It’s a moral outrage that we are being singled out thusly!” Loki huffed. “Sigyn enjoys it when someone plays with her hair. Just because the act can be most intimate and rather sensual...”

“This is exactly why I said case-by-case basis,” Tony rolled his eyes. “Furthermore, no purposefully farting so you can have the entire couch.”

“That was one time!” Clint protested.

“We will also be watching the films in chronological order of when they were released,” Tony announced, “mainly because I’m it would be helpful to have two happy children’s movies following Natasha’s Russian vampire thriller. You know, for those of us who want to be able to sleep at night.”

“It isn’t that scary,” Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Also, as an addendum to that,” Tony said, “no one is allowed to make fun of anyone else’s movie or their reaction to the movie. Except for the movie chosen in absentia by Thor, because he’s not here to defend himself.”

“Hear, hear!” Loki agreed.


Not only did Tony Stark have an entire cinema mode for his communal living area but he had enough related equipment he could open his very own snack bar. In addition to a popcorn machine on wheels like those back in Steve’s day, he had his cotton candy maker, his state-fair-style caramelizer, a slushie machine with room for three different flavors, a nacho cheese dispenser, and had overnighted enough boxed movie theater candy to stock an entire movie theater for the Friday night rush. Big pretzels had also been baked for the occasion and two entire vending machines had been moved up to the room for drinks.

While Steve and Tony arranged the food, Pepper, Clint and Sigyn had made sure there were plenty of comfy blankets, pillows and snuggle room in front of the big screen. Some furniture was moved around for optimal viewing. JARVIS had helped to ensure no one’s viewing would be obstructed and that each person was in a position where they could get up to freshen up their food or use the facilities without causing a major disturbance to any one else. Set up complete, Steve’s pick of the 1939 Wizard of Oz went into the player promptly at seven a.m. Loki and Sigyn were the only ones in the room who hadn’t seen the film before, and while they both seemed to enjoy it, there was one problem Loki had with the movie.

“I find it personally offensive that magic users are depicted as evil in this tale,” Loki grimaced.

“Glinda uses magic and she’s good,” Sigyn pointed out.

“She’s a dullard. And she reminds me of your mother,” Loki huffed. “And why is the only male in this film with any sense of magical ability portrayed as incompetent? Is that how it always is?
Women who use magic are fine but men who display these abilities are inferior?”

“I think this is about more than the movie,” Tony surmised.

“It’s sexism!” Loki hissed.

“Where did you learn that word?” Tony said, surprised. He turned to Barton. “What have you been teaching them?”

“Not sexism,” Barton shrugged.

“How is the Wizard of Oz sexist?” Tony groaned, knowing he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“Actually,” Natasha pointed out, “the definition of sexism is gender discrimination rooted in prejudice or stereotyping. While it is typically applied toward women, there is also gender discrimination against men. Gender stereotyping can also be used against men, such as the belief that a man who doesn’t earn more money than his wife or takes more responsibility for caring for children or even wears his hair long is a wimp or less of a man.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. “There’s a misconception that men who show emotional fragility, have a lack of self-confidence, and don’t subscribe to the stereotypical provider/protector role are somehow less than or ‘sissy.’”

“Is Cap going back to school to major in gender studies?” Tony asked.

“I’ve been catching up on my reading,” Steve admitted. “Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan…”

“Tash, promise me you’ll let him borrow something to read that isn’t on a required-reading list at one of the Seven Sisters?” Barton sighed. “You know, something that he can read just for fun when he’s not on missions.”

“We’re doing The Handmaid’s Tale next,” Natasha smirked. “Fun enough for you?”

“I would like to read this tale,” Sigyn mentioned.

“As would I,” Loki nodded. “Tell me, which of your Midgardian skalds wrote this work?”

“This is movie night,” Tony said, annoyed. “You guys can find some other time to do book club night. And Cap, I really need to get you a reading list. Tolkien, Lewis, Asimov, le Guin, Heinlein, Bradbury, Douglas Adams, some Arthur C. Clarke…”

“Don’t leave out Dune or Neil Gaiman,” Banner agreed. “You probably missed Orwell and Huxley too. Oh, and George R.R. Martin if you want to get into some high fantasy stuff. I know it’s not science fiction, but you can’t really watch ‘Game of Thrones’ until you’ve read the books.”

“What is this Game of Thrones?” Loki asked, intrigued.

“He’s not allowed to read it,” Tony proclaimed, pointing to Loki. “Might get too many ideas.”

“I’m sorry, but Philip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut were my jam back in high school,” Clint snorted. “Or at least during the period of my life when I should have been in high school.”

“That’s it,” Tony said. “Big Green, Legolas and I are starting the book club. And we’re only reading sci-fi and fantasy.”
“Fine,” Natasha snorted. “Margaret Atwood is sci-fi and fantasy. We’ll keep reading *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

“Terry Pratchett!” Banner exclaimed. “How could we forget Terry Pratchett?”

“The skalds of Midgard have such strange names,” Sigyn mused.

“Okay, everybody,” Tony said. “We gotta keep on schedule. The one is Bruce’s pick - 1982’s *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. It’s about an alien who falls to earth and his friends have to help him get back to his homeworld before the government can capture him, possibly for use in weird experiments. Sound familiar to anyone?”

While the tale obviously did have some connections with Thor’s first trip to Midgard - Loki wouldn’t have been surprised if Lady Jane and Lady Darcy had used candy to lure Thor to safety - Natasha and Clint decidedly denied any suggestion that SHIELD had any plans of cutting Thor open and doing experiments on him. Steve had liked the Buck Rogers reference - though it had made him a little sad - and Sigyn was ready to locate E.T.’s homeworld - possibly so she could adopt one of his cousins. Steve had teared up a little at the movie, though he was mainly impressed with how fair animatronics had come.

Tony spent a good deal of time introducing his pick - *Back to the Future* - including five minutes arguing that it would be everyone’s benefit to watch the entire trilogy. Once Pepper shushed him, he put in the movie and sulked for a bit until the opening scene began to play. Oddly enough the three people who had never seen the film before - Loki, Sigyn, and Steve - had no context for what the 1980s or the 1950s were like, though they all seemed to go along with the time travel theory. Though Loki disputed that plutonium was useful in any sort of time travel enchantment.

“Then what would you use, Mr. Wizard?” Tony snorted.

“As the film portrays, time travel is a very fickle and finicky business,” Loki said. “It is best not to mess with it. In fact, I have only done so once and that was to retrieve a favorite athamé I lost about three hundred years ago. It requires a herbal mixture, a good wine from the year intended to travel, some blood, certain bird feathers and an hourglass encased in silver. You must put yourself under a cloak of invisibility once you have arrived to avoid paradoxes, and prepare to vomit profusely for several days at random intervals after you have returned.”

“Wait, so you’re saying time travel is possible?” Clint said, excitedly.

“So long as you do not change anything major,” Loki shrugged. “Recovering something that is lost is all well and good and the intention of the spell, but you cannot use it to change anything that might alter the future.”

“Changing the future always has devastating consequences for the person who changes them in the present,” Sigyn nodded. “Typically, if one wants to see an alternate reality it is safe to travel to an alternate dimension or timeline. Of course, one shouldn’t interact with anyone in those realms either. It’s more like walking through one of your Midgardian re-enactment villages or festivals.”

“I’m sorry.. time travel and alternate dimensions and parallel universes…” Tony said after pinching the bridge of his nose. “Are you guys saying this is all real or are you just fucking with us?”

“I will say, your Stephen Hawking is on the right path,” Loki nodded. “As is your Einstein. It’s too bad your so-called Midgardian science and mathematic calculations haven’t quite caught up yet.”

“Bruce, are you hearing this?” Tony screeched.
“Yeah,” Bruce sighed. “But they aren’t going to teach you anything.”

“Screw movie night,” Tony said pointing at Loki and Sigyn. “The two of you are teaching me how to time travel right now.”

“Don’t have the ingredients I need with me,” Loki shrugged. “Using a time stone would be effective and definitely less dangerous, but the last known one disappeared eons ago.”

“Besides, it wouldn’t be in your best interest long-term for us to show you how,” Sigyn shook her head. “Midgard’s magisters are working very hard and coming very close to these things. If we showed you, it would take away from your pride and accomplishment in doing it on your own. And it is so adorable to see the way Midgardians react when they discover something new.”

“Even if it’s something you’ve known about for a thousand years?” Bruce said as Tony began pacing the floor in anger.

“It’s like when a child learns to walk,” Sigyn shrugged. “It isn’t something that can exactly be taught. It must be figured out on one’s own. Besides, you have come so far in so many years. Why, I understand you even had a ship go to your moon! It’s very impressive!”

“For what? A species that only lives 80 years tops?” Tony snorted.

“Sigyn gave you a compliment,” Loki warned him, his eyes narrowing.

“This is bullshit,” Tony said, collapsing back onto his seat. “I bet Thor would teach us time travel if he were here.”

“Thor can’t even teleport himself from one end of his bed to another without forgetting his arm and having to reattach it,” Loki harrumphed. “And your attitude toward the entire thing shows you are not ready for time travel by any means.”

“I’m telling Odin on you,” Tony threatened.

“No one is telling Odin on anyone,” Pepper said, “now, can we finally watch my movie?”

Tony had initially made fun of *Bridges of Madison County* the first time Pepper had showed it to him, but it was only after learning it was actually her favorite movie and watching it with her for the first time Tony had come to outwardly - albeit begrudgingly - admit he thought it was a good movie. Inwardly, he cried like a baby after it just about every time and spent most of the movie hiding behind Pepper to avoid anyone seeing his reaction. Steve, Bruce and Clint also cried at the end while Loki didn’t understand why Robert Kincaid didn’t simply kill his lover’s husband and then take her and her children back home with him. Even after Bruce and Clint somewhat explained the Midgardian concept of divorce to Loki, he still thought murder was the best solution. Sigyn didn’t seem to refute Loki’s idea that murder was a good solution for romantic problems, instead snuggling closer to him as Tony went to take out the movie and put in another one.

It just so happened to be Natasha’s Russian-language vampire action flick. The film was quite possibly the opposite of *Bridges of Madison County*. Bruce was a little squicked out at the blood and gore, though he had to admit the filming techniques and special effects were pretty interesting to watch. Tony tried to get through any parts of the movie that creeped him out by talking constantly through them and after the third time he asked Natasha why Russian fashion in 2004 looked like American fashion in 1994, she threatened to gag him for the rest of the film. Clint, who had seen the film with Nat several times, occasionally ruined major moments by saying things like “here is comes” or “this part is great.” While Sigyn didn’t mind the blood and gore, she did seem upset by the fact
that one of the characters had named his pet dog “Ugly.” Loki was intrigued by the supernatural storytelling - particularly the shapeshifting aspects - and afterwards no one could convince him Midgardian flashlights weren’t objects of important magical power.

Needless to say, Air Bud was a welcome relief for those who had found the previous’ movies violence hard to handle. Natasha did end up gagging Tony ten minutes into that film after he wouldn’t stop obnoxiously pointing out the unrealistic parts. Bruce and Steve appreciated the happy ending, and Sigyn was completely enchanted by the talented pooch. While Loki admitted he hadn’t exactly hated the movie, he did swear revenge on Clint for letting Sigyn known Air Bud and Loki would love to watch them.

“And finally,” Tony announced, as the sun was beginning to set outside, “we come to Thor’s choice - a.k.a. the only movie anyone has ever known him to watch. Ladies and gentlemen, for your viewing pleasure, a Disney computer-animated re-telling of a fairy tale about a girl with long hair named after lettuce.”

Loki was briefly relieved that the children’s tale before them now completely awed Sigyn, who occasionally whispered to him how similar he and the Flynn Rider character were. Loki had to admit the tale had its interesting parts and it’s clever tunes, but he also didn’t like the fact that magic users were depicted as villains, nor did he understand why the princess of the tale was literally, the princess of the Kingdom of Crown. It may have had something to do with how unilingual most Midgardians in this section of the realm seemed to be. As the film ended, Loki looked up over the top of Sigyn’s head - as she was curled up beside him - to find Steve, Clint, Pepper and Bruce all looking a little teary-eyed. Even Tony was trying to blink back some moist eyes from behind the mouth gag Natasha had fashioned for him and “forgotten” to take off.

“I can see why Thor likes it,” Steve said finally. “And I’m glad Disney is still making movies.”

“You might not be if you heard about what that guy did during the Red Scare,” Tony said as Pepper helped remove his gag. The knot was very tight and so Pepper had just slid it down from his mouth to his neck, making it look like Tony was either a cowboy or had just robbed a bank.

“Perhaps I should grow my hair out,” Sigyn said suddenly.

“If that is what you like,” Loki shrugged, “though you always look beautiful.”

“Do I always look beautiful?” Clint asked Natasha.

“You’re a disaster,” she replied.

“How is it I’ve done nothing but lay around all day and eat junk food and yet I’m really tired?” Bruce groaned, standing up to stretch. “This is ridiculous.”

“Great,” Tony moaned, as Pepper continued trying to untie Natasha’s knot. “I forgot we’d have to clean all this up. Maybe I should call in the bots.”

“I’ll get it,” Steve offered. “It was my idea.”

“You don’t have to,” Tony insisted before wincing as one of Pepper’s nails accidentally dug into the back of his neck.

“Sorry,” Pepper frowned. “This is on really good.”

“When I put a gag on someone, rarely do I intend to take it off,” Natasha smirked.
“Don’t worry about the clean-up,” Sigyn said airily. With a wave of her hand and a burst of golden seiðr, everything was magically put back in its place and cleaned.

“I was going to get more nachos,” Clint frowned.

“Princess Sigyn has equitably distributed the remaining food stuffs in your personal kitchens,” JARVIS intoned.

“Well, we really should be getting to bed,” Loki said, standing up and then helping Sigyn up beside him. “Sigyn and I have a rather long day planned ahead.”

“Yes!” Sigyn said happily. “Queen Frigga just sent us a copy of Aslaug Ragnvaldsdottir’s *Grimoire and Treatise on Transmutation* and Oddmund the Wanderer’s *Travels in Linnunrata*. Both are in the ancient High Vanir tongue, and she has asked Loki and I to translate them for Asgardian consumption!”

“Not that Asgardians consume literature with the same veracity as they do mead and cracking each other’s skulls open,” Loki rolled his eyes. Sigyn sent him a pointed look. “Though, I suppose it would be unkind to deny those who want to learn such things yet do not care to learn other languages such vital information.”

“You know the ancient form of the High Vanir tongue is most difficult to master,” Sigyn huffed. “Even you have trouble without the benefit of Allspeak.” Loki said nothing, just made further muffled farewells and escorted his wife from the rooms.

“So,” Tony asked when they had gone, “do you think they’re really translating texts from obscure languages, or was that just one of their code words for sexy naked fun time?” In response, Pepper yanked the gag back up his neck and into his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Natasha’s film is *Ночной дозор*, Nochnoy dozor, later released in English as *Night Watch*. It is loosely based on a Russian novel of the same name and has a sequel called *Day Watch*. 
Monday morning, Sigyn sadly arose from her bed, dressed for the day in black leggings and a too-big-black sweater, and headed into the living rooms. She used her seiðr to clear up the hnefatafl board and its scattered pieces that she and Loki had discarded after a particularly intense game had led to the pair of them making out and eventually losing their clothes the evening before. When Loki realized there was no way he could win a hnefatafl game against Sigyn, it was a common tactic of his to attempt to seduce her so they game would never finish and he wouldn’t have to admit defeat. It wasn’t a bad tactic as Sigyn would rather have her husband on his knees before her than have some bragging rights over a board game.

But even the intricate and erotic things her husband could do both with his body and her own were not enough to distract Sigyn from the task at hand. Today was the day the black cats would hopefully be going to their new homes, meeting up with prospective owners and - if JARVIS approved their backgrounds - going home with them. Making herself a light breakfast, Sigyn told repeated to herself the same things she had been telling herself and Loki had been telling her about why keeping the cats was impossible. They were short-lived Midgardian pets and there were too many of them. Besides, Fen didn’t like cats and might try to eat one of them for a snack. And Sigyn wasn’t one to deny lonely Midgardians a chance at feline companionship, especially since they themselves only had relatively short lifespans in which to enjoy things.

After finishing her coffee and cleaning up her breakfast dishes, Sigyn ensured all the cats were present and then proceeded to lead them down to the area where the adoption fair was being held. It would have been a strange sight for anyone to see her leading a trail of single-file black cats to the elevator and out of it, but Sigyn made sure to use a cloaking spell. She knew her husband wouldn’t have done such a thing - enjoying the mischief leading a parade of orderly black cats might cause - but Sigyn wanted the cats to be comfortable and relaxed, especially if they were meeting their new families that day.

When Sigyn arrived down in the conference room where the entire event was being held, she was happy to find Pepper already there, directing the Tower’s event staff on the finishing touches for decorating the room. Various cat toys - including some of the bizarre Asgardian ones Sigyn had conjured - were all laid out as well as litter boxes, water and some food. Pepper and Sigyn had agreed it might be nice for the families and potential adopters to get to play with the cats or see them in action before picking out a pet. There was also a table with light refreshments and a second table with a veterinarian and a member of the rescue group that was helping with the event so adopters could get more information both about the health of the pets and ways to work with the rescue group.

“This is very nice,” Sigyn said to Pepper, coming out of her cloaking spell and slightly startling the tall redhead before her. The cats, who had also come out of the spell, instantly dispersed to begin
playing with the toys and as yet taped down streamers.

“Thanks,” Pepper smiled. “The event opens in about thirty minutes and we’ll be holding it until seven tonight, just in case there are some folks who need to stop by after working hours. I’ll be here most of the day, but I might need to step outside some for other SI business.”

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded. “Let me know what I need to do to help.”

“Well, you already know the information about all of the cats,” Pepper smiled, “so I don’t need to give you one of the binders with all the info I’ve handed out to the vet, the outreach coordinator and some of the other volunteers.”

“Good,” Sigyn smiled. “And I have been trying to call the cats by their new names. I didn’t want them to be confused. They have all adjusted spectacularly. After all, many of them never had names before.”

“That’s… good to know,” Pepper said.

Some of the names Sigyn had given the cats easily translated into acceptable Midgardian names like Ashes, Cinder, Smoky, Misty, Smudge, Charcoal, Soot, Ember, Sparky, Shade, Shadow, Phantom, Midnight, Raven, Lucky, Mystery, Stormy, Outlaw, Bandit, Trouble, Sassy, Sable, Onyx, Pearl, Jasper, Opal, Beryl, and Obsidian. There were also some Asgardian names that didn’t exactly translate or that sounded better than their English translation. Hulda was apparently a popular Asgardian cat name because wild cats were seen as forest guardians there. Brenna seemed nicer than naming a cat “Burning Fire,” Bruni better than “Heat,” Dragi better than “Slowpoke,” Gala better than “Scream,” Helvet better than “Inferno,” and Kjell was preferable to its literal translation of “Large Pot or Cauldron.”

However, a lot of the cats had names that weren’t exactly easy on Midgardian tongues but didn’t translate very well. One of the cats had been named Steði meaning “anvil.” Others included Bjarki meaning “little bear,” Brauðsvíða meaning “burnt bread,” Dyrvörðr meaning “doorkeeper,” Hraun meaning “lava,” Hnipinn meaning “downcast,” Lodinkinni meaning “shaggy hair,” Móðr meaning “fury and wrath,” Nyi meaning “New Moon,” Lodde meaning “solder,” Spákonu meaning “prophetess,” and Víðishorn meaning “sconce horn.” These are all apparently not entirely uncommon Asgardian cat names, though Pepper had to admit Earthlings had some weird pet names as well. At least until Sigyn confessed the name of the last cat on the list.

Because she was such a good wife, Sigyn had allowed Loki to name one of the cats. It was evident why he had only been given permission to name one cat because he dubbed it Fretr, which literally translated into English as “Fart.” Pepper easily deduced there was a reason it was a rare and perhaps unappreciated privilege when Sigyn permitted Loki to name something, especially from the embarrassed grimace that had come over Sigyn’s face when she had to explain to Pepper that one of the cats was named “Fart.” It was apparently an Odinson tradition to give pets awful names. When the boys were small, Frigga had been gifted a kitten and later regretted the decision to let her young sons name the creature. Meinfretr - literally Stinkfart - had lived to a ripe old age for even an Asgardian tom cat, and one of his kittens - Stinkende or Stinky - still kept Frigga’s feet warm as she worked her loom. Frigga had thought her now relatively older sons would be more responsible in naming the new kittens, but the nearly teenage Thor and Loki had quickly proved her wrong. Of course, Frigga admitted she should have known the boys would do so because Odin was similar. He had named his majestic steed “Slippery” after all.

So, with Sigyn’s approval, Pepper renamed thirteen of the cats into more acceptable Midgardian names. Anvil became Muffin, Little Bear became simply Bear, Burnt Bread became Patches, Doorkeeper became Angel, Lava became Whiskers, Downcast became Tiger, Shaggy Hair was
simply Shaggy, Fury and Wrath became Fluffy, Nyi was changed to Nyx, Solder to Oscar, Prophetess to Oracle, and Sconce Horn to Blaze. Pepper delighted most in renaming Fart the Cat as Loki the Cat, which sent Sigyn laughing and excited to tell her husband later. Pepper asked JARVIS to take a picture of the look on Loki’s face when he realized his cat name had backfired. He had not been pleased and Sigyn reported he insisted on referring to the cat as “Fart.”

“You are okay with this, right?” Pepper asked Sigyn, concerned. “You look a little sad.”

“Why should I be sad?” Sigyn said, putting on her best happy face. “Today is a happy occasion! My friends will be meeting their new families and making new homes for themselves. I am very happy for them.”

“Okay,” Pepper said, “but let me know if you need anything?” Sigyn nodded and then focused her attention on playing with some of the cats.

Pepper had planned out the entire thing in an event space on the second floor used as a lecture area for school groups, investor groups, environmentalists and others who scored a tour of Stark Tower - or at least the parts that couldn’t be used for corporate espionage. Tony was now trying to claim that his black cat adoption fiasco had actually turned into a genius idea and that Stark Tower should use some of its hardly used areas to help charitable causes. He even used the phrase “corporate citizenship” in a sentence and then looked at Pepper like an elementary school student expecting a gold star from his teacher. Pepper had to admit that hosting some fundraisers or events that didn’t cost a couple hundred grand a plate and let ordinary people see some of the behind-the-scenes work at the Tower as an added bonus wasn’t a bad idea at all. Of course, she was still too annoyed with Tony to tell him that just yet.

Tony had been put under strict order that he wasn’t allowed to make an appearance at the adoption event because Pepper didn’t want him distracting from it. She also wanted to make sure that the people who were there were legitimately trying to adopt one of the cats, not just lingering around in the hopes of getting a selfie with Iron Man. Loki was on standby in case Sigyn needed any emotional support because of the adoptions, though Pepper knew he would most likely sleep until noon and then spend the rest of the day reading or working on theoretical experiments since he didn’t have actual magic still. Pepper made a mental note that she and Tony needed to find him another source of Midgardian employment. With Thanksgiving and the holiday shopping season coming up, there were bound to be plenty of seasonal employment opportunities with Loki’s name written all over them.

“Everything appears to be ready,” the head event coordinator for the day informed Pepper.

“Alright,” Pepper said with a nod, “open the doors.”

As soon as the doors opened and the first event guests came in, Pepper could spy four groups of potential adopters. There was a mother and her two children who had been promised a pet because they had been proven their responsibility. Next to them was a middle-aged couple who were looking to fill the void of their empty nest after their last child had left for college. The third group was an elderly couple looking to replace the pet they had just lost, and the fourth was a working mother, her stay-at-home husband, and their daughter looking for a second family pet. Rather than hang back and be depressed about the entire thing, Sigyn instantly swung into action. Pepper started to wonder if Sigyn had missed her calling as pet adoption placement agent.

Sigyn quickly introduced the mother of two and her boy and girl to Smudge, a playful but also tame creature that would provide the children with entertainment but not leave so much of a mess that their
parents would forever be complaining about cleaning it up. For the middle-aged couple, Sigyn brought over Sable, an energetic cat that liked to cuddle up with people. The elderly couple soon found themselves situated with Dragi, a more calm creature that also liked snuggling but would be easily for aging people to keep track of. The family of three found themselves playing on the floor with Fluffy, who Sigyn boasted liked to be around any kind of work - whether it was the little girl’s school work or cuddling up in the lap of her parents as they performed their own tasks. All four families went home with Sigyn’s picks after less than thirty minutes of play.

By noon, Sigyn had placed about half of the cats with various people who had come in and out looking for a new family pet. Only two of the people who had come to the adoption event so far had been outright turned down. Sigyn had jostled both of them out of the room as soon as they entered, and JARVIS revealed to Pepper one had an arrest record for animal cruelty. The second was an animal hoarder.

“She’s really good,” Rajani, the adoption center coordinator remarked to Pepper as Sigyn sent a family of five home with Nyx. “Where does she work for?”

“She’s the foster for the animals,” Pepper explained. “She’s not affiliated with any agency.”

“It seems like she’s done this before,” Rajani said. “And Dr. Goetz said she knew a lot about the animals healthwise.”

“Victoria’s mother was an animal foster the entire time she was growing up,” Pepper lied, feeling a bit guilty about it. Of course, she had to protect Sigyn’s identity as well. “She grew up around a lot of different animals, but cats were among the family favorites. Her mother still has quite a few of them and works as a foster too.”

“Nyx is going to be so happy!” Sigyn smiled, bounding back over to Pepper and Rajani. “The Garcia’s already have an older cat, and Nyx always does like a playmate. I daresay he might pick up some neater eating habits as well from an older role model.”

“Pepper was just telling me your mother is an animal foster?” Rajani said to Sigyn. Pepper winced, but Sigyn smiled, easily going along with the story.

“Oh yes,” Sigyn nodded. “She has a great farm with much space. She has always been fond of felines. There have always been several roaming around there, and those she cannot find a home for she takes in myself. Four of my older sisters live in the area as well and help her take care of them. And the pigs.”

“Pigs?” Rajani said, surprised.

“My grandmother had a pet pig the entire time my mother was a girl. In fact, he lived until I was rather young,” Sigyn nodded. “Pigs and cats have always been my mother’s two favorite animals. She has always had plenty of them on the farm.”

“Where is your mother from?” Rajani asked, interested to learn more about this pig/cat faster operation.

“Norway,” Pepper said. “Victoria and her husband are here visiting Tony.”

“We are very interested in seeing your land,” Sigyn smiled greatly. “It is much different from home.”

“I’m sure it must have been hard to convince your husband to take in so many pets at such a short notice,” Rajani mentioned.
“Oh,” Sigyn said airily, “he always insists he is more of a dog person that a cat person, but I think that has been just to annoy my mother. After all, he had cats growing up. His mother is just as fond of them. He would never admit it, but he very much liked having all of our recent little house guests curl up at his feet when he read. He even read the entire group some of his favorite cat stories and wished each of them an individual farewell last night.”

“My husband talks to our cats when he thinks no one is looking,” Rajani nodded. “He protested against adopting the first one, and now he feeds all three scraps from his plate at the table and cuddles up with them when we watch movies.”

“I suppose I couldn’t have married a man who wasn’t an animal lover,” Sigyn agreed. “He is terribly compassionate about all creatures, though you might not tell it by looking at him.”

“Is he coming down to help today?” Rajani asked curiously. A look of panic crossed Pepper’s face. She wasn’t sure if Loki would help with the adoption event or sabotage it so that Sigyn would be able to take her new furry companions home with them.

“No, I’m afraid,” Sigyn sighed. “I am sure he is quite busy with his own work today.”

Loki let out a deep, depressed sigh from the entire lab table he had commandeered and was now sprawled across, like some recently reanimated corpse that was still too morose to rise from the very area where he had been brought back from the netherworld and given a renewed spark of life. Of course, even as the Frankenstein analogy formed in Tony’s mind he found himself thinking Loki was more like a vampire - not Dracula but rather one of those Anne Rice creations that seemed to think immortality was boring and best spent dressed in attractive clothing and whining about how endlessly dreary and dull everything was. Of the three men in the lab, Bruce was the only one of them actually focusing on the task at hand: developing a solar-powered water purification device for use in third world countries.

“You know,” Tony said, “if our efforts to reduce disease and provide cheap, safe drinking water to those in need are boring, I’m sure you could head back to your rooms and find something more entertaining.”

“My rooms are empty,” Loki said mournfully. “Sigyn is with Pepper handing out the felines, and I am at a standstill in my own work.”

“How’s that?” Bruce asked conversationally while trying to figure out why the device didn’t seem to be absorbing heat properly.

“The crystals need to be recharged, which must wait for a good full moon,” Loki sighed. “I am waiting on a shipment of Elvish bulgross, Vanir nettles and her personal strain of weld from my mother before I can begin some of my new work. I can’t touch my current concoction because it must stew for another two days and nights. And as I am without any proper seiðr, there isn’t much I can do besides theoretics, a bit of scrying and some potion making. All of which I am currently bored with as it’s all I’ve done for half of one of your Midgardian years.”

“What does this stewing concoction of yours do?” Tony asked worriedly.

“It is protective,” Loki replied. “It helps block Sigyn and myself from the Mad Titan’s sight. Oh, I’m sure Odin has conjured up some sort of invisibility for us now that he knows, but I hardly trust his efforts. I know my mother has done something as well, but every little bit helps. That odious creature could see through things even Heimdall can only glimpse at.”
“Hey, speaking of Asgard’s all-seeing badass,” Tony said, working on some sort of chip needed for solar harvesting, “like, how far does this vision of his go? Like, could he see down to the bottom of the Mariana’s Trench and stuff, because I’m pretty sure if Godzilla or Krakens or Leviathans or Cthulhu exist, that’s where they’d be. I mean, even if they don’t, I’m sure there are some weird ass marine creatures it would be fun to know about.”

“I suppose he can,” Loki shrugged. “But Heimdall is only allowed to watch and report, not intervene. And I’m sure Goldeneye would disapprove for him letting you Midgardians in on secrets. He firmly believes you have to discover the wonders of your world for yourself, even if you all have made a mess of the place.”

“Barton let you watch Bond movies?” Tony gaped. “Without me?”

“I think the larger issue might be that Asgard has the ability to solve many of the modern issues our planet faces but is unwilling to share their technology with us,” Bruce pointed out. “I mean, here we are trying to develop a device that gives people clean drinking water - one of the barest of essentials - and you guys have constant renewable energy, magic healing stones, and the ability to manipulate the atom for your own gain.”

“I wasn’t aware Asgard owed you anything,” Loki pointed out. “After all, you managed to pollute your water, starve your fellow Midgardians, and create war, famine and pestilence all in the conquest of finite resources you know will disappear in the next thousand years. You’ve destroyed your own climate, but rather than try to find workable solutions, you spend hours debating whether or not the problem exists in the first place. And let’s not get started on the fact half your planet seems incapable of cooperating with someone whose skin is a slightly different shade of their own. Asgard may not be a perfect place, but at least we’ve never gone to war over something as ridiculous as the genetic codes determining what one’s body looks like. I mean, can you image? Waring with your neighbor simply because his eyes aren’t the same as your or because her hair is straight and yours is curly? That’s how ridiculous you Midgardians sound. Even if we tried to come here and offer help, you’d probably refuse to accept it on some made-up grounds and a false sense of morality. There is a reason the rest of the realms stopped intervening here, you know.”

“Don’t you guys have your own racial prejudices though?” Tony pointed out. “Like, Asgardians hate the Jotuns and the Vanir, and the Vanir hate the Dwarves and the Dwarves hate those giants who are always on fire?”

“Yes, but it’s not based on looks,” Loki shook his head. “Asgardians and Jotuns despise each other because the Jotuns increased the prices on their magical ice cave crystals and also had an insane king who attempted to enslave dark elf refugees after allegedly saying he was going to give them a peaceful respite from their dying homeworld. Jotuns hate Asgardians because they wouldn’t pay an increased price for magical ice cave crystals - despite being able to afford it - and they stole their homeworld’s magical source of power as punishment for Jotunheim’s insane monarch enslaving the remaining dark elves. Who the Asgardians let die off anyway.”

“Magical ice cave crystals?” Tony snorted. “What’s so powerful about that?”

“They are an energy source,” Loki shrugged. “Best as I can tell. And also very useful in old magicks. I don’t have much knowledge of them other than what I’ve heard from my mother for they started becoming scarce in her youth. Jotunheim went into total isolation after the Cask of Ancient Winters was taken from it - along with yours truly - and since then, no one has been able to access it. A few smugglers have tried, but usually they are swift returned back to their homelands in a giant block of ice.”

“What is it with crystals and all these other realms?” Tony snorted. “I thought all that crystals and
“chakras stuff is bunk.”

“There is power in suggestion,” Bruce shrugged.

“There is also the fact that Midgard has lost touch with its magical side,” Loki pointed out.

“Yeah, I’m calling bullshit on that,” Tony rolled his eyes. “But I’m still not convinced that your realms don’t have prejudices of their own. I mean, didn’t Asgard and Vanguard or whatever it is have some eons long war?”

“Vanaheim,” Loki corrected. “Perhaps I should express surprise that Thor never bothered to give anyone a lesson on the history, culture and political divisions of the other realms, but I’m honestly not shocked at all. Now, Asgardians hate the Vanir because there was some sort of scuffle over who had the right to colonize a barren moon that may or may not still exist. You see, Asgard believes in order to colonize a place one has to have a military force stationed there, but on Vanaheim it’s the first person to successfully grow food there.”

“On our planet it’s who’s the first to plant a flag,” Tony replied. “And if you don’t know about flags or have a concept of landownership, then you lose even if you’ve been living there for thousands of years.”

“And the Vanir hate the Dwarves because the Dwarves made archery go out of fashion with their magically smithed weaponry and the Dwarves hate the Vanir because the are always insulting their craftsmanship and also because of some bad trade deal,” Loki explained. “Dwarves like fish, but don’t have access to them - at least not tasty ones - and so the Vanir were trading inexpensive basically bottom-dwelling fish for high priced Dwarven gems for centuries before the Dwarves found out the Vanir were giving them the cheapest, least tasty fish in exchange for something of real value.”

“Sort of like how Native Americans had no concept of land ownership and so when they exchanged land for goods, they thought the European settlers were just giving them gifts as no one could really own land,” Bruce said. “Until they realized that Europeans definitely had a concept of landownership and that concept included coralling native peoples like cattle on the least desirable patches of land they could find.”

“See, this is why none of the other realms talk to you people,” Loki huffed.

“I thought there were more realms than just the Snowmen, Asgard and both halves of Sigyn’s ancestry,” Tony pointed out.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “The Elves hate everyone because the Elves think they’re better than everyone just because they may technically be the oldest of all the races and also have untold magical secrets they never share with anyone. And they are also very good looking people and they know it. And everyone hates the Elves because they’re so haughty and don’t like to share. And the Dwarves hate the Fire Giants because they are always finding secret pathways into Niðavellir and destroying things because Surtr has a thing against Odin. Surtr is always trying to find a quick route to Asgard so he can burn everything down, but usually just ends up finding Niðavellir instead. Honestly, Odin probably would be dead ten thousand times over if Surtr had ever developed a sense of direction.”

“And why do the Fire Giants hate Asgard?” Bruce prompted.

“Oh, no, Fire Giants and Asgard have gotten along quite well in the past,” Loki shook his head. “Almost as well as the Jotnar did with Asgard once upon a time. No, Surtr just hates Odin.”
“Why?” Tony asked.

“No one really knows,” Loki shrugged. “Not even Old One-Eye. Its as if Surtur just got up on the wrong side of his flaming bed one morning and decided that sending a fireball straight up Odin’s old backside sounded delightful. I mean, it sort of does…”

“But none of this is about race,” Bruce said.

“I mean, racial insults have cropped up in the past over issues, but everyone knows economics is to blame for most of it. Well that and some cultural misunderstandings.” Loki shrugged. “And until Nál got the not-so-brilliant idea to enslave Dark Elf refugees, slavery wasn’t really a thing in any of our worlds. Save for yours.”

“I thought you Vikings had slaves,” Bruce said.

“For the last time, we are not vikings!” Loki huffed. “And it wasn’t as if it were something we encouraged. I suppose they misunderstood. Thralls were someone sorcerers - usually practitioners of dark magic - enchanted to do their nefarious bidding for them. Sort of like making someone do the dirty work so you can establish your alibi and not be blamed for the crime. It is terribly illegal and quite a bit fun.”

“Yeah, I still think a little bit of the problem here is people not liking how other people look,” Tony pointed out.

“I don’t like how you look, but that doesn’t mean I have an urge to stab you,” Loki shot back. “The urge to stab you comes from when you open your mouth.”

“Maybe you should write a book about this or something,” Bruce suggested to Loki. “I mean, if Earth - Midgard - is going to have more dealings with these other realms, it might be beneficial for us to understand some of the background of these places.”

“Even if I were to lower myself to such a thing,” Loki huffed, “I doubt very much His Royal Anophthalmic-ness would permit it. In fact, you people probably owe me a debt of gratitude. Had I not made a mess of things in your nation’s southwest, Odin would have carried on with his observe-and-ignore attitude toward this plane.”

“Yeah, we’ll get right on the thank you notes,” Tony snorted sarcastically. “Why aren’t you up there helping get rid of the kittens, again?”

“Your key-keeper seemed to believe I might try something nefarious so that Sigyn could keep all of them,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Which is utterly ridiculous.”

“Yes, ridiculous,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I mean, it’s not like you’ve ever tried to hide illicitly-acquired animals in the Tower before.”

“You know, they say sarcasm is the lowest form of wit,” Loki pointed out.

“And how does it feel all the way down there in your pit of sarcasm?” Tony retorted.

“Very comfortable,” Loki responded. “Maybe sometime when you remove your head from your posterior you can visit.”

When the adoption event came to a close at seven-thirty that night, Pepper was utterly surprised that
all of the cats had gone home with new family members. Only about thirty people had inquired about the cats beforehand, and she expected even less to actually show up. There were already plans in place about what to do if not all of the animals could find good homes, and Pepper had already beginning prepping for a second adoption event to take place later in the week just in case. But the last cat had gone home fifteen minutes before closing time, and now there was nothing left to do but clean up everything.

Sigyn was working to help the event staff take down the streamers and clean up the last of the punch. All of the cat toys had gone home with the cats themselves, and so there wasn’t much left to clean up but that which humans had left behind. Pepper couldn’t help but notice that Sigyn seemed a bit sad - which was understandable given how tenderhearted she could be - and so she suggested Sigyn head on back up to her rooms for the evening, seeing as how the cleaning was pretty much done anyway. When Sigyn returned to her chambers, she found Loki braiding away at one of her lucets. Sigyn herself typically only used them for weaving, but she could tell Loki was braiding together some sort of protection charm. Frigga had taught Loki, Sigyn and all of Sigyn’s sisters this particular brand of magic, but Sigyn had never really caught onto it despite being one of the better weavers in her family. Loki, however, had mastered the craft.

“Is everything alright?” Sigyn asked, worriedly.

“Just a bit bored, dear heart,” Loki smiled, setting aside his crafting and extending a hand toward her. Sigyn walked over and took it, allowing him to pull her down onto the sofa with him and slightly into his lap. “How was your day?” Sigyn had remained composed the entire way up to her rooms, but something about that question made her burst into tears.

“They...they...they all went home!” Sigyn said mournfully tucking her head between his chin and shoulder, letting out a terrible sob. Loki tried patting her back and whispering some soothing words, but he honestly always felt so inept, so powerless when his wife was upset like this.

“Now, Sigyn, earlier you said you knew this was what was best for them,” Loki pointed out as she continued to sob. “We couldn’t give all of those creatures the attention they deserve, and what would become of them once we returned to Asgard? Besides, I’m sure you found them each wonderful people to take care of them.”

“They were just so adorable! And so sweet!” Sigyn sniffled. “And I liked having to care for them.”

“You have Skata and Skara and Jor to take care of,” Loki pointed out, the magpies twittering in agreement. “And of course, you have your most challenging quest - taking care of me.” Sigyn smiled and giggled a bit in spite of herself.

“Still,” Sigyn said, tracing invisible patterns on her husband’s chest. “It might have been nice to at least keep one of them for ourselves.” Loki rolled his eyes.

“My dear, you already have a snake, two birds, a fire-breathing horse and a hellhound,” Loki pointed out. “Not to mention any stray or injured creature that happens to have crossed your path.

“I know,” Sigyn sniffled a bit. “I suppose a part of me misses having a cat. We always had plenty of kittens of your mother’s to play with as girls, and Vár always has at least three and Idunn has a few, but it’s not the same to occasionally play with someone else’s pet when you have your own.”

“Sigyn,” Loki said pointedly.

“And you pointed out yourself that you didn’t give me a kitten when we got married,” Sigyn continued, doing the thing where she jutted out her lip and pouted. Loki usually found himself giving
in at this point.

“Sigyn,” Loki cautioned her.

“It’s just a kitten,” Sigyn said. “It’s not like I’m asking you to have a baby.”

Loki was certain he blacked out and possibly went temporarily cross-eyed. No, the last thing they needed right now while they were exiled on Midgard, being punished by the Allfather and technically on the run from Thanos was a baby. Especially not a baby that might inherit his tainted blood, Jotnar heritage and ability to shapeshift into terrifying primeval monsters at will. It wasn’t that the idea of a child with a genetic mix of himself and Sigyn wasn’t adorable. And Frigga had certainly never been quiet about her desire for at least one of her sons to make her a grandmother before she turned five thousand. But a baby was definitely not something Loki needed to be thinking about right now. Nor should it be something Sigyn should be thinking about. But he knew there was a way he could shake such thoughts from her head.

“Fine, we will look into getting you a kitten,” Loki sighed, causing Sigyn to laugh and clap childishly. “But, only after we have returned to Asgard. And it has to be a creature Fenrir can get along with. I am not having you pouting because he ate something he wasn’t supposed to.”

“Thank you!” Sigyn grinned, peppering him with kisses. Loki sighed as Sigyn raced off - most likely to dash out letters to her sisters about the new pet she was to receive.

He had made the right decision, Loki reasoned. Had he not agreed, Sigyn most likely would have gone and adopted a creature behind his back and hid it from him until there was no way he could convince her to get rid of it. And this way he could at least have some say in picking out the creature. Perhaps one of his mother’s felines would be having a litter soon enough. He was not taking a cat from Freyja. He made a mental note to give Fen the customary lecture about not eating any new creatures Sigyn had brought home. Regardless, Loki was convinced this entire episode was Stark’s fault. He would have to find a way to pay him back.
Of Cleanliness and Godliness

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Thor learns an uncomfortable truth about his parents

Pepper and Tony spent the entire morning of the day Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis were due to arrive back at the Tower arguing. Truthfully, it wasn’t an uncommon sight for other Tower denizens to find themselves entertained over breakfast by the bickering of their host couple. The pair usually had a blow up before Pepper went out of town on SI business, often squabbles started by Tony. Bruce said it was a psychological issue of Tony’s that he picked fights with Pepper before she left to further distance himself from her in case she never came back. Arguments started by Pepper usually started because of something Tony had done, like wearing a “Moustache Rides $5” shirt to ring the bell opening the New York Stock Exchange or trying to set Cap up with Rhodey’s newly single 98-year-old Great Aunt Gladys or saying “Senator Stern can suck my entire asshole” when asked by a reporter if he thought he would be subpoenaed for a new round of hearings about Justin Hammer’s involvement with an illegally-immigrated Russian terrorist.

However on this particular morning, the fight seemed to be coming from both sides. Bruce and Clint had found themselves trapped at the island bar in the kitchen while Tony and Pepper hashed things out. It turned out there was some - well, rather a lot - of unfinished business back at the Stark Headquarters and facilities back in Malibu. Pepper needed to head back to California as soon as possible and for a bare minimum of a month to get things sorted out. She wanted Tony to come too, especially since she knew he had several projects of his own in development there and he would be needed around as the owner of the company even if he no longer had the power to make executive decisions. Still, there was one problem in making a hasty retreat to the opposite coast - a problem that just happened to be a few floors down, naked, and wrapped around his wife like some sort of flesh cage or very handsy octopus.

“I was put in charge of him,” Tony pointed out. “And he’s not really supposed to leave the Tower. I don’t think I’m supposed to leave him here in anyone else’s charge. Besides, you’re always lecturing me about taking responsibility for things and following through on my promises.”

“You were never explicitly told you had to be with him at all times,” Pepper pointed out. “Besides, he’ll have Bruce and Clint here to watch over him. Darcy and Jane as well.”

“No offense,” Tony said, for the first time seeming to recognize Bruce and Clint were trapped in a room, “but the last people we need watching Loki are the guy who goes big and green at the first sign of stress and the guy who has been waiting for the perfect opportunity to send an arrow into Loki’s nether regions. And while Foster and Lewis can handle a lot, it takes both of them to handle Thor. I’m pretty sure it would like at least five Fosters and two-and-a-half Lewis’ to handle Loki. Maybe more.”

“Tony, we can’t put this off any longer,” Pepper said. “It’s been nearly eight months since we were in California. There’s business that has to be done. A company that needs to be run. The company that keeps this building’s lights on and heat running.”

“The arc reactor I designed keeps this building’s lights on and heat running,” Tony snorted. “And Loki’s not like some kid you can dump off with a babysitter or a relative for a while. He’s a teenage
godling with super powers, terrible mood swings, and a penchant for destroying cities. You can’t just leave him with the old lady across the street.”

“Hey,” Clint said. “I’m a much better babysitter than Mrs. Glenn was. My room doesn’t smell like dead cats and mothballs and I would never torture children by making them watch Lawrence Welk if they wanted dessert - which always turned out to be fruit cups. And I doubt Lewis or Foster would appreciate the comparison.”

“Why don’t you just call Thor down here to watch him?” Bruce pointed out. “I don’t think he’d pass on getting to spend time with Jane. And he did say he would look out for Loki.”

“That’s a great idea,” Pepper agreed.

“So long as Thor’s not too busy getting hammered across the various realms,” Tony pointed out. “And I’m going to say there is a seventy-five percent chance Thor will be too busy making out with Foster to notice Loki is getting into some mischief. Maybe we can call Fury and see if we can borrow Cap and Widow. I’m sure they’d like a good break for Thanksgiving and Christmas.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re like in Angola or somewhere,” Clint said, thinking back to his last conversation with Natasha. “Or Argentina, maybe. Azerbaijan. No, maybe it was a city. Aberdeen… no, Atlanta. Aleppo, maybe? Whatever. It’s something to do with internet piracy, a black market, and some guy who might be funding an African warlord.”

“I’m beginning to see why SHIELD is never afraid you’ll divulge important secrets,” Tony rolled his eyes.

“Tony, we are going to have to make this trip, whether you want to or not,” Pepper ordered. “So, either get on the phone to Fury or contact Thor through his intergalactic telegram service or however you get a hold of him. Just get someone here so I can go to California and work without having to worry about flying back here because someone blew up the Tower or Loki took the president hostage or any other disaster that’s just about run-of-the-mill around here.”

“Sure thing, sugar plum,” Tony called after her as Pepper stormed out of the room. He turned back to Bruce and Clint, who were now eagerly waiting to see how he proceeded.

“I’m not calling Fury for you,” Clint informed him.

“Ugh, fine,” Tony groaned. “I’ll call him. After I private conference with Heimdall. Of the two, he’s the least likely to hang up on me.”

Sigyn was terribly happy to have Jane and Darcy back in the Tower. What part of the morning she had not spent attempting to disentangle herself from her husband, succumbing to his early morning amorous affections, and then actually getting ready for the day Sigyn had spent cooking up various cookies, pies and treats she knew Darcy and Jane liked to snack on when working in the labs. Loki slept completely undisturbed as she whipped up a variety of delicacies. Happy would be bringing the two women and their luggage from the airport, and Pepper had planned a nice meal to welcome them home. They wouldn’t arrive until that afternoon and probably after a quick jet-lag induced nap, Sigyn was ready to welcome them. Loki would no doubt be fully rested and less of a grump by that time.

That was until Sigyn heard the sound of the Bifrost opening up over Stark Tower and the jolt of magical energy caused Loki to let out a violent snore and then tumble from their bed before standing
up in a defensive pose. With a sprinkling of seiðr, Sigyn sent the kitchen to work on its own, the whisk turning the batter by invisible hands, various ingredients being poured and placed in pans and the oven being properly heated and filled with various goods based on how long they needed to bake and at what temperature. She chucked off the Midgardian baking apron Loki had purchased for her via the internet — it was frilly and cute with an adorable floral pattern — and went to ensure her husband was solidly in reality not fighting invisible monsters. Satisfied Loki was only seriously annoyed and now going to complain about being woken up early for the rest of the day, Sigyn decided to head Thor off before he made one of his usual uninvited intrusions to their chambers and earned Loki’s further wrath.

Heimdall had apparently gotten the message to Thor and the Allfather about Tony’s needed sabbatical and the desire to see Loki was properly cared for in his absence. Upon his abrupt arrival, Thor informed Tony the Allfather understood the pressure of tending multiple estates in various parts of the realm and that one simply had to travel to make sure business was being conducted properly. There would be no repercussions for Tony and Pepper’s absence and, if Tony needed to crush any riotous peasants, Odin could even spare a few of the Einherjar who wouldn’t mind some quality head-bashing time. Tony politely declined, and Bruce was able to explain to Thor that Tony’s business was more of the “it’s harvest time and we need all-hands on deck” variety rather than “the peasants are revolting and must be quashed” variety.

While Odin had been the one to give Thor release to stay on Midgard indefinitely, it was the part of the message that announced Lady Jane was also returning to the Tower that day that made Thor decamp to Midgard with nothing more than his hammer and the clothes on his back. He technically didn’t have to arrive until the week of Thanksgiving, when Tony had actually invited him to come down, but Thor wasn’t a patient man. It had been two months since Thor had last spoken with his ladylove on account of Skype not working between the various realms. It had been even longer since he had actually held her - if one didn’t count his brief disappearance that night of drunken revelry when he showed up at her hotel room only to realize it was two in the morning in Hamburg and Jane was deep asleep.

Sigyn managed to head him off at the elevator as he was thundering not toward his own rooms but toward Sigyn and Loki’s to ensure his brother and sister-in-law were aware of his arrival. Thor sometimes seemed to forget that their sensitiveness to seiðr as well as the large amount of noise the Bifrost usually made would have alerted them to his presence already. Of course, Thor also forgot that barging in on people without being invited or knocking was rude and, considering the amount of times he had walked in on Sigyn and Loki naked or at least in the middle of lovemaking, it seemed he probably wouldn’t learn his lesson any time soon.

“Loki is asleep. Or trying to go back to sleep,” Sigyn said before Thor could even greet her. “Do not disturb him.”

“But…” Thor began.

“He will come out and greet you when he is good and ready,” Sigyn said.

“I smell ruiskakut, lussekatter, serinakaker and goro cookies! I love goro cookies!” Thor said happily.

“They are for Jane and Darcy,” Sigyn said. “You are not to touch them. Otherwise, I will make you explain to them why all of the cookies I made are gone, and I doubt you would want to face the twin horrors of their wrath.”

“Yes,” Thor agreed solemnly. “Jane is very partial to serinakaker. She would be most displeased. And Darcy enjoys cookies.”
“Well, I suppose I should get back to the kitchen…” Sigyn began before seeing the sad look on Thor’s face. She had a feeling her brother-in-law had some news. “Or perhaps I can help you get settled. The kitchen is running itself, anyway.”

I turned out it was a good idea that Sigyn went with Thor into his rooms. No one had touched Thor’s rooms since the smiling space prince had last left them, and Thor obviously had not been cleaning out his chambers during his occasional visits. It had apparently not occurred to Asgard’s crown prince to make some sort of arrangements for the cleaning of his chambers. Moldy food was sitting out on the counters and within the fridge. Sigyn quickly deduced Loki must have picked up the mouse he intended to release on the coffee shop from one of the family of creatures nesting in one of Thor’s kitchenette cabinets. The rest of the apartment had not fared much better.

All of Thor’s Midgardian clothing and some of the Asgardian garb he had left there on various occasions had obviously not been washed. Neither Thor nor Loki seemed to get the concept that even in Asgard their laundry had to be done — whether by servants or by seiðr — and that dropping it on the floor wouldn’t just instantly clean it and then return it to their drawers properly folded. Upon opening the door to Thor’s restroom, Sigyn barely had time to notice the mold growing in the shower before slamming the door shut and rushing back into the kitchen to vomit into the sink.

“Are you well?” Thor asked, panicked. Sigyn couldn’t help but glare at her brother-in-law. While her husband could be downright aggravating with his fastidiousness, Sigyn had to admit she much preferred that to the generally slovenly conditions Thor created if left to his own devices.

“Lady Jane will never wish to look upon you again if she smells these rooms, let alone beholds whatever travesty you have allowed to stew in your tub,” Sigyn shook her head. “We must get these rooms to rights. And by we, I mean mainly you.”

“But I’ve never cleaned anything in my life!” Thor gaped. “Well, other than the time Father made us muck out the stables…”

“It is about time you learned, then,” Sigyn replied. “After all, I don’t think Lady Jane is the type who will be content to clean up after you for the rest of her days. Honestly, given the condition of these chambers after such a short time I think such a task would be enough to make anyone break.” Thor at least looked contrite, but there was still a mix of confusion and fear on his face.

“It is too much,” Thor admitted. “Where would we even begin?”

“Do not think of it as cleaning,” Sigyn said, summoning various cleaning supplies from where Loki kept them in the utility wardrobe in the library. “Think of it like a battle.” She handed Thor dish rag and some cleaning spray of Loki’s own creation while she went to fill a bucket up with soapy water. “The cleaning supplies are your weapons and the grime and muck are your enemy. You must smite them Thor, until they are all gone and none can return.”

“Alright,” Thor nodded, looking around the room. “I am prepared to do battle!”

When Loki awoke that afternoon at the time he had intended to wake, he smelled wondrous things coming from the kitchen. After dressing and his usual grooming routine, he headed out of the bedchamber to find the spatula plating the cookies and various dishes either going into the oven or putting themselves in the sink to be properly washed now that they were devoid of food. A few bowls were continuing to be mixed or pouring themselves out either entire pans of brickle and brownies or in careful dollops of cookies. Sigyn was nowhere to be found, but Loki had an idea of where she might be.
Following the sounds of his wife’s humming and what could pass for a herd of elephants stampeding through a rock concert mosh pit, Loki entered his brother’s rooms to find the most amusing site he had seen in a long while. Sigyn was finishing up making a pot of tea, moving the kettle back over to the very nice Vanir tea set that Thor had no doubt received from their mother. It had a sugar bowl, creamer, honey pot, coffee pot, and tray for snacks all with a motif of baby goats on it. Frigga had even sewn some tea towels to match the service. But Loki would find time to tease Thor about that later.

Currently, Thor — Son of Odin; Crown Prince of Asgard; Wielder of Mjolnir; The Thunderer; Protector of Midgard; Lord of Bifrost, Ægishjöll, and Þorr; Defeater of the Troll-King Hrungnir — was down on his knees scrubbing scuff off the kitchen tile like a common scullery maid. Loki suddenly discovered something he didn’t absolutely hate about Midgard: the ability to capture moments like this in perpetuity via his smartphone camera. It was too bad Asgard did not have access to the CountenanceCodex or Titter or ImmediateGraph or whatever those idiotically “social networking” things were called so he could share this moment live. He would definitely be showing it off later, though. Frigga might even base a new tapestry on the picture, a woven commemoration of the one time Thor Odinson had cleaned something up behind himself. No doubt tales and songs about this day would soon pass into myth and legend.

“Ah, husband,” Sigyn said, pouring out three cups of tea. “It is good you are here. There is a rather nasty mold that may have become sentient since the last time Thor used his… facilities. Perhaps you could help your brother tackle that particular beast?”

“Oh, yes, Loki,” Thor said, looking up from his work hopefully. “You must help. It smells as worse than if a rock troll orgy had taken place in one of the manure piles outside the palace stables!”

“I am dreadfully, sorry,” Loki simpered, obviously not sorry at all, “but shouldn’t Thor learn to clean up after his own messes? I mean, he can hardly rely on me to go behind him and fix everything, especially if I am to remain exiled her for the remainder of my life.”

“I agree,” Sigyn nodded, causing Thor’s face to fall momentarily, “which is why Thor will be doing the actual cleaning. You will be there to supervise him and give instruction.” Thor seemed happier at that pronouncement until he realized Loki would be giving him orders.

“Well, if you put it that way,” Loki smirked, “it wouldn’t hurt to provide Thor some education on the matter of cleanliness. What is it Midgardians are always saying about teaching men to fish?” Sigyn looked at Thor pointedly, who sighed and stood up from where he had been scrubbing.

“Thank you, Loki, for helping me,” Thor said.

“Oh, don’t thank me yet,” Loki grinned. “Save it until the cleaning is done. Come, Thor. This way.”

Loki was surprised to find Thor had underestimated and Sigyn had undersold the intense stench of whatever was growing in the bathroom. Looking around, they both swore they saw something move in the toilet. Both men let out girlish screeches as Thor smashed the toilet to bits with his hammer and Loki attempted to defend himself with a plunger. The resulting burst in the water pipes alerted JARVIS who alerted Tony who came down to find Sigyn mixing up afternoon tea. Before Sigyn could offer him a tea cake, Tony headed into the bathroom where he found Loki standing in an inch of water on the bathroom floor and wielding a plunger to direct Thor, who it appeared was using paint scraper to get some sort of fuzzy brownish-greenish-bluish-blackish fuzz off the shower walls. The room also smelled like vinegar and a hint of ammonia.

“Hello, Sir Stark!” Thor said jovially, not taking his eyes off of scraping the gunk he was currently working on.
“What the hell happened here?” Tony demanded to know.

“In the past five minutes or since you bequeathed these chambers to Thor?” Loki said.

“You guys broke the toilet!” Tony pointed out.

“Something in it moved,” Thor replied, shifting his eyes as if he expected it was still hanging around. “Something unnatural.”

“What? Are you and the wife breeding frogs in here now?” Tony grumped at Loki.

“I think the bigger issue is that these rooms were not cleaned since Thor acquired them,” Loki replied. “I believe if you were to poke this mold with a stick, the mold would grab the stick and poke you back. And let’s not get started on what Sigyn found in your cold-keeping device.”

“There was a raccoon living in the dishwasher!” Sigyn yelled into the room.

“Please tell me your wife hasn’t already named the raccoon?” Tony said to Loki with a groan.

“I assure you Tvättbjörn and the entire extended mouse family that turned the cabinets into their personal apartments have been safely moved to new quarters in your Most Central of Parks,” Loki replied.

“I thought you were keeping the place up,” Tony frowned at Thor. “You never asked for maid service?”

“There is maid service?” Thor said, confused. “I thought you did not employ a scullery here.”

“Yes, there is a cleaning service” Sigyn replied, coming into the room and depositing a glass of lemon ginger tea in Stark’s hands. “The automatons come to clean our rooms twice weekly. When they come, we all put on hats and dance together while we clean.” Loki nodded and Tony had to bite his tongue to ask if Loki participated in what JARVIS called Sigyn’s cleaning dance parties. He would ask him or the bots later. Hopefully, at least one of them had taken pictures.

“Yeah, they definitely have the most fun cleaning your place,” Tony nodded, taking a sip of his tea. “Should I send them down to help out with this catastrophe.”

“Thor needs to learn to take care of himself,” Sigyn replied. “If he is to be king one day, he must know what it is like to clean up messes. Especially those of his own creation.”

“It is most invigorating!” Thor agreed. “I have not fought such an entrenched enemy in some time! But I shall vanquish thee, mold!” Loki rolled his eyes and then stealthily snapped a few more pictures of Thor cleaning the tub.

“Hopefully in time for the arrival of Lady Jane and Lady Darcy,” Sigyn nodded.

“Which will be soon,” Tony pointed out. He turned to Sigyn. “Do you think you could give me a hand with the fact that water is overflowing in this room? You know, just until I can get a new toilet seat in?”

“Certainly,” Sigyn nodded, waving her hand and causing the water to freeze. Not freeze into ice but just freeze in terms of motion. Tony finished up his tea, wondering if things like this might ever seem strange to him again.

“Well, it’s been a nice chat,” Tony said, gently handing Sigyn back his empty tea cup and saucer.
“Thor, good luck on cleaning and please try not to break any appliances or bathroom fixtures.”

“Of course,” Thor nodded before he knocked off a pretty good chunk of mold and yelled: “Huzzah! I am victorious!”

When Darcy and Jane arrived two hours later than they had wanted to, both were too jetlagged to question why Thor was wearing pajama bottoms and a Stark Industries security team standard-issue black polo nor why he smelled of various cleaning supplies and Hawaiian Breeze air-freshener. Sigyn had demanded Thor wash all of his clothing - especially the outfit that he was wearing while cleaning - leaving Thor to scramble for fresh, unsullied clothing at the last minute. Happy had given him a spare shirt and Thor had borrowed some of the Captain’s sleep pants, though they were a bit small around the hips. Jane greeted him as warmly as her extremely tired body would allow.

Thor then carried most of the women’s’ equipment and luggage up to their rooms, listening intently as they detailed every aspect of their flight and the annoying unscheduled layover brought about by some new mutant discovering her ability to fly and disrupting all air traffic over Wales. Loki followed behind, carrying the remainder of the women’s equipment. Sigyn had acted as though she was going to carry what Thor had been unable to grab, but chivalry wasn’t exactly dead on Asgard and Loki wasn’t about to let his wife carry anything - even something innocuous as a set of Hello Kitty-themed carry-on luggage. Of course, he had to admit the tiny cartoonish cat was a bit adorable. Perhaps Sigyn would like a set of similarly themed luggage.

Sigyn had laid out several trays of baked goods in the kitchen Darcy and Jane shared for their arrival. Darcy had dropped the bag she was carrying and hugged Sigyn before taking an entire tray with her into her bedroom, saluting the others before shutting the door. Jane was just about sleepwalking by the time they arrived and so Thor bundled her up and took her into her bedroom. Sigyn then coaxed Loki out of Jane and Darcy’s chambers despite Loki’s insistence they give Thor a taste of his own medicine. Darcy and Jane both slept through their homecoming feast that night but were up and ready to get to work on their lab in Stark Tower the next morning. Sigyn had offered to help them and Loki found himself following his wife down to the lab level at an uncomfortably early hour.

It had taken them an hour or so to unpack all of the equipment and soon, Sigyn was happily helping Jane and Darcy rearrange their labspace in Stark Tower just the way Jane wanted it. Thor had been banned from helping after he nearly broke something that was apparently very important but looked like it was being held together by a mix of glittery pink duct tape, Hello Kitty stickers and gum. Instead, Thor was banished to the opposite end of the lab where a morose Loki sat, pretending to read a book on the theoretical applications of polymorphism in cryo and glaciokinesis while actually watching his wife flitting around with her Midgardian friends. The two brothers sat beside each other awkwardly, neither wanting to be the first to initiate a conversation yet both realizing it would continue to be incredibly uncomfortable if one of them did not speak.

“Mother sends her hellos,” Thor said finally. He was usually the first one of them to back down in these situations. “And Idis rather enjoyed the gifts you and Sigyn sent her. Though Idunn was displeased when I told her the gift contained no confections as you said and Idis found chocolates at the bottom of it.”

“You can’t lie worth a damn, Thor,” Loki snorted. “And I’m not about to let my niece waste away because her parents think fruit curd on shortbread is an adequate dessert. Can you imagine what it must be like to be sent to bed without dessert every day of your life?”

“Yes, yes,” Thor agreed. “I agree that Idunn is a bit… strict when it comes to Idis. But it is only because she seeks to protect her only child.”
“Protect her from clotted cream and caramel,” Loki snorted. “Someone should tell Bragi Boddason his wife makes him look henpecked.

“And yours doesn’t?” Thor snorted as Sigyn and Darcy danced in celebration after getting a rather delicate telescope to stand up on its own. “Perhaps it is just a quality she and her sisters possess.”

“I’m surprised Asgard can bear to part with someone who makes such astute observations,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“You know as well as I that Sir Stark must attend to his estates in the land of the successors, this Call-I-Forn-I-Yay,” Thor said, the Midgardian word strange on his tongue. “To help him do so, Father… Odin sent me.”

“I’m truly surprised,” Loki said sarcastically, “that they sent you rather than Sif or Hogun. Fandral can even be handy on guard duty when there is no one he particularly wants to seduce. It seems odd to send the heir apparent off on such dull business.”

“Do not mock me nor think that anyone on Asgard underestimates your ability and potential for mischief when left unguarded,” Thor said. “Besides, I wanted to come.”

“I’m sure. I suppose they are trying to get rid of you apurpose,” Loki snorted. Thor shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, causing Loki to groan. “Oh, what?”

“Well, Father did say something to the effect that he was enjoying having both of us gone from Asgard for good periods of time,” Thor said, sounding a bit grossed out. “He said with both of us out of the palace, it has been like he and Mother are having a second honeymoon. He then implied that you, having a half-Vanir wife, would understand the value in such things.”

“Why, Thor?” Loki grimaced. “Why would you say something like that to me? Why would you think I would care to know such things!”

“Because I will not be the only one who has to deal with such mental trauma!” Thor shot back. “You were not there to listen to Father detail why one should seek out a Vanir wife!”

“No, I wasn’t, Thor,” Loki huffed. “Because I heard it all for months and months after I was wed. Do you really think that I wanted to listen to him blather on about Mother in such a way?”

“Mother!” Thor screeched. “I just thought he was talking about his conquests in his youth!”

“Did you hit something in the Bifrost on your way down or have you always been this stupid?” Loki hissed. “Of course he’s talking about Mother. He always uses her as the example when he talks of the qualities of Vanir women! He always has! Why do you think I tried to drown myself during that father-sons bonding hunting trip after my wedding!”

“So when he compared Vanir women to hellcats…” Thor said squeamishly.

“He was talking of Mother,” Loki nodded affirmatively. “Also all of his references to their flexibility, temperaments, and adventurousness.” Thor looked like he was in physical pain.

“Jane! Jane!” Thor called out across the lab. “Do you still have that device that accidentally caused Lady Darcy to have that mental blockage? I have need of it!”

“No,” Jane replied. “I took it apart and salvaged the parts to make an infrared telescope.”

“And she could never get the calibration right,” Darcy snorted. “Instead of blocking out my entire
memory of middle school, she just blocked out the middle part of every movie I’ve ever seen.”

“Please, Jane,” Thor begged. “Can you replicate it? I have a great need for such power!”

“What’s wrong?” Jane asked worriedly.

“Thor, apparently, did not realize he was not the product of immaculate conception,” Loki said, “nor did he realize that the Allmother and Allfather haven’t exactly been abstinent since.”

“Of course not,” Sigyn snorted, helping Darcy to wash and clean some equipment. “Why, your lady mother was always kind enough to educate her handmaidens on both what they should expect and what they should demand from their spouses. She often said not everyone was as fortunate as she to have such a generous lover as a husband, so they might need to teach their lovers a few things.”

“Sigyn!” Loki and Thor shrieked at the same time.

“Props to Odin and Frigga for keeping things spicy,” Darcy nodded.

“Honestly,” Sigyn rolled her eyes, “if the two of you expect to still be having sexual relations well into your fifth millennia, why would you think your parents are some sort of exception?”

“We’ve never talked about your parents thusly!” Thor said to Sigyn, annoyed.

“To be fair, Sigyn’s mother did gift her with an… instructional text upon our wedding,” Loki pointed out. “And Freyja is a well known….”

“Maybe we should stop talking about people’s parents doing the do,” Jane interrupted.

“You have how many doctoral degrees and you can’t say ‘sex’ in front of a group of adults?” Darcy snorted. “Lame.”

“I truly feel for Heimdall if he is keeping track of this conversation,” Thor sighed.

“He’s probably laughing his head off,” Loki snorted, “and delighted that he doesn’t have to participate in this farce.”

“At least I shall not have to return to Asgard soon,” Thor lamented. “I may never be able to look Father in the eye again.”
Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Loki finally is forced to deal with is own inner nature.

Loki was exceedingly, tediously bored.

It seemed odd, even to the god of mischief himself, that he was bored in such a time of chaos around the Tower. Lady Pepper and Stark were preparing the Tower for the arrival of the Captain and the Widow as well as their own departure to the western coast. Jane and Darcy were busy compiling recent findings from the Leonids Meteor Shower and also preparing for the upcoming conjunction of Venus and Saturn. Sigyn had been helping them and excitedly relayed all of their discoveries and research back to Loki, who honestly hoped Thor and his paramor did not discover Sigyn sometimes talked about Jane and Darcy as one might a child playing with their first telescope.

Of course, the most chaotic thing going on at the moment was possibly the preparations coming up for some sort of secular holiday that kicked off a full season of quasi-religious holidays of the plane’s many different, confusing and often contradictory religions. If he lived to be ten thousand, Loki seriously doubted he would ever understand the strange customs of Midgard. Everyone was gearing up for some sort of holiday that involved shopping. Pepper, Bruce, Darcy, and Jane had attempted to explain to Loki and Thor that the purpose of the celebration was actually a feast of thanksgiving the day before, but that modern commercialism and capitalistic principles had led to the beginning of the winter holiday shopping season overwhelming the traditional feast.

Further confusion ensued when Tony announced that he had secured a temporary position the night and following day of the feast for Loki, working in the toy department of a major department store. Tony had sort of explained the day as a sort of shopping excursion mixed with a bit of a battle and then had to spend an entire afternoon convincing Thor he would not need Mjolnir to secure Jane a new astrograph, especially since it would be much easier to buy one online. Tony then tried - and failed - to explain online shopping to Thor. Loki had been surprised to learn that Thor even knew what an astrograph was, let alone how to acquire one in the first place. Still, he doubted even the esteemed Dr. Jane Foster could make a scholar of Thor Odinson.

The Tower’s other two residents were also extremely busy. Bruce was editing and revising a new paper he was going to send off for publication in the new year, and spent most of his time in his labs or in his room, double checking his research and tweaking various words and phrases. Barton was on an assignment for SHIELD, tracking down some smuggling ring that might have ties to an internationally wanted gang. They were using some hip jazz bar in Williamsburg as the front for their operation and the outfits Barton had to wear on his stakeouts always managed to make Stark snerk and give a witty comment. Barton would issue a biting retort before complaining about fake glasses, horse masks, kale, and the word “artisanal.” But even Barton’s ludicrous appearance was not enough to draw Loki out of the doldrums he found himself in. Nothing would draw him out.

Except his seiðr.

The problem with seiðr is how all-encompassing and deeply ingrained it can be. Seiðr is a part of a
weidler not in the way that blood or the nervous system or firing synapses are part of a person but like a twin being living within the wielder’s own body. Seiðr was akin to what Midgardians called their conscious, their flight or fight reflex, their lizard brain, the little voice in their head - save it was more powerful and sometimes could accomplish its intrusive thoughts. Loki’s seiðr knew it hadn’t been used and knew it wanted to be used. And it when seiðr wasn’t being used, it found ways to manifest its annoyance in a manner similar to the itch one could not scratch, having a rogue eyelash in the corner of the eye, a piece of errant food stuck uncomfortably between one’s teeth or the pins and needles sensation of a limb that has been sat on too long. Loki felt the neglect of his seiðr in slightly painful tingling sensations at various points in his body, usually following an errant thought about how his seiðr could make a particular task easier.

One didn’t go cold turkey on seiðr like one might the wide variety of Midgardian substances used to alter consciousness or reduce pain. Stark had jokingly suggested giving Loki something akin to sobriety coins or anger management chips for each month he went without magic, but had quickly been lectured by Sigyn about how not using one’s seiðr wasn’t like abstaining from imbibing; it was more akin to how long he had gone without eyesight or the ability to hear. Mixing the odd potion or two wasn’t enough to satisfy the inward urge to use his magical abilities. After all, any apothecary without a smidge of magical talent could make a potion. Reading theoretical texts did nothing for him without the ability to put what he was learning into practical application.

Which was why Loki found himself in the communal rooms with Thor of all people, learning how to play a video game. Tony Stark had thought it hilarious that Skyrim had elements of Norse mythology and culture in it, and it was the first game he decided to introduce Thor to. After breaking several dozen controllers in frustration, Thor had finally learned how to play the game and somewhat mastered it. While Thor admitted he would prefer slaying real dragons and taking on actual quests in Asgard to the video game version, he seemed to enjoy hacking and slashing his way through the faux Viking open world game. Tony had also learned several ancient Norse curse words in the process.

Loki had seen Thor playing the game and did his best to feign complete disinterest. However, he could see why Midgardians seemed addicted to their gaming consoles, especially when Thor insisted he was going to only finish one more quest or travel to one more icon on his map or harvest one more plant before going to bed for the evening. Loki managed to get Thor to teach him the ins and outs of the game after Loki spent an entire morning acting as though the game was the least entertaining thing in the world and that Thor was overselling its value. He just hoped that the Midgardians never realized how susceptible Thor was to reverse psychology. By that evening, Loki was playing a level 20 mage character that even Thor was impressed by. It was a poor excuse for not getting to use his actual seiðr, but at least this sad imitation quieted the nagging voice of his seiðr in his head.

“Congratulations on becoming the Arch-Mage of the College of Winterhold, brother,” Thor said happily as Loki completed a quest.

“What? Like it was hard?” Loki snorted, sending his avatar into the winterscape of the game.

“I suppose I should not be surprised that your magical abilities extend into this artificially generated world,” Thor admitted.

“I do hope Midgardians don’t actually think this is how we live,” Loki snorted.

“Yes,” Thor agreed gravely. “I find it hard to believe how easily necromancy is accepted by the characters of this world, though they claim it is not. Or that dragons are so easily killed.”

“Or that is is so easy to become the most skilled magister in an entire realm,” Loki rolled his eyes.
“Honestly, as if casting the same spell or charm over and over again improves one’s overall ability in any way. Don’t get me started on the concept that repeatedly eating various herbs will give you any kind of herbal knowledge. And that grinding random ingredients together to make potions is safe in any way. Ridiculous.”

“Having fun guys?” Tony asked, walking into the room.

“We are picking apart the inaccuracies of your simulation,” Loki replied.

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “Why would a castle meant to hold a dragon be primarily constructed of wood? Nor does one defeat a dragon by yelling at it. The most that will get you is eaten. And you cannot stop mid battle to magically repair yourself with sweet rolls.”

“Though that might explain why Volstagg has survived so long,” Loki muttered under his breath.

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but Clint was right,” Tony sighed. “I should have taught you guys Call of Duty, Mass Effect or one of those dancing games. You wouldn’t complain about those being inaccurate.”

“Well, it is,” Loki said. “Should we stand idly by while our proud culture is mocked and portrayed without sensitivity?”

“And what is an orc? Why do they feature prominently? Where are the dwarves?” Thor asked.

“Thor is right,” Loki nodded. “Your game is racist against dwarves. Especially since it has no dwarven smiths and makes smithing seem like such an easy task. Perhaps I shall inform Sigyn about this Stark. I think it would be quite a treat to see what kind of rodent you would be.”

“I’m starting to feel like it’s better when the two of you are fighting,” Tony sighed. “When you two get along you’re twice as annoying.”

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Sigyn knew something was not right with her husband. She had sensed for several weeks now that something had him slightly on edge. Though he had not yet come to her with what was troubling him, Sigyn was nearly certain she had figured out what was bothering him. Since he had lost his seíðr, Loki had been trying other ways to stretch his magical abilities. He had worked on various quasi-magical projects such as a bit of divination, scrying, potion-making, carving sigils to be imbued at a later date, some rune casting and writing or rewriting of various spells and charms he thought he could improve. He was also doing a lot of studying - predominantly on the theoretics of ice magic and related subjects - which Sigyn took as a sign he might be at least attempting to embrace his Frost Giant heritage.

However, in the past few days Loki had ceased any and all magical activities or even attempts at them. He only read Midgardian tomes and did not sit at his desk late into the evening hours writing notes or suggestions for bettering his spells, incantations, potions and charms. He avoided his laboratory and didn’t even accompany her to garden to pick fresh flowers for drying. He didn’t even use the various magical oils, incenses and soaps of her own creation in his baths. It seemed almost as if Loki was avoiding his seíðr, though it was hard to avoid something one didn’t actually have. In fact, Sigyn realized she had been avoiding using her own seíðr around him in the past day and a half just in case it made him upset. With a sigh, Sigyn decided that not only was she going to have to bring up the subject her husband was purposefully avoiding but also force him to face whatever it was outright. Loki had a penchant for bottling things up until they had no choice but to explode, and Sigyn sometimes grew tired of being the one who had to let the air out of the proverbial bottle so he
wouldn’t spew everywhere.

“You are avoiding your seiðr,” Sigyn said, not as a question nor an accusation but rather a matter of fact. Loki slowly looked up from the Midgardian novel he was reading glaring not at his wife but straight ahead at the wall, trying to form a response in his brain.

“One cannot avoid something they do not have,” Loki said.

“You have your seiðr, just not the ability to use it,” Sigyn replied, knowing she didn’t have to explain this to her husband. “The Allfather did not remove your seiðr as a true fetterer might. He only bound it within you.”

“Semantics,” Loki huffed, returning his focus back to his book.

“Semantics or not, I am not going to let you avoid this, to pretend as if it doesn’t bother you,” Sigyn said.

“Maybe it doesn’t bother me,” Loki replied.

“I have been married to you long enough to know when your apathy is real and when it is for show,” Sigyn snorted. “You cannot just hide from your problems, husband. And you certainly cannot hide from me.”

“I’m not trying to hide anything from you,” Loki replied.

“Hiding your problems and emotions from everyone counts as hiding them from me,” Sigyn pointed out.

“Semantics,” Loki muttered again.

“Loki, I am warning you,” Sigyn said, annoyed.

“Can you not understand that I don’t want to have this conversation with you?” Loki huffed.

“The last time you didn’t want to have a conversation with me,” Sigyn reminded him coldly, “you ended up tumbling off the Bifrost Bridge, leaving me to not only think you were dead for an entire year but faced with having to answer for your deeds, only to reappear in Midgard under the influence of some unknown being who I would very much like to geld if I ever get the chance…”

“Sigyn…” Loki said warningly.

“You wouldn’t tell me anything,” Sigyn said, trying to be calm and not get choked up.

“I told you about my heritage,” Loki frowned.

“And then refused to say anything beyond that,” Sigyn pointed out. “You wouldn’t tell me how you were feeling about it, or where Thor was or what was happening with Odin or really anything about what happened on Jotunheim. And from the second your mother put Gungnir in your hand, all I heard from you was that your day was busy and you didn’t want to talk about it. Next thing I know you’re locking me in our rooms and…and…”

Sigyn felt her husband’s arms come around her from behind. She hadn’t heard him close his book, get up or walk over toward her, but she was never really surprised by his stealth. She tried to take a few calming breaths, knowing if she turned around to face her husband she would cry and she desperately wanted not to cry. Loki didn’t need her dissolving into a fit of tears right now. He needed
her to be strong so he could deal with his seiðr issues, and she was not going to let him make this about her. She wasn’t angry about it all, though it still made her upset to think about. And she had forgiven him - too easily according to some. Perhaps she could be rather self-sacrificing when it came to her husband - a total doormat her sister Var often said - but she was the only person who always put Loki first. Even his mother sometimes had to make Loki take a backseat to the needs of her husband and eldest son.

“You know I am sorry for all of that,” Loki said gently, his breath coming in husky beside her ear as he held her back against him. “And you’re absolutely right. I shouldn’t have hidden things from you. I should have talked from you. Maybe if I hadn’t been so stuck in my own head you could have made me see reason. You could have brought me out of the spiral. I never wanted to burden you…”

“When we married we promised to share our burdens with each other,” Sigyn said. “Remember?”


“And that doesn’t mean that I share mine with you but you never return the favor,” Sigyn pointed out. “I’m stronger than I look. Maybe I can’t always carry the full weight of what is hurting you, but I can at least try to help.”

“I know, my love,” Loki sighed. “I know I should talk to you about these things.”

“Then talk to me,” Sigyn said, turning around to face him. Loki seemed to still be mentally debating whether or not he should confess his concerns as Sigyn ran her fingers against his cheek.

“What is there to do? Seiðr wants to be used but mine is bound and therefore useless,” Loki shrugged. “The pain of it becomes more and more annoying, but I suppose I shall just have to grin and bare it. I’m halfway through, aren’t I?”

“Have you tried using it?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“I’m sorry,” Loki snorted sarcastically. “Did my wife, one only four known living masters of fettering magic in the Nine Realms, just ask me if I had tried using my bound seiðr? Weren’t just just lecturing me a moment ago about the very definition of fettering?”

“May I remind my husband,” Sigyn replied with a quirked brow, “that though he is Odin Allfather, he is not one of those masters of fettering magic and therefore unable to completely remove or bind one’s seiðr.” Loki frowned, but Sigyn continued. “Remember when we first came here? And you sought to defend me from Sir JARVIS?”

“Why are you reminding me of that humiliation?” Loki grumbled.

“Because you used your seiðr then,” Sigyn pointed out.

“Barely… it only came out in sparks…” Loki said.

“But you used it,” Sigyn said.

“Yes, well,” Loki frowned.

“Has there been any instance sense where you’ve managed to manifest it?” Sigyn asked. Loki closed his eyes and thought hard.

“There have been a few instances,” Loki admitted, “where I have woken from a deep sleep and sworn that the cup of water I keep on the table beside the bed has frozen over, but I’ve never been
able to prove it was more than lucid dreaming. When I have awoken for sure, it has been normal. I had thought it was just a dream… a manifestation of the study and thought I have put into any Jotnar ice manipulation abilities I might possess.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Sigyn frowned.

“I thought it was a dream,” Loki huffed. “Why would I tell you I was having delusions in my sleep?”

“Because it makes perfect sense!” Sigyn said happily. “Odin could bind the bulk of your seiðr, yes, and because he is unable to completely bind it he was able to leave you with the bare minimum for self defense.”

“So?” Loki sighed.

“This is why I should have made you study fettering magic alongside me,” Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“Dearest, I know you love your grandmother,” Loki said, “but I would rather not have endured getting hit with a silver stick whenever I gave a wrong answer nor listening to her prattle on and on about her childhood at her grandfather’s forge.”

“My great-great grandfather was the greatest dwarven king and smith who ever lived,” Sigyn said challengingly. “He made that hammer your brother is so fond off and half the magical wonders in Odin’s treasury.” Loki sighed. One simply didn’t badmouth Sindri the Forger around any dwarves, let alone his offspring. Even if Loki found it annoying the way his grandmother-in-law always managed to mention her childhood working in his forge into the conversation, he probably shouldn’t have said to out loud.

“Yes, yes,” Loki sighed. “Thor owes him and all of dwarf-kind a great deal for giving him a way to fly around like an oaf and bash things to bits like an irreverent, drunken house guest. So, what did I miss out on by not taking fettering lessons?”

“You know only fettering masters can fully and completely bind and strip one of their seiðr,” Sigyn said, “meaning that even one as powerful as the Allfather has to leave a little of it behind. He chose to leave behind some that can be used for defense. And since he is no master of fettering, he cannot take from you what comes naturally.”

“Is this the bit where you go on about how all of us have a natural bit of seiðr within us, even sleazy dragon bait like Fandral, and all we have to do to become power magisters is to unlock that seiðr and use it?” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Yes, and I am telling your mother you made fun of her lecture,” Sigyn huffed. “Odin cannot take from you what is innate. He cannot take the small seiðr you were born with. And being born a Jotun…”

“No,” Loki cut Sigyn off. “No. I know what road you are trying to take and I will not allow it.”

“He couldn’t have bound your natural Jotnar seiðr!” Sigyn continued excitedly. “Meaning you can practice with it! Meaning you can learn from it!”

“Absolutely out of the question,” Loki shook his head. “You know as well I as do that the Allfather would have me locked in chains with a full contingent of Einherjar around my cell constantly if he caught on to the fact I was using any seiðr. He’d probably have my head served to him on a platter at the evening meal if he found out it was Jotnar seiðr I was using!”

“Never before have I seen you so afraid of your own power, your own seiðr,” Sigyn shook her head.
“This is part of you. I think you should embrace it.”

“Oh, certainly,” Loki huffed. “Embrace the part of me that is an innate killing, child-eating, land-destroying monster.”

“No, embrace the part of you that is a Jotun. Not the part of you that has anything to do with the violent stories your old nanny told you,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “I wonder why Frigga hired that old bat anyway. I’m sure she’s the reason Thor has that inexplicable fear of brunnmigi. As if little fox-faced goblins that piss in wells are something he encounters frequently.”

“No Jotnar magic,” Loki insisted.

“All I’m asking you to do is attempt to freeze a glass of water!” Sigyn said. “Just as an experiment!”

“No, Sigyn,” Loki shook his head.

“But it would quite your seiðr and keep you calm and balanced,” Sigyn said. “And this magic is part of you; you can’t simply ignore it. Then the seiðr rules you rather than you ruling it.”

“If you think, for an instant, I am going to let even the smallest bit of my unfortunate base nature come through…” Loki began, only to be interrupted by the shattering of glass.

Sigyn and Loki both followed the sound to see a glass vase of flowers sitting nearby. Except it was no longer sitting on a side table holding flowers. It had froze solid and then shattered from the cold surrounding it, the flowers laying about with frost on their petals and chunks of ice frozen at their bases. Horror had crossed Loki’s face and when he finally mustered up enough courage to see Sigyn’s reaction, he felt even more terrified. Instead of being upset or afraid of what he had just done, Sigyn seemed happy - ecstatic even - that Loki had managed to tap into this part of himself. His wife was downright proud that he had broken a vase through his anger manifesting itself as ice magic. He knew that when one didn’t utilize their seiðr it could manifest in strange ways, but this was exactly the opposite of what Loki wanted. All he could think of was that his wife was in danger, and currently he was the greatest threat to her.

“Loki, look…” Sigyn began, but as she turned to tell her husband this was exactly why he needed to harness his Jotun seiðr, she found he was gone. Loki had fled from the room, and it only took her a moment to sense where he might have gone.

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Tony Stark wasn’t sure how he had gotten roped into this, but he figured it had something to do with the fact that he owned the building and had build the Hulk containment cell located within it. Honestly, he thought that Sigyn or Thor or even Bruce alone would be way better at doing this, but Sigyn had insisted he and Bruce needed to coax Loki out of whatever snit he was in. To be fair, Tony had only paid partial attention to her explanation because he was preoccupied with how he was going to hide from Pepper the amount of suit construction material he shipped to Malibu for their brief holiday stay. It was enough to build at least a small army of metal men, and he doubted Pepper would approve. She was already dropping hints that she thought his recent spate of improvements and tweaks were getting obsessive.

On their way down, Bruce had summed up Sigyn’s explanation in a way that wasn’t exactly more interesting but rather just given when Tony was in a better state of mind to focus on it. Apparently, the fact that Loki’s seiðr hadn’t been used in about half a year meant that his seiðr was angry and going to manifest itself in new and unusual ways - somewhat akin to the way teenage hormones always seemed to manifest themselves in the form of large pimples on prom night. As a result of this
manifestation, Loki’s latent Jotun ice powers were coming to the surface and he was now terrified that the appearance of these ice powers would lead to him, at best, being indefinitely imprisoned in Asgard or, at worst, executed. Tony wondered what so was jacked up about Asgard’s justice system that one didn’t even remotely consider imprisonment or capital punishment as drawbacks to attempted world conquering yet these were considered perfectly acceptable fates for someone who just happened to be a living, breathing ice maker.

Bruce explained that Sigyn had explained the answer to that question was that both world conquering and Jotun killing at one point had both been considered national sports on Asgard. Furthermore, Sigyn had explained Loki needed someone with as few Asgardian ties as possible to get him out of this funk. He was terrified of Sigyn seeing him as a monster and of hurting her with his uncontrolled, burgeoning power and knowledge. He was only slightly less afraid that Thor might see him manifesting ice powers and hammer him into the ground like a giant, blue nail. Despite Loki’s earlier insistence that the other members of the Nine Realms weren’t as racist as Midgardians, Sigyn confirmed that the average Asgardians’ first reaction to seeing someone with blue skin was to draw their weapons. In fact, Sigyn hadn’t even told Thor about Loki’s issue at that point because she didn’t want his reaction to further compromise Loki’s struggle to come to his Jotun side.

When they arrived down in the room that held the Hulk’s cell, both Bruce and Tony were a little surprised to see nothing seemed amiss. Everything was where it should be and, unlike Sigyn had warned them, nothing was frozen nor were there any snow drifts anywhere. When they found Loki, sitting on the floor of the Hulk’s cell and folded up upon himself, he seemed perfectly normal. Sigyn had warned them he might be blue with red eyes, a coloration on her husband she had never seen herself but knew all Jotuns possessed. Instead, he was just his normal, pasty-faced self with green eyes and jet black hair, muttering to himself. His hands were folded and tucked into his armpits.

“How did he know about this place?” Tony asked Bruce, a little concerned.

“Prince Loki asked me where one might put Dr. Banner should he become a danger,” JARVIS intoned quietly. “He then informed me that he was a danger and asked to be ‘imprisoned’ here for safety reasons. His words, not mine.”

“Well, at least he was thinking of others,” Tony sighed. “You holding up okay there, Bruce?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said quietly. “The Other Guy is just a little curious why Loki always tries to invade space reserved for him, though.”

“Sharing is caring,” Tony shrugged. “How about you let him out JARV?”

“I would,” JARVIS intoned, “but he seems to have frozen the door shut from the inside.”

“So, we’re going to have to talk this one out?” Tony sighed.

“Let me handle it,” Bruce suggested. “I know what it’s like to feel like you have a monster inside you.”

“Alright, but I’m here if you need back up,” Tony said.

The two men approached the cell where they could see the ice crystals that had frozen the locking mechanism from the inside. One would think that Loki’s breath would be letting out a hint of smoke, steaming up the inside of the tube as the hot air from his body met the cold air inside the tube. It was then that both Tony and Bruce realized Loki wasn’t blowing smoke because his body was currently the same temperature as the ice. He wasn’t blue, like Sigyn had theorized, but he had been able to adjust his body temperature so that the cold didn’t bother him.
“Why are you here?” Loki snarled at the men as he noticed them.

“Because your wife really likes you, but she doesn’t like it when you make her think you’re going to do something that might hurt yourself,” Tony said, only to receive a glare from Bruce. “Right, right. You’re doing the talking.” Bruce sat down, legs crossed like he did before his morning meditations, and faced Loki.

“Do you feel safe in there?” Bruce asked curiously. Loki looked at him like this was the most bizarre question he had ever been asked.

“I think it would be harder for me to use my seiðr through this chamber,” Loki said. “Though does that make me feel particularly safe? No. I’m still a threat.”

“I know what you mean,” Bruce agreed. “I look like a strong wind could probably knock me over, but I know that even like this I’m still a threat. I’m still one second, one word, one emotion from becoming something absolutely monstrous. Something that kills. Something that destroys things, even things I love and never want to hurt.”

“Then why aren’t you in this chamber?” Loki huffed.

“I tried that once,” Bruce admitted. “I realized you can’t live your entire life isolating yourself from the world. And you can’t isolate the world from yourself, either. It always finds a way in.”

“Bruce, I hate to interrupt,” Tony said, obviously not hating it at all, “but what kind of pep talk is this?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “It leaves much to be desired.”

“What I’m saying is you can’t hide who or what you are, but if you want to make sure it doesn’t hurt people, you have to learn to control it,” Bruce said. “I’m not perfect at it. I still… change sometimes when I don’t want to. But the more I practice, the better I get. And I hope one day I’ll reach a point that I won’t have to change unless I want to.”

“Why would you want to willingly become that green behemoth?” Loki snorted.

“He’s not all bad,” Bruce admitted. “He can do some nice things from time to time. And he can totally beat up your big brother, even with that magic hammer of his.” Loki sneered and Tony’s jaw dropped in disbelief that not only had Bruce’s pep talk seemed to work but it had also ended with a joke.

“I have no control over this,” Loki insisted to Bruce. “I don’t know if I want to control it.”

“If you have no control how did you freeze the entire locking mechanism and not the entire tube?” Tony pointed out. “I mean, it takes work just to freeze all of the working mechanical and computer parts - which I will have to completely replaced due to the water damage, mind you - and not anything else, namely the parts that wouldn’t damage if you froze them?”

“Thor and Sigyn say that you’re well known as one of the best magic-wielders in any of the realms, especially at such a young age,” Bruce said. Loki did his best not to preen under the compliment. “I’m sure whatever this new power is, you can find a way to harness it.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “I’m sure if you can manage making doppelgangers of yourself and disappearing into thin air and changing into other people, you can definitely handle making a few ice cubes.” Both Loki and Bruce glared at Tony in annoyance. “What? Am I the only one here who thinks it would be cool to create yourself a ski slope whenever you wanted?”
“Maybe you would feel better about your powers if you could work in a confined, safe space with someone around to spot you,” Bruce suggested. “I’m sure you didn’t learn the magic you already have by just being shoved out into the world and told to deal with it, right?”

“No,” Loki admitted. “I had years of schooling under my mother and various tutors. However, I doubt very much you are going to find me a capable tutor of ice seiðr and on Midgard of all places. Hardly anyone in the realms practices ice wielding because the only masters of it have ever been Jotuns and no one wants to be associated with Jotunheim.”

“Dude, I didn’t go to class to learn how to build my suits,” Tony pointed out. “And I don’t think you were taught everything you know about magic. Some of it you learned through experimentation, right? Reading, theorizing, and then practical application? That’s like at least twenty-five percent of what you and your wife get up to in your little library-slash-laboratory-slash-astronomy-tower-slash-museum-of-oddities.”

“Twenty-five percent?” Bruce frowned.

“I think Stark is referring to the fact Sigyn and I are quite adept at utilizing a wide variety of surfaces and objects to aid in our connubial bliss,” Loki replied. “And yes, I have done a fair amount of experimentation and theoretics in my day. But I’m not sure this is a particular experiment I want to mess around with.”

“Not even if you had someone willing to work with you?” Tony suggested. “Someone who can tell you when you need to rein yourself in or when you are being too cautious and can let yourself go a little?”

“I absolutely, categorically refuse to have Sigyn present while I do this,” Loki shook his head. “Jotnar seiðr has the ability to kill people. They can kill anyone who touches them in their natural state. I could kill anyone who touches me in my natural state. And if I return to that… form… I don’t want her to see me. I don’t want her to see a monster.” Tony opened his mouth to protest, but Bruce gave him a warning glance.

“You don’t have to let anyone see you if you don’t want them to,” Bruce agreed. “Not until you’re ready.”

“And Thor isn’t allowed either,” Loki said, sounding a bit more petulant than he had intended. “Besides the fact that he ruins everything, there is something about being in the presence of Jotuns that makes him go on murderous rampages. He gets it from Odin, I presume.”

“Fine,” Bruce agreed.

“But then who do you propose work with me?” Loki huffed.

“Bruce and I’ve got it,” Tony said. “I’ve never shied away from an experiment that could get me killed. Just as Pepper. And Rhodey. And pretty much everyone who’s ever seen me in my lab. And Bruce here is the complete opposite. He knows what it’s like to tone things down and keep them under control.”

“And when I freeze both of you to death?” Loki huffed.

“You can stay here in the cell and work on things,” Tony said. “And we can stand over there in the observation room. It allows us to shut things down if they get out of hand.”

“Perhaps,” Loki frowned.
“You don’t have to agree to anything today,” Bruce assured him. “Just think about it.”

“I suppose,” Loki frowned.

“And in the meantime, since you’ve managed to calm yourself down,” Tony suggested, “how about you go apologize to that nice wife of yours? I’m pretty sure she’s wearing a hole in the floors worrying about you.”

“But what if I…” Loki began.

“I seriously doubt you can throw anything at that woman she isn’t already expecting,” Tony pointed out. “She’s like Pepper but with magic.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed, “but I’m coming back down here if I sense in anyway that I’m a threat to her.”

“I’ll get you a cot and some blankets,” Tony nodded. “Of course, since it’s Banner’s room you’ll have to share it with him if he needs it.” Both Banner and Loki gave each other the once over, and frowned.

“Hopefully,” Loki said, “it won’t come to that.”
“Okay, now just focus on the glass and see if you can freeze it without breaking it this time,” Bruce’s voice intoned over the announcement system in what was, ironically, Bruce’s cell.

Loki gritted his teeth and focused himself on making the water in the glass cold enough to freeze, but not so frozen the glass broke. He had already shattered at least fifteen of Stark’s high ball glasses this morning. Loki hated when things didn’t come to him naturally - particularly things that were allegedly byproducts of his nature - and he hated even more when he failed at something in front of an audience. Of course, he had learned not to express this after railing at one of his failures and being informed by Banner that “there was no such thing as failure in practice, only chances to improve.” Loki idly wondered where Banner got his motivational posters and how long it would take to burn the place down. Stark would probably help judging by his eye roll.

His eyes closed, Loki thought about ice and cold. He thought about the times Odin had frozen the large bay around Asgard for his Allfatherly Name Day as a gift to the people, letting them skate around it. He thought about learning to ski in the mountains of Alfheim while on a visit with his mother and Thor has a young boy. He thought about sitting with Sigyn in a small cottage in the Elvish mountains on their honeymoon, wrapped up together in the same thick blankets and drawing figures with their fingers on the frosted window panes. He opened his eyes to a slow clap coming from Stark inside the observation room. Banner had a smile on his face. Loki turned to see the glass was intact but the water frozen. Walking over, Loki picked up the highball glass and turned it upside down, but the ice was frozen inside, unmoved.

“Wait til the wife hears about this,” Tony grinned as Loki sat the glass back down. Loki frowned instantly.

He hadn’t wanted to let Sigyn in on their little practice sessions. He was afraid she would want to participate in them, and the last thing Loki needed to do was worry about possibly injuring her while trying to get ahold of this new ability. Banner had been the one who had talked to Sigyn about maybe not being present for the entire thing so that Loki could better focus. Stark had unhelpfully commented that having Sigyn around would heat Loki up rather than help him cool things down. Sigyn wasn’t happy - Loki could tell that she was upset not to be included in this new development - but she agreed to make herself scarce and try not to be overly inquisitive about every minute detail of his time practicing his new ice powers. Of course, Sigyn being Sigyn, her curiosity was overwhelming and despite her promise Loki found himself peppered with questions about his practice. Banner and Stark also found themselves being interviewed when Loki wouldn’t give her the answers she wanted. Even now, Loki had a sneaking suspiscious she was using her wiles to convince JARVIS to let her watch this entire training session.

Loki’s one consolation is that everyone involved had agreed not to tell Thor. Both Loki’s fear of Thor’s reaction and the knowledge that Thor was a hit first, ask questions later kind of guy made it easy for Stark, Banner and Sigyn to agree Thor wouldn’t be informed about what was going on with
Loki. Of course, Thor was so busy following Jane around like a lovesick puppy or sitting in her lab and sighing like a schoolboy with a crush on his teacher Loki doubted very much Thor would pay attention to any announcement that Loki was acquiring Jotnar ice powers unless Jane’s name was slipped into the conversation somehow. Loki had actually forgotten how hilarious it was to watch Thor be in love, completely mooning over a woman whom who Loki didn’t think he had that much in common with. Then again, Thor did have a penchant for proving the old axiom opposites attract. After all his two most previous conquests had been sorceresses who liked breaking the rules for personal gain - not exactly qualities one associated with Thor.

“Okay,” Banner said, coming into the clean room that was his erstwhile cell with another highball glass full of water. “Let’s try it again.” Loki groaned as Banner switched the glass of frozen water with the new glass and began to leave the room.

“Must I?” Loki frowned. “I’ve already proven I can do it once.”

“Yes,” Banner said, “but for an experiment to be successful you have to be able to produce the same effect in the same conditions.”

“Are you saying my ability to freeze the contents of this glass is a fluke?” Loki huffed as Bruce was safely ensconced back in the observation room.

“The seventeen broken highball glasses in the trash bin might indicate that, yes, it was a fluke,” Stark replied over the intercom. Loki muttered something under his breath. “Don’t worry. I’m not mad. Always thought the old things were ugly, anyway. Apparently, Mom let the Old Man have free rein when he redecorated his office in the 1970s and, for even the 1970s, Howard apparently had unbelievably bad taste. I’m thinking of replacing them with something more modern and sleek…”

“As completely diverting as your discussion of purchasing new tableware is, I do need to focus,” Loki grimaced.

“Do your thing Mr. Freeze!” Tony said back. Loki gritted his teeth, rolled his eyes and then focused himself on the glass before him.

He focused again on the glass before him. As idiotic as it sound, thinking of cold things worked well in channeling his powers, but after several attempts and failures at freezing the water without breaking the glass, Loki had created a hypothesis of his own. Thinking about his happy memories was enough to start the freezing process, but he never seemed to be able to freeze the water completely. When he turned to more painful memories of snow and ice, the water froze too quickly and too cold, breaking the glass around it. So, Loki was trying his best to achieve a balance, to use his good memories to keep the glass from breaking yet channel them in a way that sped up the freezing process. When he opened his eyes, the water was again completely frozen but the glass still intact.

“Does this mean I’m going to have to break the other three highball glasses myself?” Tony groaned.

“Not necessarily,” Bruce shrugged before turning to Loki. “How do you feel about doing two at a time?”

“I suppose I could give it a try,” Loki said disinterestedly, “though it we continue to add multiple glasses I daresay Stark will have to start bringing down the family stemware.”

“Har, har, har,” Tony rolled his eyes. “Though, now that you mention it, there is this really ugly glass vase that Pepper loves for some reason…”
“If you want someone to indiscriminately smash your possessions so you can redecorate, I highly suggest recruiting Thor. It’s his speciality,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Now, is there a second cup for me to freeze or not?”

“How was it? Did you have fun?” Sigyn bombarded him as soon as he arrived back at their rooms for the midday meal. “Did you learn anything new?”

Loki loved his wife, he truly did, but he wasn’t mentally up to her boisterous presence or rapid-fire questions at that particular moment. Instead, he walked over to the divan and slumped over it with a sigh, pushing his face into one of the pillows to hide it. Seiðr could be exhausting to use, particularly when much of it was used in such a short period of time. Attempting to use what little seiðr one had when it was bound seemed to triple the rate at which that exhaustion came. At least Loki could take consolation in the fact that no one from Asgard had yet come down to arrest him for tapping into his Jotnar abilities.


In response, Loki just muttered something into the pillow.

“I’m sorry,” Sigyn rolled her eyes, “I didn’t catch that.”

“I said be a dear and fetch me some lavender tea and honey scones?” Loki replied, removing his face from the pillow.

“Will you tell me about your practice?” Sigyn badgered.

“I would much rather be able to just relax in my own chambers,” Loki replied.

Sigyn huffed but still went to fetch his requested food. Loki sat up on the divan just for her to plop down a cup of tea in his hand and a plate on his lap. Despite being miffed with him, she had added a few fresh strawberries and a healthy dollop of clotted cream to the plate beside his scones. Loki smiled to himself as Sigyn returned to the kitchen to put the finishing touches on the trays of lunch meats, vegetables, fruits, cheeses, breads and various spreads she prepared so they might have a good picnic-style lunch. He imagined she already had a blanket spread for them out in her garden of oddities and terrors. The fact that her nose was so adorably scrunched up in annoyance at his behavior made Loki’s own annoyance melt away.

“I froze three glasses full of water without breaking them,” Loki announced finally. “At the same time, even.” Sigyn looked up from where she was preparing their lunch, clapped her hands and then excited ran over to pepper her husband’s face with kisses.

“I knew you would excell at it!” Sigyn grinned. “Why, by the end of the week I’m sure you could freeze the entire city in the blink of an eye!”

“Yes,” Loki rolled his eyes mirthfully, “because that would not draw Heimdall’s attention at all.”

“I said you could,” Sigyn teased, “not that you should.”

“How fortunate am I to have married such a clever creature,” Loki smirked. Sigyn rolled her eyes and, as she stood up from the divan, made his tray of treats and cup of tea disappear.

“Come on, now,” Sigyn chided him, pulling Loki up from the divan. “I have made us a wonderful picnic lunch and I don’t want it to spoil.”
“So, who else have you invited to our little picnic?” Loki asked her curiously, following Sigyn through the door she had made into her massive garden.

“No one,” Sigyn said, “though Lady Jane does want to take a tour and some readings in here eventually. And Lady Darcy is most intrigued by the meat-eating plants.”

“Yes,” Loki snorted. “I can see that.”

Skata and Skara flew overhead before nesting in a tree not far from where Sigyn had spread out both the picnic blanket and the feast she had prepared. After sitting down, Sigyn rubbed her bracelet, setting Jor free to slither about the gardens at will. Loki had to admit, despite the amount of plants that could be used as poisons or at least looked like they wanted to kill something, Sigyn’s garden was a warm, relaxing place for a good afternoon picnic and for their pets to frolic about. The trays of food she had only moments before been preparing had brought themselves into the garden and were ripe for any combinations that Loki and Sigyn desired. As he made up various meats and cheeses on a piece of bread doubling as a plate, Loki watched as his wife plucked a few fruits from their bowl and then plopped them into her own mouth. As she began to lick the juices off her fingers, Loki wished it was his tongue around each of her digits.

“I hope you will be continuing your practice after Sir Stark leaves,” Sigyn mentioned. “If Sir Banner needs any assistance monitoring you, I would be happy to help.” Loki shivered slightly, not liking the idea of his wife potentially trapped in a room with the Hulk and his own Jotnar form.

“I am sure something will be worked out regarding that,” Loki shrugged. “I would suggest Lady Jane coming down to watch had she any scientific interest in frost, but she would no doubt tell Thor who would then blab to everyone he meets.”

“She is busy preparing for the upcoming conjunction of two planets and a lunar eclipse,” Sigyn replied. “Her traveling apparently limited the amount of time she could dedicate to taking her readings and research, so there is much to get caught up on. And since the city lights block her observations, she must journey to the Isle of States in order to observe them. It apparently takes a while to get there.”

“I’m surprised Thor doesn’t offer to ferry her over,” Loki snorted.

“Apparently, the one time he tried,” Sigyn said conspiratorially behind a cup of tea, “he broke one of Jane’s particularly expensive pieces of equipment. Since then he has been permitted to accompany them, but he isn’t much allowed to aid in transport.”

“I am sure that is absolutely riveting for Thor,” Loki scoffed, “having to sit in a field somewhere, unable to fiddle with any of the expensive equipment, and being quiet all night so he doesn’t disrupt anything. Sounds to me like his worst nightmare.”

“By all accounts, he is rather well-behaved,” Sigyn replied.

“I might pay to see such a thing,” Loki snorted. “He could barely keep his eyes open during astronomy classes as a boy.”

“Maybe we can arrange to accompany them sometime,” Sigyn suggested, “since it isn’t that far from the Tower. And I’m sure you and I could both provide Jane some assistance.”

“Or just tell her everything I know about the Bifrost,” Loki shrugged.

“And wind up in the dungeons for revealing Asgardian magical secrets to Midgardians?” Sigyn pointed out.
“You know the only reason why Thor hasn’t explained it to her is because Thor never quite paid attention to that lesson himself,” Loki rolled his eyes. “It’s a wonder he hasn’t raided the Asgardian library to find her the answers she seeks. Then again, I suppose discovery is half the fun…” Loki leered at his wife with a lick of his lips and a wink, causing Sigyn to giggle. Setting aside her tea, Sigyn leaned forward and kissed her husband. After all, he had worked extremely hard that morning and deserved a reward.

“Brother! Sigyn!” Thor yelled as he burst into the conservatory, “Wondrous news!”

Thor’s wondrous news was met with a silver cheese plate being tossed at his head. Apparently, Thor didn’t think twice about barging into his brother and sister-in-law’s rooms, through their living area and following the sounds of Sigyn’s giggling to the conservatory. It was only when he looked down from the direction the cheese plate had come that he realized Loki and Sigyn were quite naked, rolled up together in a giant picnic blanket with the remains of an outdoor feast all around them. Sigyn, blushing from head to toe, was doing her best to hide herself behind her husband and the blanket. Loki had sat up, not caring how much of himself Thor saw, and was armed with a butter knife and the silver tray that had been used for cold cuts.

“I shall return later,” Thor gulped before speeding out of the room. Loki rolled his eyes, tossed his makeshift weapons aside and then lay back to join his wife.

“One would think he would have learned his lesson by now,” Loki grumbled as his wife snuggled back against him. “Maybe I should accuse him of attempting to see you naked again. He’d be more careful about his intrusions for another fortnight, at least.”

“Lady Darcy said there is a Midgardian tradition in which one hangs an item of clothing on the doorknob to let others know they are otherwise engaged with a paramour,” Sigyn mentioned. “It is a rule she said she had to instate when she and Jane began sharing chambers, and that they have been good with following it for the most part. I suppose that may be more of Jane’s doing than Thor’s, but perhaps it is something we could try.” Loki thought for a moment, tracing patterns on his wife’s back with one hand as she traced similar patterns on his chest with her own.

“Perhaps it is worth a try,” Loki shrugged, “though I doubt a stocking or pair of trousers on a doorknob would cause Thor to give more than a second thought when he kicks the door in.”

“We’ll have to see,” Sigyn smiled, resting her head against his chest. “Though there is a distinct possibility that he will never learn his lesson if he hasn’t at this point.”

“Especially not after he walked in on Fandral and those triplets,” Loki scoffed. “At least we aren’t the only ones.”

“Your Highnesses,” JARVIS intoned overhead.

“For Norns’ sake,” Loki huffed. “Are you in every room now?”

“The entire Tower is within my purview, even the artificially created rooms,” JARVIS intoned. “Sir requests your presence in the communal rooms as soon as possible. He knows Prince Thor came down to retrieve you, but has not heard from his since…”

“Thor doesn’t know when to knock,” Loki huffed. “Tell your overlord we shall be dressed and ready in due time, but that further interruptions intended to encourage us to do so more quickly shall be met with hostility.”
“Quite right,” JARVIS agreed.

Seeing that Loki was going to take his time dressing as if to prove a point, Sigyn rolled her eyes and then used her own seiðr to not only clean up the room but also dress herself and her husband. Loki was not particularly pleased that Sigyn had chosen for him one of his more Vanir outfits, a knee-length tunic over wide pants both of which were dark green and covered in detailed embroidery with greenish-gold thread. At least she hadn’t put him in some of those ridiculous curved court shoes the Vanir favored. Leaning down, Sigyn allowed Jor to slither back up her wrist and magically froze him, Skata and Skara flying down to perch on her shoulders so they could head back into the living room with her and then to their nest. Loki schlepped behind his wife all the way out into the hallway where they found an antsy Thor shifting from leg to leg in excitement, akin to a small child waiting for the bathroom. Loki rolled his eyes at Thor’s excitement, but Sigyn smiled warmy at her brother-in-law. Of course, Thor was still in the three-hour-or-so window of embarrassment that always happened between when he walked in on someone naked and when he could bear to look them in the face again, so he averted his gaze from hers.

“Sir Stark has some sort of announcement?” Sigyn asked as the trio headed toward the elevator.

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “He didn’t wish to say it without everyone present, and he was going to wait until the evening meal. But I was curious and since you and Loki were the only ones not gathered…”

“You came to fetch us,” Sigyn finished as the elevator doors closed around them.

“You know, Thor,” Loki said, flicking a piece of lint off of his clothing, “I am sure that Stark’s talking building would be more than happy to inform you that Sigyn and I are otherwise occupied and would not appreciate your intrusions. Why, you wouldn’t even have to get up out of your chair to find out whether or not we are up to receiving company. Of course, I’m sure you would ignore him as well. After all, it might require you to think of someone other than yourself for a while…” Thor sputtered to defend himself, but Sigyn interrupted.

“I distinctly remember the two of you agreeing to get along and not cause strife in Sir Stark’s home,” Sigyn said evenly. “It would be a shame if I had to write to your mother and tell her otherwise.” Both Loki and Thor were quiet, not looking at each other but both desperately wanting to get a jibe in at the other one.

“I am sorry for disturbing you,” Thor said finally. “I let my excitement get the best of me.”

“You must work on this, Thor,” Sigyn told him. “What if it hadn’t been us who you had interrupted? What if you had done this to another one of the Tower’s denizens? How would you feel?”

“Yes,” Loki smirked. “What if it had been Mother and Father instead?” Thor looked positively queasy and Sigyn shot a look of annoyance at her husband.

“Well, Loki, I consider that your revenge for this incident,” Sigyn informed him. “So, you will be polite to Thor from now own.” Loki muttered something to himself, annoyed that he had wasted a good pranking opportunity through the use of a snide comment.

When the elevator doors opened, Sigyn strode out into the common room leaving Loki and Thor behind her to jostle for position. Thor always liked being first in everything, but Loki wanted to follow along behind his wife. After twisting his ankle around Thor’s and causing Thor to stumble backwards, Loki triumphantly emerged behind his brother and followed his wife over to where Tony and Clint were vehemently arguing over whether “A Clockwork Orange” or “Eraserhead” was a weirder movie. Both Bruce and Pepper looked vaguely grossed out by the conversation while Darcy
was very interested. Jane was fiddling with something on her StarkPad, not paying attention to anything that was going on. Sigyn took a seat between Darcy and Pepper on the sofa as Thor took the one on the sofa next to Jane. Loki found himself skulking behind the piece of furniture that held his wife.

“Hey, Hawkass, you owe me twenty bucks,” Tony informed Clint. “Thor did get them to come up here.”

“Actually, it was your talking building that decided we had not been interrupted enough,” Loki huffed. “Apparently the promise that my wife and I would be given the privacy due to most married couples was greatly exaggerated.”

“Thor, did you walk into their rooms without knocking again?” Jane said, looking up from her StarkPad in annoyance. “We talked about that!”

“Jane’s just afraid your hubs will return the favor,” Darcy stage whispered to Sigyn. “She apparently got a weird tattoo in grad school she totally regrets.”

“Darcy!” Jane said, her ire now refocused from a dejected Thor, “I told you that in secrecy and under the influence of tequila!”

“Hey, you haven’t really lived until you’ve gotten an unfortunate tattoo,” Clint shrugged. “Ask Hill about her first assignment to Hong Kong and then be prepared to duck for cover.”

“Rhodes has USAF Property tattooed on the bottom of his right foot,” Tony said. “Lost a bet in basic training.”

“Was there a point to this meeting other than discussions of unfortunate body modifications?” Loki sighed. “Or was I disturbed from a private moment to listen to inane chatter?”

“No, there is a point,” Tony said. “I mean, it could have waited until dinner…”

“Seriously, Thor,” Jane muttered to him. “We really have to work on patience.” Thor looked like a sad puppy, prompting Jane to sigh and give him a kiss on the cheek. Loki made a fake gagging noise from behind them.

“So, Cap and Widow are coming tomorrow,” Tony said. “They were able to get some time off while Pepper and I are gone, though there is a possibility that they might get called out on missions during our hiatus, Fury said he’d try to keep that to a minimum since apparently he thinks the biggest risk to Earth’s safety is residing within this Tower.”

“I don’t know,” Loki mused. “Thor has managed to keep his bathing chamber quite tidy in the past few days.”

“Loki,” Thor hissed.

“Did he start a mushroom farm in the toilet again?” Darcy sighed at Sigyn.

“At any rate,” Tony continued, “Pepper and I are leaving the day after Thanksgiving…”

“The date of the great feast!” Thor thundered happily.

“And we still aren’t sure when we can come back,” Tony said.

“I told you there is at least a month’s worth of work back on the West Coast,” Pepper sighed.
“Maybe we need to look at consolidation again.”

“Sure, thing,” Tony nodded. “Oh, and Clint has informed me that Natasha’s birthday is the same day as Thanksgiving this year. Apparently, it’s beyond most people’s SHIELD clearance to know that, especially since she had it redacted from all of her files. So, we are going to have to plan something especially cool.”

“Will we be using actual spiders in the decor this time?” Loki said, feigning disinterest.

“Actually, Loki-loo, you will probably be spending the evening getting ready for your new job,” Tony grinned.

“What?” Loki huffed.

“Tony got you a position as a temp in toy section of a department store,” Pepper informed him. “It’s just for Thursday evening into Friday afternoon, but the pay is good. How much do you know about Black Friday?”

“Pep! Don’t ruin the surprise!” Tony huffed before turning back to Loki. “Just don’t kill anyone, okay?”

“Fine,” Loki huffed, as if that was a huge demand.

“Any other business?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded. “I got a bone to pick with whoever is eating all the havarti cheese. Get some for your own fridge of learn to share.”

“But I no longer have a drawer for cheeses in my cold keeping device!” Thor said pathetically, outing himself to the group. “Sigyn threw it away after it became furry!”

“We can order you a new cheese drawer,” Tony sighed.

“You realize you do not have to keep the cheese in the cheese drawer?” Sigyn pointed out. “We keep ours in the side panel of the cold keeping device and fill the cheese drawer with overflow from the fruit drawer!”

“But the drawer said cheese and the others said fruits and vegetables. I did not want to break the rules,” Thor admitted. As the others began to educate Thor further on fridge etiquette, Tony and Bruce pulled Loki aside. He was expected it to be about his new position.

“So, while I’m gone Widow is going to help Bruce oversee your ice capades,” Tony said. “We initially were going to offer the job to Cap, but he doesn’t do so well in the cold anymore.”

“And she will no doubt report all of this to Fury,” Loki said, annoyed. “You shouldn’t have said anything!”

“Odds are she already knows,” Bruce admitted. “She always knows.”

“Besides, she’s got the best head for combat out of all of us, and her life in Mother Russia probably means she’s better at dealing with insane drops in temperature better than the rest of us,” Tony pointed out. “And do you really think Cap could keep a secret from Thor? One puppy-dog face and he’d be holding a press conference to announce your newfound powers of refrigeration to the world. Not that he’s a bad guy, but he doesn’t like lying to people.”
“He is rather honest,” Loki said, enunciating the word like it was disgusting to him. “Fine. I shall accept the Widow’s help so long as I don’t find myself in another of the Furious One’s cells. It isn’t my fault the Allfather wasn’t able to scrape this base form of seiðr from my body.”

“Why do you always talk about it like that?” Tony frowned. “If I could instantly give myself an ice refill, I’d be ecstatic.”

“You also don’t come from a culture that considers ice manipulation barbaric magic,” Bruce pointed out.

“Yeah,” Tony shrugged. “Who knew the ability to make snowmen at will is Asgard’s version of majoring in philosophy.”

“I am sure that comment is considered witty in this realm,” Loki huffed.

“Oh, I’m going to miss our snark fests,” Tony said, throwing his arm around Loki’s shoulders because he knew it bothered the godling. “Maybe we’ll have to schedule some on Skype while I’m gone.”

Loki had frozen five distinct glass pitchers full of water and yet the Widow remained completely unimpressed. Normally, his success this far into the day would have put him in a rather jovial mood. He had gone from freezing glasses the day before to entire pitchers of water without breaking anything this morning. Somehow, the uninterested gaze of the Widow and her lack of comment - encouraging or otherwise - irked him. She remained a positively impartial observer as Bruce and Tony continued to instruct Loki on perfecting his ice powers from behind the observation room windows.

Naturally, Sigyn had attempted to use her friendship with the Widow as well as the Widow’s almost preternatural ability to defend herself and anyone around her as an excuse for why she should also be allowed in on Loki’s quasi-secret training sessions. Loki had, again, refused to budge on the subject maintaining it was for Sigyn’s personal protection. Sigyn knew that was utter bunk, and while Loki knew she wasn’t buying his excuse, he couldn’t bring himself to admit to Sigyn that he feared her reaction to actually seeing him in his Jotnar form more than he feared her getting hurt by his abilities. Honestly, how much more he feared his wife spying his true appearance than her getting hurt by his new abilities troubled Loki himself. Sigyn had insisted she wouldn’t judge from the moment she found out her husband wasn’t Aesir, but Loki wasn’t about to test that theory just yet.

Thankfully for him, the Widow had agreed that Sigyn might be more of a hindrance than a help to the entire process, and she had told Sigyn so. Almost as soon as the Captain and the Widow arrived that morning, Sigyn had cornered Natasha and begged her to help give Sigyn entré into Loki’s practice sessions. Loki wasn’t sure if Natasha wanted to protect Sigyn, sensed his rising fear levels at Sigyn’s involvement or just assumed Loki and his new ice abilities would be easiest to subdue without Sigyn’s presence. Whatever the case, he was glad that the Widow had insisted Sigyn’s presence might not be appropriate just yet. The Widow even managed to do so in a way that was kind but firm. Nevertheless, Loki could sense his wife’s urge to stomp her foot in anger like she had done when she was younger and didn’t get her way.

“Okay, I think we’re ready to try the kiddie pool,” Tony said over the intercom. Loki rolled his eyes. Stark had been too damn excited about the round, plastic pool covered in animated characters. It was all so beneath him, but then again, that was probably why Stark was so excited about it.

“Do we really have to sit here and watch Stark fill that pool up with a hose?” Natasha said to Bruce,
just as annoyed as Loki felt.

“Yes,” Bruce said, massaging his temples. “Tony insisted on it.” Loki sighed as Stark rolled the pool over followed by a hose.

“Why does this room even need that contraption?” Loki huffed.

“To hose down the walls and floors,” Tony rolled his eyes, as if it was obvious.

“And why would you need to do that?” Loki asked.

“It’s the Hulk containment cell. The Hulk might make a mess,” Tony shrugged. Bruce continued massaging his temples.

“What? Does the green behemoth fling his own fecal matter around like an animal upon occasion?” Loki snorted.

“Not that I know of,” Tony shrugged. “But I imagine the guy’s shits are huge and since we don’t have a toilet that large…” Bruce’s fist came down on the table before him angrily and Natasha took a step back.

“Do we really have to discuss The Other Guys’ bowel movements right now?” Bruce groaned over the intercom.

“Hey, man, inquiring minds,” Tony shrugged.

“Thor once shat in our mother’s gardens and attempted to blame it on a rogue Bilgesnipe,” Loki informed them.

“Recently? Or when you two were younger?” Tony said. Loki didn’t answer, but Tony was pretty certain Loki was trying to pass off some childhood shenanigans as recent activity.

“Does every one of these training sessions devolve into toilet humor?” Natasha asked Bruce, obviously unimpressed.

“More often than I care to admit,” Bruce said. “Though unless you bring up the jokes in Tony’s absence, I don’t think it will be too much of a problem moving forward.”

“Hopefully not,” Natasha nodded.

“Now,” Tony said as he began filling up the kiddie pool, “don’t freeze anything until it’s completely full. If I get stuck in this thing, you’re the one who is going to have to explain things to Pepper.”

“Why not? I think she would enjoy a good laugh at your expense,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Are they always like this?” Natasha asked Bruce.

“This is Loki and Tony getting along,” Bruce pointed out.

“Alright, the pool’s full and… seriously?” Tony huffed. Bruce and Natasha looked up to find Loki with a cheeky grin on his face. Not only had he frozen all of the water in the kiddie pool the second Tony filled it but he had also frozen the hose water as well, effectively freezing the hose to the pool via the water. “If you have frozen my pipes there are going to be serious consequences, mister.”

“I would think you would be proud I am harnessing my newfound abilities,” Loki replied haughtily. “After all, I could have frozen your coffee cup when you brought it in here last.”
“Don’t even joke about that,” Tony threatened. “Now, unfreeze this.”

Loki merely giggled, so Tony decided to take things into his own hands. He began pulling at the frozen length of hose, trying and failing to break the hose away from the ice shooting out of it. Instead, his hands slipped and he stumbled back, causing Loki to laugh hysterically.

“You actually manage to get things done between the two of them?” Natasha snorted.

Tony stood up and decided to try kicking the ice connecting the pool and the water, breaking it off so the hose would disconnect. Just as he was about to break through, the water unfroze completely and Tony found himself off balance, landing in the kiddie pool, completely soaking his bespoke Bironi suit. Despite Pepper’s insistence he should dress appropriately for the board meeting that afternoon, Tony knew he would have just put on a t-shirt and some jeans.

“You said to unfreeze it,” Loki shrugged toward an incensed Tony.

“Hey, good job,” Bruce said over the intercom to Loki. “You’re getting much better at unfreezing.”

“I thought we were suit bros!” Tony called out to Loki, upset. “You never disrespect the suit!”

“I can’t believe I’m going to have write all of this down in a report for Fury,” Natasha sighed.

“I’m sure you can leave this part out,” Bruce said as Tony exited the pool to find his shoes and socks were making squishy sounds against the hard flooring of the cell - noises that sounded like repeated flatulence. Loki laughed harder with each step Tony took.

“No,” Natasha said as Stark began chasing around the godling with the still flowing hose, hoping he could get Loki wet as well, “this is definitely going in.”
The Great Midgardian Feasting Holiday

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Jane gets some insights into Thor - and her potential in-laws

“Husband! Husband! Husband! Awaken! It is the day of the Midgardian Feast of Thankfulness!”

Loki groaned as his wife continued to jump up and down on their bed. It wasn’t that he minded when Sigyn decided to let her inner child come out and play by jumping on the bed. In fact, her love of doing so was one of Loki’s favorite things to witness, especially if she was only in her nightwear or preferably nude. Though he would never admit it to anyone, Loki had indulged his wife in this pastime rather often, usually with bed jumping turning into play fighting on the bed that typically concluded with a sexual act. Even Loki sometimes found his wife’s cheerfulness contagious. However, nothing could entice Loki from his bed so early in the morning that the sun had not yet risen.

“Loki!” Sigyn huffed as she jumped and then fell back onto the bed, kneeling on all fours. She crawled over to her husband as he attempted to hide his head underneath his pillow. Sigyn magicked it away from him, leading Loki to groan. “It is time to get up! We must prepare for the day ahead!”

“Why should I be awake if the sun is not yet awake?” Loki grumbled. “Besides, the feast is not until midday. I shall awaken then.”

“But there is much preparation to be done,” Sigyn insisted. “I promised the Lady Pepper I would help cook the meal. And there is to be a parade in celebration she said is most exciting! I am sure you will enjoy it.”

“I have never been entertained by an Asgardian parade,” Loki huffed. “I seriously doubt a Midgardian one will change my opinion. Go on to your work, lykyn, and let me sleep.”

“Perhaps you do not wish to watch the parade, but Thor undoubtedly will,” Sigyn pointed out. “I am sure he will be here soon to coax you into joining him. And he will not be as pleasant in waking you as I am.”

“I fail to see how consuming large amounts of food celebrates gratefulness for what one has,” Loki said, annoyed. “Midgardians have odd ideas about holidays.”

“Captain Rogers is going to feed the hungry this evening as part of his festivities,” Sigyn said. “Thor and I will join him. You should come to.”

“I can’t, remember?” Loki huffed. “Stark lined up a new occupation for me dealing with miniature Midgardians and their playthings.”

“You cannot fool me, husband,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “I know you adore children. They always appreciate your mischief.”

“Regardless,” Loki said, finally sitting up, “I shall have to aid you in feeding the unwashed masses at
a later date. I will have to report to my new post this afternoon. Apparently, a few hours worth of training is all that is required in Midgard to keep a shop. No wonder their economy is always in flux. Though, if you accompany the Captain to feed his undesirables you should take care not to pick up some sort of disease.”

“Come now, husband,” Sigyn snorted. “You don’t have to play the old curmudgeon with me. I know you’re not that heartless.”

“Let us revisit that statement tomorrow after I have worked my shift at this Midgardian shop,” Loki huffed. “Stark is more gleeful over this prospective place of employment than he was when I went to work at the Nokken coffee house.”

“You will certainly do well,” Sigyn said with tons more confidence in him than Loki thought she ought to have. “Now, come. Let us prepare for the day.”

“You prepare for the day,” Loki huffed. “I will sleep in preparation for my work. Awaken me when the feasting begins.” Loki seemed ready to fall back on his pillows, and Sigyn knew she would have to act quickly to distract him.

“If you ready yourself,” Sigyn promised, “I will let you pick my clothing for the day.”

Loki’s attention sharply focused on his wife, as if trying to determine whether or not she was teasing. Satisfied that the look in her eyes indicated truthfulness rather than a playful jest, Loki quickly got up and began to ready himself - though he did his best to make it look like he wasn’t rushing through his normal morning rituals. His own washing, dressing, combing and other general primping completed in record time, Loki turned his focus to the wide array of outfits in his wife’s wardrobe. Sigyn had a feeling she would not be wearing anything from her Midgardian collection nor would she be wearing something that would keep her particularly warm were she to venture out into the cold New York morning in it.

Loki had already laid out six or seven gowns he thought were possibilities when JARVIS intoned that Thor was standing before the door to their suite and very antsy about whether or not he would be let in. Loki wasn’t particularly keen for his brother to see him and Sigyn playing dress up, but Sigyn reminded her husband that Thor had not burst into their rooms unannounced and that perhaps entry would be seen as positive enforcement for respecting their boundaries. Happy to be let in, Thor bounded into the bedroom and began excitedly reciting all he had learned about Midgardian Thanksgiving from Jane and Darcy. After Sigyn asked him exactly who the “pilgrims” of the story were, Thor was flummoxed and then bounded back to his rooms so he could wake Jane up and ask her.

By the time Thor had left to fill in the blanks about the story of Thanksgiving, Loki had settled on a good dozen outfits and Sigyn was starting to think she would be later to help begin cooking than if she had forcibly dragged her husband out of bed using her seiðr. Watching his wife dress and undress in a wide variety of intricate and ornate gowns and accessories was one of Loki’s favorite little marital games and he frequently purchased clothing for her just for that purpose. It was the reason Sigyn had one of the largest wardrobes in all of Asgard as well as the ire of many petty female courtiers whose husbands couldn’t even be bothered to buy a glass of water for them if they were on fire.

Naturally, none of the outfits Loki wanted her in were in anyway suitable for working in a kitchen. Most were some of her more revealing Vanir gowns that used Elvish silk that gave an illusion of nudity or a shadow of a figure underneath carefully placed fabric and ornamentation. Rather than sequins or beading, these gowns were created using tiny, perfectly sewn gemstones. Loki never told her how much these purchases amounted to, and Sigyn never asked - though sometimes the mere
arrival of these gowns made her feel faint and nervous about their probable cost. She was halfway through trying on these gowns for Loki’s amusement when Thor arrived, a very sleepy Jane in tow, to explain the nuances of Thanksgiving.

Like Loki, Sigyn had deduced Jane was definitely not a morning person - especially because her profession was one best conducted at night. Wearing exercise shorts and a giant sweatshirt from Culver, Jane seemed mostly disoriented until the realization she was in Loki and Sigyn’s bedroom jarred her awake. Despite her annoyance at being awake, she still was soft and sweet to Thor who was overexcited about a feasting holiday and learning its origins. Jane’s yawn-filled tale was received happily by Sigyn and Thor, though mostly ignored by Loki who was more interested in eyeing up his wife in each of her outfits before making his final decision.

“Thor,” Loki said, pinching the bridge of his nose as Sigyn’s swirled around and changed yet again via seiðr, “please quit bouncing up and down upon our bed. I have no desire for Stark’s jabs in my direction if you break it.” Thor settled down but was still squirming somewhat. Jane and Darcy had secretly theorized Thor might have some Asgardian version of ADHD.

“And how long will the feast last?” Thor asked Jane curiously.

“Just for today,” she reminded him as Loki began eying up Sigyn again. “But there are a lot of parties and stuff leading up to Christmas and New Years, so you can look forward to that.”

“I am most excited for this turkey!” Thor grinned. “We have large birds on Asgard, but I have not seen such proud beasts as these majestic pheasants of your country!”

“Sigyn showed me a moving image of these turkeys and the noises they make,” Loki huffed. “Are you sure we were looking at the same bird?”

“One of our Founding Fathers actually wanted the turkey to be our national bird instead of the eagle,” Jane offered. “He thought the turkey was less morally bankrupt for some reason.”

“They do seem like sweet creatures,” Sigyn agreed. Thor and Loki exchanged a look and eyerolls which Sigyn didn’t notice but Jane did.

“I have made up my mind,” Loki announced finally. “The green dress with gold embroidery on the Alfheim silk and Vanir lace and gossamer.”

“Alright,” Sigyn nodded. “You take Thor into the living area. There should be some coffee and breakfast foods for you. I am sure Lady Jane would not mind helping me with the rest.”

Seeing the look in his wife’s eyes, Loki decided it was best not to test her. Besides, he knew coffee would help him waken better and Loki rather delighted in showing off his fancy coffee making skills to Thor, who still occasionally forgot that adding the beans was an essential step to the process. The promise of food and coffee instantly had Thor at the door and ready to go with no explanation. Jane, however, seemed a bit confused and worried about whatever was passing between the husband and wife. As soon as Loki and Thor were out of the bedroom, the door closed behind them. Jane moved to watch as Sigyn began pulling out various pieces of jewelry from a box that, like her trunk, seemed bottomless.

“Um… does Loki dress you every day?” Jane asked. Sigyn looked over her shoulder and the concerned look on the other woman’s face caused her to burst out with laughter.

“Oh, no, of course not,” Sigyn promised her. “Believe me, if that were the case my day-to-day wardrobe would be much more outlandish.”
“Then what was that all about?” Jane asked, confused.

“Loki enjoys picking out my clothing from time to time,” Sigyn shrugged. “He’s very particular - and rather dramatic - with his own apparel. In a way, I suppose he finds seeing me put on something he has carefully selected as alluring as watching me take it off. Not to mention he was going to be rather difficult to get out of bed this morning if there wasn’t something to tempt him.”

“No, I get that,” Jane admitted. “Thor will do just about anything for Pop-Tarts and bacon. I hate to admit it, but I have used that to my advantage a few times. I mean, mainly to bribe him to get things on tall shelves or hold heavy pieces of equipment in place for a long time.”

“I’m surprised he managed to be still,” Sigyn said, laying out several pieces of what Jane only assumed were various hair ornaments. “Thor has never been one for sitting still. You should have seen him when he was younger. Queen Frigga used to threaten to strap him to his chair at dinner so he would stop moving around and knocking things over.”

“What was he like as a kid?” Jane asked.

“Much like he is now,” Sigyn smirked. “Which one do you think?” Jane picked out two pieces and Sigyn used her seiðr to put the rest of them away. “Very loud and boisterous, always ready for an adventure. Talkative. His table manners were atrocious for the longest time. But he always had that contagious excitement about him. I think part of Loki’s problems growing up was that he was shy and quiet. Having a brother who was so loud and often couldn’t contain his excitement so he talked over you was hard. They were still very close though.”

“I’m starting to see that,” Jane nodded. “Thor is much happier when they are getting along.”

“Thor was always the leader, the brash one who headed straight into things without thinking,” Sigyn explained. “Loki was the thinker, the philosopher. In a way, they have always balanced each other out. I doubt Loki would have been as brave, as open to trying new things and new experiences, had it not been for Thor pushing him when they were younger. By contrast, Loki was always the one trying to get Thor to slow down and think things through. They made a rather interesting team.”

“What happened?” Jane asked curiously. “I mean, other than the whole New Mexico thing… I know that they were really close as kids, and it didn’t just end overnight.”

“As they got older, they both went to focus on different things,” Sigyn shrugged as she used her seiðr to braid and style her hair with the items Jane had selected. “Thor was trained for combat and war. Loki’s skills lay more in the realm of seiðr. They began spending less time together. And Thor met the Warriors Three and Lady Sif. The more time Thor spent in his training, the more time he also wanted to spend with his new friends and the less time he had for Loki. I suppose Loki took it personally. After all, there were always those who thought his seiðr was a worthless practice, something to be ridiculed. Asgard is not what one might consider an academic society, you see. And personally, I think Loki has and still takes out a lot of his frustrations with the Allfather on Thor. Sometimes he sees Thor as an extension of the Allfather. And to be honest, Thor has inherited some of his father’s… less pleasant qualities.”

“I have noticed that,” Jane has admitted. “Thor likes to be heard, but he doesn’t always like to listen. And he’s pretty stubborn.”

“Loki is too,” Sigyn sighed. “I don’t know how Queen Frigga manages with a husband and two sons as hard-headed as they are. She says that she just has to be twice as stubborn as all of them.”

“She’s got to be like Super Woman or something,” Jane sighed. As Sigyn finished her dress, she cast
a sidelong glance at Jane, who seemed a little nervous.

“Has Thor mentioned introducing you to them?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“No,” Jane said, trying to hide how it was bothering her. “I mean, I haven’t exactly introduced him to my mom either, but still. I know he’s a lot closer to his parents than I am to my mom. It worries me a little that we’ve known each other this long and he still hasn’t even said offhandedly that he’d like me to meet them sometime.”

“While he likes battle, Thor hates emotional confrontation, particularly with his parents” Sigyn pointed out. “And he knows that bringing you back to Asgard will most likely cause one with Odin. I suppose it’s more out of his selfish desire to avoid a fight, especially in front of you, than anything.”

“I suppose,” Jane said. “I just don’t want to bring it up, because I don’t like confrontation either and I really don’t want to start a fight about this.”

“I wish I could give you better advice,” Sigyn sighed. “I met Loki’s parents when I was so small I barely remember it. From what I’ve been told, I bit one of the members of the einherjar who tried to scoot me closer to the throne so the Allfather could see me better. I took offence because I felt the man had gotten too close to me and then he poked me. The Allfather apparently thought it was hilarious that one of his supposedly elite soldiers had been taken down by a bite to the knee from a tiny, half-dwarven child who still spoke with a slight lisp. Of course, I don’t know if he would have been so happy to know right then Loki and I would marry. That entire thing took some time. But he did come around eventually.”

“That at least gives me hope,” Jane sighed.

“If you would like,” Sigyn offered, “perhaps I could mention something to Thor about it?”

“No, that’s alright,” Jane insisted. “If anyone is going to talk to him about that, it should be me.”

“If you ever need anything…” Sigyn offered.

“I’ll ask you. I promise,” Jane smiled. “Well, I suppose we should go check on the guys before they break something or start a fight.”

“Yes, now that you mention it,” Sigyn agreed. “It is has been awfully quiet in the other room. Something must be wrong.”

The two women headed into the living room-kitchenette area to find the two brothers - to their great surprise - were not fighting, but instead engaging in a game that instantly led to Sigyn rubbing her forehead out of stress. Thor stood at one end of the kitchenette and Loki at the other, each man throwing fruit for the other to attempt to catch in his mouth. Pieces of melon and grapes were littered across the floors from where each man had missed. This wasn’t a new experience for Sigyn, apparently, but Jane was starting to wonder if this was what Loki and Thor were like when they were getting along. And if so, perhaps the two of them fighting was safer for everyone around them.

“I will not be picking this up,” Sigyn announced loudly, causing Thor to jerk his head at just the right moment and a grape to bounce of his ear. The grape fell to the floor and rolled to a stop at Sigyn’s feet.

“I hope you two weren’t trying to consume your coffee that way,” Jane said as Sigyn continued to stare at the grape by her feet as if it completely disgusted her.

“We drank all the coffee already,” Thor admitted as Loki seemed to creep his way around the
kitchenette’s island counter, is if that would hide him from his wife’s fury.

“The two of you will clean this up while Lady Jane and I report to the communal kitchen to begin feast preparations,” Sigyn informed the two men. “If you have not finished and come up to join us in a maximum of ten minutes, I will have Sir JARVIS inform me as to why. And I will not be pleased.”

“Yes, Sigyn,” both Thor and Loki intoned, seemingly slightly ashamed. Sigyn swept out of the room and Jane thought she had no choice but to follow her. Jane was still processing what she had just seen and was trying not to bust out in laughter as a result.

“What was that all about?” Jane asked once the two women were firmly ensconced in the elevator.

“Thor and Loki have been playing that particular game for millennia, and it usually ends in a food fight that is a menace to clean up,” Sigyn sighed. “But, at least they are getting along… For now.”

Loki was not pleased to have been awoken so early in the morning so he could see a parade of all things. Stark had wanted everyone to go over to the penthouse a friend of his owned that actually was on the parade route, but the groans and complaints of various Avengers in their pajamas meant he would have to settle for watching it on the big screen in the communal room like a normal person. Steve was enthralled to see the parade up and at it again after being suspended during the war, regaling whoever would listen about listening to the parade on the radio and actually getting to see it for himself - Mickey Mouse balloon and all - one year. Since Steve had been susceptible to the cold weather most of his life, lining a parade route all morning wasn’t exactly the best idea for him. The one year he had gone he had wound up with double pneumonia through New Years.

Tony found himself having to explain the various characters on floats and in balloons to Steve, Thor and Loki, especially since Clint had no problem spinning false tales about characters if left to his own devices. The conception of marching bands and children’s entertainers performing during a parade seemed to confuse both Thor and Loki, who were used to the more military-style parades of Asgard. The concept of giant balloons and decorated floats with minstrels performing on them was a bit different that row after row of warriors. Loki was also a bit annoyed that the mayor would close down a street to celebrate a holiday that as far as Loki was concerned only celebrated feasting but wouldn’t extend the same courtesy for Sigyn’s Name Day. Tony was just glad he wouldn’t have to explain the Christmas parade to Loki.

For her part, Sigyn had jumped at the chance to help Darcy, Pepper, and Bruce figure out the mechanics of cooking Thanksgiving for the assembled crowd. Pepper had given the usual chefs the day off to spend with their family, and so it would be up to the four of them to prepare the meal. During the parade commercials, Steve also chipped in helping with this or that. In addition to the turkey and Bruce’s tofurkey, the menu for the day called for mashed potatoes, green beans, cranberry sauce, baked sweet potatoes, dressing, and applesauce. Of course, a Stark Thanksgiving also came with the stuffed artichokes, stuffed mushrooms, squash lasagna and tortellini that Tony’s mom had always made sure were added to the table to honor her Italian heritage on the day. For dessert, pumpkin, apple, chocolate and pecan pie were all on the menu.

Sigyn delighted in learning the ins-and-outs of Italian food, which relieved Pepper who had always feared messing up the recipes herself. The one time Tony had tried to make them, he nearly burned the house down and then nearly drowned from the fire extinguisher foam DUM-E sicced on him. He had then been banned from using the kitchen on Thanksgiving by Pepper, Happy and JARVIS. Anytime he attempted to sneak a snack from it during a commercial break, JARVIS and all the bots began sounding a loud alarm throughout the Tower, which then prompted Happy to get up and guide Tony back to his seat. Bruce was always slightly startled each time Tony sounded the alarm,
but something about putting together the vegetable dishes with Darcy seemed to calm him down.

Not all of the Tower’s Thanksgiving guests seemed to revel in the parade or food, however. Clint had come in early in the morning, whined about having to keep his stomach empty until noon and then promptly collapsed under the large dining table to take a nap, occasionally waking up to make a comment on a balloon like how a cartoon show’s current season wasn’t living up to the hype or how long it would take one of his arrows to deflate a certain balloon. Natasha was curled up in the living area but instead of watching the parade she was sipping Russian tea and reading a book about homemade weapon making. It was hard to tell if she was reading the book because she was learning some genuinely new information or because she was trying to get a rise out of her housemates. Save for Loki, who was now trying to figure out a way he could get his hands on whatever other delightful texts might be hiding on the Black Widow’s bookshelves. Jane was curled up with a book containing the collected correspondence and research of Caroline Herschel.

“A parade is a most unusual way to celebrate thankfulness,” Thor mused. For once, Loki though his erstwhile brother had made an insightful comment.

“Well, I think the parade is more a big advertisement to shop at Macy’s for Christmas presents,” Tony shrugged.

“Christmas?” Loki and Thor enquired.

“It’s a winter gift-giving holiday…” Tony began before getting a curious look from Steve, “which I probably should not be the one to explain to.”

“The parade started in the 1920s,” Steve explained. “It didn’t even have balloons at first. They used to parade the zoo animals down the street. When they got the balloons, they used to release the balloons at the end of it until one almost caused a plane crash. They had to cancel it during the war because the rubber was needed for the war effort instead.”

“Oh my god,” Tony grinned happily. “You are literally older than the Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade!”

“Yes, Tony,” Steve rolled his eyes.

“Pepper!” Tony began.

“I heard you!” Pepper shouted back. “Now, let me mash these potatoes!”

“At least this isn’t as bad as when he found out you were literally older than sliced bread,” Bruce offered. Steve smirked at that. Tony had even made him up a shirt that said “Sliced Bread is the Best Thing Since Me.”

“Come, Sigyn,” Loki called to his wife. “It is your cat friend!” Sigyn rushed over from the kitchen to jump up and down, clapping excitedly as the Hello Kitty balloon floated down the streets. Once it was off the screen, she seemed disappointed for a split second before happily returning to the kitchen to resume her work.

Tony soon found himself having to justify various balloons to Thor and Loki. The Happy Dragon character was not only, according to Loki, the worst misrepresentation of a dragon ever seen but also, according to Thor, perhaps misleading toward children as to the friendliness of dragons. Even a team of Tony, Bruce and Jane couldn’t explain to the two Asgardians what kind of creatures were Smurfs, Spongebobs, and the Kool-Aid Man. Steve being thrilled that they had at least brought back the “Harold” characters for the parade was a minor consolation. It was also somewhat of a
consolation to Tony that the balloons had improved since Steve’s day when the most exciting part of the parade was the balloon shaped like the Nantucket Sea Monster or Eddie Cantor.

With the parade over, there was still thirty minutes until the meal would be served, and Thor’s hunger was starting to get the best of him. Despite the fact that he had eaten a good, Thor-sized breakfast, the lightning god was not doing well being within sniffing distance of so many tasty aromas. Steve’s discourse on the history of Thanksgiving traditions - including something called a ragamuffin parade Tony would have to make fun of later - was helping to distract Thor from the food. Tony tried to distract Thor with talk of the upcoming football games that afternoon, especially since Thor seemed to enjoy watching the Midgardian sport, but it was to no avail. Thor soon began inching closer and closer to the kitchen until both Sigyn and Jane called him out, forcing Thor to grumpily return to his living room seat.

The second time Thor began sneaking over to the kitchen, Pepper assigned him to set the table. Knowing that Thor wasn’t the most gentle table-setter, she asked Steve to go behind and help him. While Thor was at least gentle with the plates and silverware, he apparently had never paid attention to how silverware was sorted and so Steve had to behind him and correct the place settings. With the plates done, Pepper suggested the two of them get everyone’s drink orders and start putting those out as well. Finally, all of the food was ready and Sigyn was happy to use her seiðr to levitate the contents of the feast to the table for everyone to eat. Thor seemed ready to seize the entire turkey with his own knife before Pepper cleared her throat.

“Before we eat,” Pepper said, causing Thor to let out a loud groan in distress that in turn earned him glares from much of the rest of the table, “we are going to go around the table and say what we are thankful for.”

“Potts family tradition, Point Break,” Tony said to Thor. “No getting around it.”

“I’ll start,” Pepper said. “I’m thankful to have all of you to celebrate this holiday with. And that fourth quarter revenues are coming in higher than projected.” She turned to her left to see Tony, who was sitting at one end of the table.

“Yeah, I’m thankful for Red Bull and gummy bears,” Tony said before getting a slight kick from Pepper. “And I’m thankful for JARVIS and Happy for keeping this fuckawesome Tower safe and Pepper for running the company and putting up with my shit. And I’m thankful for Rhodes, even though he was a lame ass and decided to spend this holiday with his family instead of me, his awesome cool totally rad best friend.”

“Um,” Bruce said, a little nervous things had come around to him so quickly. “I’m thankful for Hulk-proof-lab spaces, tea, yoga, and Ernest Rutherford.”

“I’m thankful for all this good food,” Steve smiled, “the people who made it and the people I get to share it with.” Tony wanted to roll his eyes, but Steve was so genuine it was hard to. Steve turned to his left to Loki, who didn’t seem happy that he was going to have to announce he was thankful for something. Tony expected Loki to say something rude, but was caught off guard when the Trickster’s turn came around.

“I am most grateful for you, my love,” Loki said to Sigyn, kissing her hand and causing her to giggle. He even earned a few “aws” from the group before looking Tony dead in the eye and, with a smirk, adding: “and the winter squash pie we are about to consume.” Tony fumed, but he knew now wasn’t the time to be picking fights with Loki over proper translation, especially since Sigyn was now talking.

“I am thankful for my family, including my husband and my brother-in-law who are with me,” Sigyn
said. “And I am thankful for my garden. And my pets.” Even Natasha seemed to smile at Sigyn’s enthusiasm, though she quickly reverted to her trademark resting bitch face when it was her turn to share.

“I am thankful for vodka,” Natasha said, seeming to be sharpening her butter knives, “and my custom Makarovs.”

“I am thankful we will be leaving this building in the care of someone with custom Makarovs,” Happy said, “and for the turkey.”

“Yeah,” Clint said over his cup of coffee. “I’m thankful for ‘Dog Cops,’ caffeine and explosive-tipped arrows.”

“I am thankful for this great Midgardian feasting holiday!” Thor announced exuberantly. “And that I get to enjoy it with my Lady Jane and our friends!” Jane blushed slightly then realized it was her turn.

“I’m thankful for NASA and Vera Rubin,” Jane said. “Ludwig Flamm, the Harvard Computers, and Nancy Grace Roman.”

“I’m thankful for going last so I could think of something insightful,” Darcy grinned, “and for getting to work with Janey and all the opportunities it’s given me. You’re awesome.”

“Thanks, Darce,” Jane smiled, giving her a hug back.

“Alright,” Tony said. “Let’s dig in before Thor’s stomach starts eating itself.”

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“So, before I bring dessert out,” Pepper announced as everyone began to finish off their plates. “There is something we need to take care of.” As Pepper gestured, Sigyn brought over a Black Russian cake with raspberries on the side and placed it in front of Natasha.

“You will pay for this Barton,” Natasha glowered at him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Clint said.

“So, Clint suggested we not sing the traditional Russian birthday song,” Pepper explained. “Something to do with alligators playing an accordion?”

“Russian is a complex place,” Natasha shrugged as she received curious glances from around the table.

“And Clint said you’d also get mad if we got you presents,” Pepper said. “But we did all chip in and get you a Sephora gift card.”

“And I got you a bottle of each one of Stolichnaya’s twelve flavors,” Tony said, snapping his fingers so DUM-E brought in a crate of vodka straight from the motherland.

“Alright,” Natasha nodded approvingly. “Now, if I cut this cake and give you each a piece we will eat in silence and forget this birthday nonsense?”

“You really aren’t big on birthdays, are you,” Darcy mentioned.

“I’d wager I’m not the only one at this table who can claim that,” Natasha pointed out. Steve blushed a little and Loki rolled his eyes - though it could have been because Thor and Jane were playing
footsie under the table.

“I love my birthday,” Tony pointed out.

“You love having an excuse to drink,” Pepper pointed out.

“Birthdays aren’t so much fun the older you get,” Bruce admitted.

“Another year older, another year closer to death,” Natasha nodded.

“I was more thinking because no one buys me action figures anymore,” Clint shrugged.

“Can’t you buy action figures for yourself?” Happy pointed out.

“It’s not the same as getting them from someone else,” Clint agreed.

“Okay, either cut the cake or break out the vodka,” Tony ordered, “because this Thanksgiving is getting way too depressing way too fast. I mean, that is a Stark family tradition and all, but not one I necessarily like to keep.”

“Here, here,” Natasha agreed.
Decades later, the tale of Thor and Loki’s experience in the annual Midgardian Battle of the Blackest Friday would provide much awe and entertainment for the denizens of the Nine Realms. As the events unfolded, however, neither brother quite envisioned ever telling anyone about their first and hopefully only experience with the bizarre ritual of pillaging that took place as the official start to Midgard’s winter holiday gift-giving season. The entire thing began innocuously enough in the final throes of the great Midgardian Feast of Thankfulness when Thor loosened his belt and let out a burp that shook the foundations of Stark Tower.

“Seriously, Hammer Time?” Tony groaned, himself overstuffed with pie, turkey and tortellini. “Next time I need demolition work done, I’ll just take you out for beans and rice beforehand.”

“Yes,” Loki scoffed with a roll of his eyes where he and Sigyn - both equally stuffed with pie themselves - were reclining on the sofa in a post-feast food coma snugglefest, “let us use this time to celebrate our bodily functions.”

“There are leftovers,” Bruce said, looking at the table in utter surprise. “How are there leftovers?”

“There aren’t any leftovers of dessert,” Darcy pointed out, a little sad.

“I thought there were a couple of slices of Natasha’s cake left,” Jane pointed out.

“Nah,” Clint sighed from where he had gone under the table to take a nap after eating. “She’s smuggled them back to her room by now.”

“Ugh, I guess we should start dividing those up so we can get the dishes done,” Pepper sighed.

“So, now your feasting holiday is complete?” Loki asked from where he was snuggling his wife.

“Not quite,” Tony said. “There’s a football game on in a few minutes.”

“There is to be a ball game upon the gridded irons? Huzzah!” Thor said happily, forgetting the fullness of his stomach and trotting over to place himself in an ideal position before the television. Steve had already taken the comfiest recliner, falling asleep because of how full he was, and Loki and Sigyn were hogging the couch for what Tony could only best describe as spooning with their clothes on. Tony, for his part, was trying to figure out exactly why Allspeak translated “gridiron football” as “a ball game upon the gridded irons.”

"Typical,” Loki snorted.

“You can help us clean up,” Pepper offered.
“What is happening?” Sigyn asked, her eyes fluttering open.

“There is to be a game in which the pig’s skin is tossed!” Thor said happily. Sigyn looked horrified and then Jane, Darcy, Thor, Tony and Bruce all began talking over each other, assuring Sigyn no actual pigs were harmed in the making of a football. At least not any more.

Still slightly horrified that pig’s may have once been used in making the ball in Thor’s new favorite tackling sport, Sigyn used a spot of seiðr to effortlessly clean all the dishes and pack away the leftovers, much to Pepper’s relief. Those who did not want to stay and watch the game - Jane, Darcy, Pepper, Bruce, Sigyn and Loki - were then herded into the library so Darcy and Jane could teach the Asgardians Yahtzee. Apparently, dice were not uncommon on Asgard and there was a dice game similar to poker that Loki allegedly excelled at. Despite the fact that Loki had no seiðr, most of the group soon became convinced he was somehow cheating at Yahtzee because no one was that naturally lucky with dice.

Meanwhile, Tony, Steve, Clint, Natasha, Happy and Thor were watching New England and the Jets square off. Tony would have thought Steve would be all about the red, white and blue team, especially as Steve was a self-professed Giants fan. However, Steve explained that even though he preferred the Giants to the Jets he had to root for a New York team no matter what - especially if they were playing a team from Massachusetts of all places. Tony rolled his eyes at Steve’s typical New Yorker belief that his city and state were better than everyone else’s. Tony had technically been born at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, which Howard had helped found. In fact, the desire to have his son born in said hospital delayed the delivery so much that Maria Stark gave birth in a hallway and it was still unsure if Tony was delivered in the Long Island or the Queens side of the hospital. Of course, living in Malibu and various boarding schools on and off from the time he was seven until he was thirty-eight rubbed most of the New Yorker out of him.

For his part, Thor made up for his lack of knowledge about how football was played with his enthusiasm - particularly for the tackling aspect. While he still was unclear on how to score, no matter how many times Steve or Tony tried to explain it to him, Thor’s overall exuberance for the game made up for anything he didn’t understand. Even though Thor was partially responsible for the near obliteration of the Thanksgiving feast they had only a few hours before, he and Clint were still sharing one of the three party platters Pepper had gotten for the day in anticipation of Thor not being patient enough to wait for the meal to be done. The two of them had just finished up the tray of cold cuts in time for the halftime break, which was filled with even more commercials than all of the other breaks.

“What is this Blackest Friday?” Thor asked suddenly. “Is it some kind of Midgardian holiday?”

“Didn’t we talk to you about this already?” Tony asked.

“I may not have been paying attention,” Thor admitted, causing Tony to roll his eyes.

“It’s the official kick off to winter holiday shopping,” Tony explained. “A lot of stores have really good deals, so people come out really early in the morning to get stuff. Well, people who don’t have a JP Morgan Chase Palladium Visa or AmEx Centurion in their wallet.”

“What does that have to do with blackness?” Thor frowned. “Is it because they begin their shopping excursions in the black of the night?”

“No, it has more to do with economics,” Tony explained. “See, when a company or a person is in debt, we sometimes say that person is ‘in the red,’ meaning they have a negative amount of money. When you’re doing well or your company is making more money than it is losing, we call that being ‘in the black.’ They started calling it Black Friday because the amount of shopping done on this day
is often enough to take companies afraid they would finish the year ‘in the red’ to where they are ‘back in the black.’”

“Truly? That many people visit the merchants?” Thor said, impressed.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded. “It’s like going into battle, though. People can get pretty fierce. Like coldclocing each other over children’s toys and stuff.”

“People don’t serious punch each other, do they?” Steve asked, alarmed.

“Steve, do yourself a favor and google ‘Tickle Me Elmo 1996,’ and see what pops up,” Clint replied.

“This day sounds most intriguing,” Thor nodded.

“So, you planning on getting Jane something?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded. “It may not be the twenty-fifth yet, but the day really creeps up on you.”

“What is this day?” Thor asked.

Steve, who had just returned to the area with a fresh two-liter of soda, launched into an explanation of Judeo-Christian winter holiday traditions with Thor. Most of what Steve explained went over Thor’s head, which Tony figured was a good thing. The last thing Steve probably needed was Thor poking holes in his religious traditions. Of course, Thor did pick up on small, more secularized things like the decoration of trees, lighting of lanterns and the idea of giving gifts to one’s friends and family. Asgard apparently had a similar winter holiday tradition involving decorations, trees being brought indoors, lighting bonfires, and exchanging gifts. Midway through his own half-hearted attempt at explaining his own Asgardian traditions, Thor was distracted by a commercial advertising expensive jewelry for women. It was then that Thor finally seemed to process something.

“I must go shopping!” Thor announced.

“Yeah, that’s kind of what it’s for,” Clint rolled his eyes.

“No, I have not acquired any winter holiday gifts! Not for my friends here, nor for my friends and family in Asgard!” Thor said, a bit panicked.

“Well, Pepper and I leave at like eight tomorrow morning,” Tony pointed out. “But I’m sure someone around here would be willing to guide you through the chaos that is Black Friday.”

“I could help” Steve suggested. “We could hit the shops after lunch?”

“No offense, man,” Tony interjected, “but everything will be sold out by lunch. And the city today is nothing like you remember. And I’m pretty sure seeing the hordes out on Black Friday might make you want to hang up the uniform. However, the shield might come in handy for busting up fist-fights over stand mixers and Hot Wheels.”

“Do people not make gifts for each other anymore?” Steve frowned.

“Yeah, I’m gonna say you’re not the ideal tour guide for Black Friday,” Clint nodded. “And there is no way I will be up in time for the shopping nor will I ever. Nat, you up for it?”

“I always enjoy the thrill of the hunt,” Natasha replied with a terrifying grin.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all,” Tony admitted.
“Huzzah! I look forward to participation in this Midgardian tradition immensely!” Thor said happily.

“Just two things,” Tony cautioned him. “I’d wear non-Asgardian clothes and leave the hammer at home.”

“You do not think this excursion is one for Mjolnir?” Thor asked, seemingly concerned. Clint rolled his eyes as Thor gestured to the hammer, which was lying on one of the couch pillows.

“I mean, it might be useful…” Clint began.

“It wouldn’t be prudent,” Tony explained. “Black Friday is supposed to be a weapons-free zone. Besides, with all the purchases you’ll be carrying around, it might be smart not to have the extra weight.”

“I assure you, Mjolnir is light as a feather. But fair enough,” Thor agreed. “Perhaps Sigyn’s miniature stuffed creatures can keep Mjolnir company while I am away.” Tony and Clint exchanged a look, both wanting to further discuss the fact that Thor treated his weapon the same way Sigyn treated stuffed animals.

“Well, good luck tomorrow,” Tony offered Thor. “Hopefully, the crowds won’t be too bad.”

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After Loki had won so many of the dice games his companions had given up in disgust, the god of lies retreated to his chambers for a nap before he was forced back into manual labor. Sigyn had gone out with Steve, Thor and a few others to help feed some Midgardian residents another feast for the holiday. Sigyn returned a few hours later and attempted to slip into bed with her husband while he caught the rest of his afternoon nap before his shift was to begin. Loki, however, was stirred away by her arrival and, after about fifteen minutes or so of what the Captain had once described as - much to Stark’s hilarity - “heavy petting,” the pair of them fell asleep together.

Loki found himself awoken a couple of hours later to the sounds of Sigyn frantically rushing around the kitchen as she had overslept and not woken in time to prepare the hearty stew and loaf of bread she had meant for Loki’s supper before he reported to his new position. With a smirk, Loki rose and changed his clothes, washing his face and recombing his hair before going into the kitchen to find Sigyn expertly speeding up the process of making the stew using her seiðr. While it tasted just as good as if she had spent hours preparing it, Sigyn still seemed annoyed that she hadn’t gotten it ready in the time she had planned.

“I shall perhaps bring the leftovers to Thor,” Sigyn suggested. “Oh, which reminds me…”

“Yes, dearest?” Loki asked curiously.

“Your brother wishes to visit the merchants on this Blackest Friday as well,” Sigyn said. “He apparently seeks to participate in the tradition as well as acquire some gifts for his friends and acquaintances for the winter holidays. The Lady Widow will be escorting him as will the Lady Darcy. And I should like to go along, too.”

“Well, even if I did not wish you to go along, I have no authority to forbid you from doing so,” Loki shrugged. “Just promise me you will stay close to the Lady Widow and the Lady Darcy so they might protect you from whatever ruffians are out and about so early in the day to acquire cheap
goods. Honestly, this sounds like a holiday for smugglers and pirates if anything.”

“I don’t intend to buy anything myself,” Sigyn admitted, “but I am a bit curious about this particular Midgardian tradition. And the Lady Darcy says that is an opportune time to seek goods one would get anyway. Apparently, many are enthralled by the sales and buy things they do not particularly need - which is a waste of funds in the long run. Lady Darcy, however, says that she uses this time to purchase things she would have to buy anyway, such as clothing or foodstuffs.”

“Purchase anything you like, my dear,” Loki assured her. “I have been informed the pay I am receiving for my single day of work will be great indeed compared to the usual wage. Eleven and twenty-five an hour, which I admit seems a bit high for the minimal amount of work I am to do. Think on it, Sigyn! Were we on Asgard, my wages would purchase you a team of the finest bred ponies!”

“That is what you said before you began working at the coffeehouse of the marmenill,” Sigyn pointed out. “And then Stark explained to you at about how the decimal point figures into Midgardian currency.”

“Yes, well,” Loki huffed, “it would at least be enough to purchase that machine that creates the spun sugar of which you have become so fond.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” Sigyn cheered, clapping her hands and then peppering her husband with kisses before returning to spoon the rest of the stew into a thermos for Thor. “I promise husband, you shall have the first batch I make! And do not argue. I know you enjoyed the sour and sweet mix of the so-called green apple.”

Loki rolled his eyes, but finished the rest of his meal in silence. JARVIS intoned that Stark was there to deliver Loki to his new punishment just as Sigyn was putting the finishing touches on her husband’s breakfast for his break later. Stark came into the room when bid, followed by Thor. Apparently, the crown prince of Asgard was so nervous about his first Midgardian winter holiday gift purchasing quest that he had not been able to sleep. Thor was excitedly telling Stark about all of the newspaper advertisements he had been leafing through and the various too-good-to-miss offers on various items. Stark, meanwhile, was mentally crafting a joke about the fact that Captain Rogers still received a physical newspaper each day. Sigyn took the remaining stew she had made for her husband, emptied it into a thermos and then thrust the thermos into Thor’s hand. With a grin, Thor up ended most of the stew into his mouth in one gulp. Stark, for his part, seemed grateful that something had finally closed Thor’s mouth.

“So, Loren, ready to head out for your first Black Friday retail experience?” Tony asked him.

“Ugh, if it will get Thor’s big head out of my line of sight I will gladly accompany you to Hel, Stark,” Loki huffed. He stood up, taking a rather long and languid kiss goodbye from Sigyn that made Stark and Thor rather uncomfortable.

“When shall you return my husband to me?” Sigyn asked Stark, seeming a little worried as she pulled her lips from her husband.

“He’ll be back tomorrow around noon,” Tony replied.

“That is an awfully long time for employment at a shop,” Sigyn frowned.

“Not for Black Friday, it isn’t,” Stark pointed out. He looked at Loki. “If I were you, I’d ask what their hazard pay and health plan is like when you get there.”
“What is that supposed to mean?” Sigyn asked worriedly.

“He’ll be fine,” Tony rolled his eyes. “And if not, they’ve assured me there are security cameras.”

Sigyn did not seem pleased by this, and Tony found himself trying to figure out a reassuring way to tell her that Loki would be facing hordes of shoppers in a free-for-all bloodbath over video game consoles, television-inspired dolls and playsets, and whatever frightening furry talking animatronic creation had been dreamed up to annoy parents this year. He had a feeling if Sigyn knew the complete and utter truth of what Black Friday entailed she wouldn’t allow anyone to take her husband within a hundred feet of it. Luckily for Tony, Loki seemed to sense that his wife was starting to have reservations about whatever his new occupation would be and decided to smooth them over.

“Come now, lykyng,” Loki said gently, “You know I’ve organized armies and managed espionage networks for centuries. I doubt very much that miniature Midgardians and their desire for playthings will put me in any danger.”

“Alright,” Sigyn said skeptically. “But keep your talking box with you so I can ensure you are safe.”

“I will,” Loki said, smirking in pride at the amount of concern his wife had for him.

Tony rolled his eyes and then began poking Loki until the god began to leave the room of his own volition. With Loki finally in the elevator and the pair of them heading out to Loki’s Black Friday assignment, Tony just hoped that the godling wouldn’t call for backup when he came face-to-face with American capitalism in all it’s glory. The last thing anyone needed was Thor smashing heads with Mjolnir over Furbies and Barbie dolls.

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Loki’s belief that Midgard had little respect for the art of shopkeeping was confirmed when his job training ended a mere hour and a half after it had begun. Apparently, his only task was to monitor a series of two aisles and prevent both theft and fisticuffs relating to who felt what item belonged to them. He was given no information on how to help any patrons who might have questions about the items on display there, and Loki felt his task was something more akin to guard duty than actual shopkeeping. Honestly, Loki felt that the Midgardian shopkeepers were training their employees better in defense than actual tasks one might consider essential for mercantile. He had been assigned to the department featuring children’s playthings for the evening, though there were apparently several other additional employees that had been hired only for this brief Midgardian shopping holidays to work in various departments.

The doors of the store, Loki was informed, had been closed at nine that evening and then Midgardians would allegedly begin lining up around the block for when the store reopened at midnight. Loki found it extremely hard to believe that any Midgardian would be awake at such an hour to do shopping of all things, especially since the store was sparsely populated as it was that afternoon. In fact, there was hardly anyone there save those who were scheduled to be working. Loki decided whomever ran this so-called “department store” must be absolutely mad. He was being paid what Stark assured him was three dollars over Midgardians minimum wage per hour just to watch some shelves. Unless they were magically inclined shelves, Loki decided Stark had seriously underestimated the danger of this temp job.
The first half hour of his shift was spent pleasantly enough watching as shelves were properly
stocked and organized. Loki was then given a last minute refresher on how the event was to
progress. Loki relaxed for a while afterward, wondering why Stark had described this evening as
something akin to a massive horde overtaking city walls. It was on the stroke of midnight that Loki
finally heard them, the great swarm of unruly hellions that had burst through the doors of the store
and into its canyon-like aisles, sniffing out goods like a pack of ravenous wolves. He had never
longed for his combat armor so much as when this mob of people in sweatpants and windbreakers
stormed into the handful of aisles he was to maintain.

Like a plague of locusts, they descended and robbed every shelf of whatever items were upon it.
Those who had achieved their aims often held their plunder aloft in triumph and then waded away
from the crowd to the next section of the store to repeat the process anew. As more and more items
were carted away, fear and panic surged among those who had not yet reached the shelves, fearful
their desires would be gone by the time they reached them. It was then that all manner of spiteful
biting, kicking, punching, and spitting ensued. Loki felt helpless to watch, as if a plague of the
undead had risen up from the bowels of Helheim and were destroying all from within. It was only
when one of the security guards began breaking up the fight that Loki was brought back to reality.

Over the centuries, Loki had seen many forms of blood and battle, but there was nothing quite like
this Midgardian thirst for consumer goods, a desire to save a coin or two so severe that one would
physically attack their fellow human being over something called a “Polly Pocket Playset.” A large
man and a woman half his size were pulling with equal weight, each trying to attain some stuffed
creature that sang and danced. Had Loki not moved to approach them, they might have torn it in two.
Seeing some measure of authority approaching their brawl, the man had given up to find another toy
while the woman clutched the item to her possessively, as if Loki might now attempt to take it from
her.

From behind, something knocked into Loki and he briefly stumbled forward before turning around
to find an elderly grandmother and a young, mustachioed man in thick glasses brawling over a child-
sized Iron Man helmet with sound effects. Loki resisted the urge to tell them no child in their right
mind would want such a reprehensible gift, only for the elderly lady to kick the young man in the
nether regions and make off of the item. Loki’s attempt to help the young man up only earned him a
streak of curses and various angry accusations about how terrible Loki must be at his job. Loki then
separated a married couple who were screaming at each other over who would have to explain to
their child why some mysterious mythological figure had not brought some playset depicting a
popular wrestler. It felt as though ages had passed in the unseemly brawl. Loki looked at the clock on
the wall over head.

It was fifteen minutes past midnight.

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Thor Odinson, Son of Odin; Crown Prince of Asgard; Wielder of Mjolnir; The Thunderer, Protector
of Midgard; Lord of Bilskirnir, Þrúðheimr, and Þrúðvangr; Wearer of Megingjörð and Járnglófar;
had defeated many enemies in his life. He had single-handedly dispatched the Troll-King Hrungrír.
He had fought Cotati, Chitauri, deathwings, direwraiths, dragons, draugrs, Frost Giants,
horrowbeasts, Kree, Rhunians, sea monsters, Spartoi, Sovereigns, wargs, wolves, and various
wights. He had bested creatures that walked on two legs, four, six, eight and even infinite numbers of
appendages that would only make a lesser man wet himself and scream in terror. He fought and
come out victorious against eldritch creatures so vile and horrific that to see them was enough to cast a mere mortal into spontaneous flames or turn them to pure stone.

And yet, Thor had never encountered anything as fearsome and frightening as watching two, fully grown adult Midgardian men coming to blows over a guava glaze-colored KitchenAid Artisan Series tilt-head stand mixer. As the two rolled on the floor, attacking each other, a third man swooped in and grabbed the mixer, running off. Five minutes later, Thor spotted the man in the coiling, snake-like check out line, arguing over his handheld talking box with a female who was angered that he had not gotten a watermelon colored version of the item as guava glaze would clash with their kitchen decor. As he attempted to walk through the line, it shuddered and hissed, the mighty glare of a thousand eyes turning on him. Thor had heard tales of a giant serpent that stalked Midgard as a boy, but never in his wildest dreams had he imagined such a frightening beast might be comprised of actual Midgardians.

From the bowels of the kitchenwares section of the store, a happy Sigyn emerged in her bright pink knitted sweater dress with a glittery pink long-sleeved shirt and matching glittery pink tights underneath. She was wearing white rabbit fur Asgardian boots Loki had gotten for her for a trip to the mountains of Alfheim one year and a bright grin on her face, a bright pink cotton candy machine meant for a kitchen countertop under one arm and a massive package of sugar floss mixtures under the other. Natasha brought up the rear with the cart being used to store other goods. Thor wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that the Lady Widow’s own purchases included an expensive toolset, noise canceling headphones, a 40-pack of gun range targets and package of floral-scented bath bombs. Thor was not sure if the Lady Widow understood the purpose of the last item.

Sigyn herself had also acquired a similar set of bath bombs and Darcy had picked some out for herself as well as a package of bath bombs that mimicked the night sky for Jane. Together, Darcy and Sigyn had picked out quite a bit of pajama bottoms, a few cute tops, and fluffy bathrobes. Sigyn had also gotten a rather large seed bell for the magpies from somewhere, despite the fact there wasn’t really a garden department in the store. Sigyn had also picked Loki out some comfy pajama bottoms of his own, a new black terry cloth robe, some of the Midgardian facial and hand cream blend he had come to appreciate, and a green leather satchel bag meant for laptops that Thor was actually a bit jealous of - only because Thor was stumped on what to procure for his brother.

In fact, Thor’s quest to find presents for his friends and family was not going very well at all. The piece of jewelry he had most wanted to acquire for Jane had been sold out as was the foot spa Tony had recommended for Pepper. The only successful presents Thor had managed to acquire were a set of seaglass vases for his mother and an air fryer large enough to roast an entire chicken for Clint. Between the humans fighting and the fact that the items on his holiday wish list were rapidly disappearing, Thor was tempted to just throw in the towel and get everyone on his list a scented candle he thought they might appreciate.

“What’s wrong, Big Guy?” Darcy asked Thor, seeing his distress.

“The necklace I wanted for Jane is gone and so is everything else,” Thor frowned. “All I have for this excursion are vases and a cooking device.”

“Hey, it’s fine,” Darcy insisted.

“Yeah, I mean, I guess we can go to another store if there is time,” Natasha nodded.

“Huzzah! To the purchasing line!” Thor started to head off toward the front of the store, only for Darcy to prod him in the back.

“Thor,” Darcy said sticking her thumb over her shoulder, “the end of the line is this way.”
After an agonizing thirty minutes in line where none of the women could tell if Thor’s antsy dance was from nervousness or the need to urinate, all four members of the party checked out their items and then the three women ran to catch up with Thor as he headed two blocks down to another department store. A bit pricier than their original destination, the second store still had some deals but much less of a crowd. Thor was quickly able to find a necklace he much preferred to the one he had originally intended for Jane, which included a pink crystal heart ornament. He purchased for Fandral what was actually a makeup mirror, a nice thick gray cashmere scarf for Hogun, a cast iron tea pot for Volstagg, and a set of Sigyn-approved leather boots for Sif. He even found a silver ring for the Allfather that mysteriously had the king’s sigil carved into it.

For his Midgardian friends, Thor located a different version of the foot massager Tony had suggested for Pepper along with a second one for Bruce. He got Tony a new set of bar tools with robots on them, a novelty bottle opener shaped like a skull for Natasha, a cutey drink carrier with butterflies on it Darcy had to have, and about a dozen headbands and combs Sigyn had been admiring. For Loki, Sigyn helped him track down a rather nice snake lapel pin that looked rather like Sigyn’s own bracelet of Jor - save turning into an actual snake when rubbed. Thor quickly made all his purchases and exited the store. It was only when he noticed his compatriots organizing their own goods outside the store did Thor begin to realize something was dreadfully wrong.

“Sigyn,” Thor realized suddenly and with great terror, “you have purchased nothing for our friends!”

“No,” Sigyn shrugged.

“No, neither have you, Lady Darcy!” Thor realized.

“Hey, I got myself this cool fluffy bathroom and matching slippers,” Darcy pointed out. “And this talking Iron Man cookie jar that I am totally putting in the labs. But… yeah, no gifts for anyone else.”

If possible, Thor looked even more distressed than he had upon realizing they had not made any purchases, and they might have to face the Black Friday crowds again. He dropped the dozens of bags he was carrying and seemed ready to fall to his knees in anguish. He let out a sound wail and then appeared to be beating his chest as if in self-flagellation for some reason. Natasha glanced quizzically at the two women beside her, wondering if this was normal behavior for a space viking. Darcy seemed just as confused as Natasha while Sigyn just seemed a little embarrassed and annoying with her brother-in-law.

“Must we go back into the dark mass of humanity and fight our way toward more goods? Will this Midgardian season of tribute never end?” Thor wailed.

“I did not wish to purchase my gifts in this manner,” Sigyn shrugged. “Lady Pepper said that it would be best to wait and purchase them via the talking box on the day designated for deals via talking box purchase. I believe it is known as the Cipher Monday.”

“What?” Thor said, from where he was down on the ground.

“Yeah, Cyber Monday,” Darcy explained. “You can do all your shopping online in your PJs and have it delivered to you without having to go out in the crowd. Didn’t you know about that?”

In response, Thor let out another wail and continued beating his chest. Sigyn rolled her eyes as her brother-in-law reverted into his native language out of a mix of exhaustion and frustration, complaining about the terrors he had witnessed and how they could have been avoided. Idly, she thought it was probably a good thing Loki wasn’t present for this particular moment; he would have salivated in it.
“Is he always this dramatic?” Natasha staged whispered to Darcy and Sigyn.

“Yes,” both women sighed at the same time.

“I have been tricked!” Thor moaned. “Curse thee, Midgardian advertising!”

“In fact,” Sigyn said, seeming a bit embarrassed by Thor’s antics, “on the occasion when Thor lets out his anguish he can make my rather dramatic husband seem quite calm and collected.”

“Are you done with the temper tantrum, now?” Natasha asked, tapping her foot expectantly at Thor.

“This Blackest of Fridays is a day of great treachery,” Thor informed her.

“Alright, get up Big Guy,” Darcy encouraged him. “We still haven’t had breakfast, and there’s a really great diner near here. Two words for you: lumberjack pancakes.”

“Breakfast?” Thor asked hopefully. He stood up and collected his bags.

“Why not,” Natasha shrugged. “Stark did loan us his ‘spare’ credit card.”

“And I for one would like to see what happens when an all-you-can-eat buffet meets a guy with a bottomless stomach,” Darcy pointed out.

“Clint’s actually banned from three Chinese restaurants and a steakhouse salad bar in Missouri,” Natasha mentioned. “Just don’t talk to him about. Every time someone brings it up he starts talking about getting a lawyer again.”

“I am sure you gifts will be well-received,” Sigyn assured a still pouting Thor. “And you fought valiantly to acquire them, which gives them special meaning. I am sure it will be a great delight to tell others of the arduous quest you took on Midgard to attain these goods.”

“Dear sister,” Thor shook his head, “I would not relive this hellish night for all the gems in your Father’s Realm. Let us away to break our fast. And I pray my brother fares better than I this day.”

“I am sure Loki is fine,” Sigyn said confidently. “If anything, I am sure the chaos this day brings delights him.”

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Loki cursed Anthony Stark in three dead languages, four ancient tongues, two types of religious cant, a bit of space pirate jargon, the eight currently-spoken languages he was fluent in without the aid of Allspeak and fifteen regional dialects, vernaculars, patois, and variations thereof. If he himself could not visit revenge upon Stark for the sheer embarrassment of his current employment, Loki prayed there was some god somewhere who could. As it stood, Loki was using all of his supernatural strength to push back the foreheads of two middle-aged women with his opposite hands thrusting each woman in an opposite direction. One of the women was wearing a large sweatshirt with kittens on it Sigyn would have found delightful while the other was donning what appeared to be a shirt with a photograph of her children on it that read “Splash Mountain ‘11” on it. They were fighting over a playset that contained the figure of some red-headed moppet with a penchant for strawberries.
Loki had only managed to break things up between the women after several punches had been thrown and scratches made. Unable to reach each other due to Loki’s considerable armspan, the women were now trading uninspired barbs back and forth as Loki kept them separate, hoping that the security guard would come. When he found out it would be another fifteen minutes before anyone from the security team could make it - there was an all-out brawl in the electronics department - Loki realized he would have to come up with another solution. Even his considerable arm strength waning due to the women’s attempts to scrape at each other again, Loki decided to pull something from Frigga’s book. Before the two women could charge at each other, he let them go and then quickly picked the playset up off the floor.

“Now, since the two of you cannot behave like reasonable and responsible...ugh… ladies,” Loki said, earning glowers from both women, “neither of you shall have this toy. I shall put it on the top shelf for someone who is well-mannered.”

As he said, Loki placed the playset at the very top of the shelf where only he or some sort of human ladder could reach it. Loki then preened down at the two women, happy at his success. The two soccer-moms-turned-MMA-fighters looked at each other, looked at Loki, and then looked at each other again before pouncing on Loki and seemingly trying to force his surrender via their own fists and nails. Apparently playing nice wasn’t working and while Loki would have delighted to see one of these women break their fists on his divine cheekbones, his patience was running thin. If reasoning with these cretins didn’t work, he would have to fall back on tried and true methods. Using all of his god-like strength, Loki threw both women off him and watched as they bounced back into shelves. Startled though gladly with nothing broken, both women looked up from the ground where Loki had risen before them.

“I had tried to reason with you, to treat you nicely,” Loki said, rising to his full stature and invoking all of the wrath and terror he had possessed in Stuttgart, “but you would not have me as a kindly overlord. You have invoked my wrath, and so I say to you, if you value your lives, you will be from this department of children’s playthings and visit it no more the rest of your days!”

Stunned into momentary silence, neither woman moved. Loki took a threatening step toward them only for one to let out a frightened squeak and both suddenly gather themselves up and rush out of the store all together. A few other innocent bystanders who had also been jockeying for position in various parts of the aisle but not engaged in full on fisticuffs shirked back in terror and a few made their own stealthy but hasty exits. Loki turned to the remaining group, fuming that he had been subjected to such humiliation.

“Now, is there anyone else who needs assistance in acquiring any objects?” Loki asked, his voice still menacing.

Seemingly as one, the rest of the group shook their heads “no.”

“Then, I presume we will all take what it is we want in a calm and orderly fashion?” Loki asked.

The group responded with soft nods. Loki grinned, a little bit more maniacally than he had intended, but it got the job done. Those remaining in his section quickly grabbed their aims with no fussing or fighting and then rushed out of the toy department as if something was chasing them. After all of the shoppers in his section were gone, Loki was pleased to find most of the shelves were empty and there wasn’t another restock scheduled for a good two hours. Happily, Loki settled into an inflatable chair depicting the cartoon man-bat Stark so admired and waited. He was certain to send a threatening glare to anyone who came into his section for the rest of the shift, letting any and all comers know that unruly behavior would not be tolerated.
Loki was dead on his feet by the time he arrived back at Stark Tower. Barton had initially agreed to ensure Loki was safely escorted back to the tower, but after coming back from shopping, the Widow had found the archer still dead to the world and clutching an empty quiver of arrows in his sleep. With a sigh, Natasha had turned back around and headed to make sure Loki didn’t use his few hours of unmonitored time to conquer Newark. She was mildly impressed to find Loki’s toy section was one of the less devastated areas of the store. Natasha chuckled a bit to herself when, upon spying the her coming to retrieve him, Loki immediately jumped up, went to demand his paycheck for his work and then nearly pushed Natasha out the door so they could return home.

As soon as the elevator opened on his floor, Loki could hear the thunderous noise of Thor’s snoring from where he had fallen asleep on the sofa of his living quarters. With a roll of his eyes, Loki headed to the door to his own chambers, but found it opened before he could even touch his hand to the handle. He was greeted in the usual way - his wife accosting him with her arms and kisses as soon as he walked through the door - and then listened to Sigyn prattle on about how Thor had consumed enough breakfast foods that the diner they visited had to go to the grocery store for more goods. As she talked, Sigyn herded him into the bedroom and magically waved away his boots.

“And did you acquire your aim, my love?” Loki asked as he sat on the bed, stretching out his pained feet.

“Oh yes!” Sigyn said happily. “The candy floss machine is ready for later. I also purchased some comfortable Midgardian clothing, some food for Skata and Skara, and some gifts for you!”

“And what would that be, hmm?” Loki said, hoping whatever his wife had purchased was underneath the Midgardian pajamas she was currently sporting.

“Come, husband,” Sigyn giggled, pulling Loki into the bathroom.

He saw the massive tub had been filled with water, oils and one of the relaxing bath bombs Sigyn had just acquired. Scented candles were lit all over the room, giving off comfortable smells and sensations. From somewhere, sounds were playing that reminded Loki of his mother’s garden with birds chirping and a gentle breeze flowing through the trees. A goblet of wine and a bottle containing the rest of the liquor were sitting on a counter near the tub. Loki couldn’t help but smirk down at his wife in satisfaction of the relaxing diversion she had planned.

“When you are done with your bath,” Sigyn informed him. “I have procured you a new pair of the Midgardian flannel night trousers you find so comfortable as well as a good, thick robe. Perhaps later this afternoon, I can show you some of my other purchases. After you have rested, of course.”

“My dear, sweet lyking,” Loki said. “You take such good care of me.” Sigyn beamed back up at him. “But there is one thing off about this entire endeavor of yours.”

“What is that?” Sigyn asked worriedly.

“You said when I am finished with my bath,” Loki leered, “but I can assure you, I would find this undertaking much more relaxing if you were to join me.” With a smirk, Sigyn leaned up as if to kiss him, but before he felt their lips meet, Loki heard the click of the bedroom door locking and the sound of his wife’s clothes hitting the floor followed by a loud splash from the tub.

“Minx,” he said.
Voluntary Man’s Laughter

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Loki has to give back to society - whether he wants to or not

Tony had called the next morning to inform everyone he, Pepper, Happy and the various bots had landed safely in California. JARVIS was managing double duty at both residences very well, though sometimes residents of the New York Tower were certain his split second delays were caused by dealing with something with Tony on the opposite coast. Occasionally, JARVIS would also randomly chime in to ask everyone how they were doing so he could relay a quick video message back to Tony, assuring the mechanist his friends back in New York were safe and doing fine. Even without Tony’s presence, life in the Tower went on as a mixture of organized chaos among military precision.

Each day around five in the morning, Steve and Thor went for a run around Central Park. At six, Natasha and Bruce did yoga in the gym before meeting up with Steve, Thor and whoever else was up at seven for a communal breakfast. By nine, Jane and Darcy were in their lab with Sigyn assisting and Thor being a general approving, lurking presence. At that same time, Bruce began setting up his afternoon work and Natasha and Steve did whatever chores they had to complete. Natasha’s chores usually consisted of the care and maintenance of various weapons while Steve’s were more of the cleaning his room, making his bed, and doing his laundry variety.

Loki and Clint woke around ten, joining Bruce and Natasha in the sub-basement for Loki’s daily ice manipulation practice. Clint had found out about Loki’s newly discovered abilities after getting stuck in the wrong elevator shaft, which led him to getting stuck in the wrong vent followed by the wrong drainage pipe followed by popping out of one of the drains around the Hulk containment cell, covered in a mysterious sludge and causing Loki to blast the unknown intruder with what was essentially the same type of ice used in sno cones. Ever since then, Clint had insisted on replacing Tony as the voice of sarcasm and pop-culture-related barbs in Loki’s daily training session.

Around noon, everyone would gather together for lunch. It was after the noonday meal that things started to get a little complicated. Natasha, Clint and Thor usually took this time to work in the training rooms, Steve occasionally going with them and occasionally hanging out in his room to catch up on lost time. Bruce went to do his work in the afternoons and Jane and Darcy usually returned to the labs with Sigyn as well. This left a conundrum of what to do with Loki. Normally, the trickster god would hang out with Stark or take a nap or work on his own miscellany during this time, but Loki was started to discover he didn’t necessarily mind participating in group activities. The problem for the rest of the group was wear to stick him.

Bruce’s lab was out of the question because Bruce could be easy to set off and because Loki wasn’t particularly interested in Bruce’s brand of science. He would sometimes spend the afternoon in Darcy and Jane’s lab, but his habit of lurking around his wife and constant attempts to distract her with allusions to his own sexual prowess creeped both of the other women out a bit. Taking Loki up to spar with the others usually wound up in a full on fist fight with Thor until someone brought up telling Sigyn about their bad behavior. Still, even when they weren’t slightly furious with each other
Loki and Thor always seemed to hit each other harder than need be. Steve had spent some time playing various strategy games with Loki, but the other residents of the Tower felt it was unfair to have the Captain shoulder this responsibility on his own. So, while the Asgardian contingent was distracted by the nature DVDs Tony had ordered, the rest of the group sat down to discuss what was to be done about Loki.

“Seriously, you guys,” Steve insisted, “I don’t mind hanging out with him. He’s got a good sense of humor. And I’m teaching him card games.”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t feel obligated to spend every afternoon with Loki just because he gets along with you best,” Natasha pointed out.

“Well, best out of everyone who isn’t Sigyn,” Darcy pointed out.

“We came into the lab after a coffee break yesterday,” Jane whispered, her eyes closed as if trying to repress the memory, “and he had attempted to sensually drape himself across a lab table.”

“He was shirtless,” Darcy grinned, “save for the see-through floral bathrobe I’m pretty sure was Sigyn’s.”

“Did it work?” Clint asked curiously, causing Darcy and Jane to both roll their eyes. Clint wasn’t sure if that meant “yes.”

“Moving on from that nightmare image,” Bruce said, annoyed, “we need to find Loki something to do with his time here. I know a lot of us are starting to sense he’s getting bored, and from what I understand, historically it isn’t a good thing when Loki gets bored.”

“Which is why we need to find him a task,” Natasha nodded. “Something to take his focus, but not something that is dangerous or that requires an armed escort.”

“He’s supposed to be here to redeem himself, right?” Darcy pointed out. “Like, the Alldaddy sent him here to learn from his mistakes and better appreciate humanity.”

“Yeah, how is that whole bit coming?” Jane asked.

“He’s cleaned up some of his own mess,” Clint ticked off. “He got fired from a job at a coffee shop. He got fired from a job as a janitor. And he successfully defended some shelves in the toy department from Black Friday shoppers.”

“I get where Stark is going with this whole minimum wage slavery sucks and you should appreciate the little people schtick,” Darcy agreed, “but all my experience working retail just made me hate human beings. I mean, if we’re supposed to be teaching Loki about compassion and having sympathy for others, shouldn’t we be making him come face to face with people who really deserve his compassion?”

Steve’s eyes lit up.

“Darcy, that’s a great idea!”
Loki wasn’t sure where the Captain had taken him, but it smelled worse than that time Fandral and Thor had started a brawl in a Vanir tavern/brothel and the group was forced to make a hasty exit via the tunnels of the sewer system. Loki had often described the denizens of Midgard as unwashed masses before, but he was certain that those gathered around him had not been washed in quite some time. Many of them had collections of refuse and garbage they clutched as if they were the most precious treasure. Loki had seen similar people before, refugees from various planets and colonies taken in by Asgard and the other realms. What he did not understand was why the Captain had taken him to the place where these people congregated. He was glad that he had managed to talk Sigyn into staying back with Darcy and Jane at the Tower, unsure if it would be safe for her to be in this place.

“What is this place?” Loki whispered to the Captain lowly. “And why are we here?”

“This is a soup kitchen,” Steve explained just as quietly.

“We are here to make soup?” Loki asked, confused.

“And some other things,” Steve nodded.

“Are all these people here for making soup?” Loki asked. “Is there some sort of reason why we cannot make soup in the Tower?”

“It’s not exactly about the soup,” Steve tried to explain. “Most of the people here are homeless. All of them can’t really afford to feed themselves or their families all of the time. So they come here and can get a meal. Sometimes it’s for free. Sometimes they only have to pay a dollar or so. A lot of restaurants in the area donate food they didn’t use but don’t want to throw out.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Loki admitted. “Why exactly do these people not have homes or food?”

Steve’s mouth hung open for a bit, half because he was amazed that Loki either had never heard of homelessness and food insecurity or at least never witnessed it and half because he had no idea how to explain systematic poverty in modern America to a thousand-year-old god. Hell, he wasn’t even sure he understood it, even though he had experienced some of it first hand. Steve realized such things may not even be an issue on Asgard, and made a mental note to ask Thor and Sigyn about what their land did with the homeless and hungry - if there were any. Tony and Phil had pretty much described their visit to Asgard as visiting some sort of utopian community where the only real social ills were typically related to sexism, gender identity and magic wielding. Not exactly sure where to begin by answering Loki’s question, Steve decided to just start with what he knew.

“My dad died not too long after I was born,” Steve explained. “My mom had a decent job. She was… a healer like Sigyn… but it still wasn’t always enough money to get by, even with the benefits she got from my dad’s time in the military. When I was growing up, times were hard and a lot of people didn’t have enough money to rent a place or to even put food on their table. Sometimes they would have a thin broth of soup with a few noodles and maybe some vegetables. Hoover stew people called it. There was one month that I got really sick and my Ma spent so much on medicine there wasn’t much left over for food. Both of us had a boiled egg for breakfast and boiled cabbage for dinner every night.”

“And what did you eat for the noonday meal?” Loki asked.

“Nothing,” Steve shrugged. “Wasn’t enough money. We were pretty lucky, though. Mom had a job and we usually weren’t too late on the rent. But a lot of people I knew had to eat at places like this. Mrs. O’Donovan had to take her five kids out to one, but she was embarrassed about it. Her husband said he was going west to get a job somewhere, but she never heard from him again. Used to get the
kids all dressed up and fancy and make a big deal of telling everyone in the building they was going to her mother’s house to visit. But we all knew she was really going somewhere to get a meal for the family. There was a soup kitchen around the corner from us, but she took the kids on the trolley and went all the way out to one in Bed-Stuy just to keep up appearances.”

Loki didn’t say much, and Steve wasn’t sure what he expected to come from the Trickster god’s mouth. Instead, Loki gestured for Steve to take them further into the shelter. Steve led Loki back into the kitchen area and introduced him around - as Loren, of course - to the other volunteers who would be prepping and serving the meals. Loki found himself assigned to cut up vegetables while Steve was peeling potatoes. Loki was a bit impressed with how quickly Steve was able to peel the vegetables while Steve was equally impressed with Loki’s slicing and dicing skills. Of course, he was a little concerned as to where Loki had learned such talents.

“I take it you have done this before,” Loki commented.

“Oh, yeah. Before I got injected full of chemicals and shot full of invisible radiation waves, they liked to stick me on KP duty,” Steve replied. “And I peeled more than my fair share of potatoes growing up. I wasn’t aware your knife skills extended into the kitchen.”

“And who, do you presume, cuts up all the ingredients I need for my potion making and alchemical work?” Loki pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

“Touche,” Steve smirked.

“I’m actually rather handy with fillet knives as well,” Loki informed Steve. “While Sigyn enjoys freshly caught fish, she detests bones in them after all.”

“Yeah,” Steve remembered. “She said something about her people having some sort of fish fillet contest every year?”

“And that is one of the less strange contests,” Loki snorted. “I supposed allowances must be made for seafaring people.” Steve cracked a joke about the Navy Loki didn’t completely understand, but smiled at politely. The two of them continued chopping and slicing in silence.

The vegetables Loki and Steve had prepared went into a giant vat of broth, pieces of chicken, rice and a few other ingredients to make large quantities of soup. The meal cooked, Loki found himself placed in a line of servers. The people gathering in the forechamber lined up to receive a bowl of the soup, a slice of warm bread, a dessert item and a drink. Loki noticed that most of those who came through the line would not look him in the eye but did offer some quiet words of thanks before progressing further down the line.

Loki knew about poverty in theory. He had read about it and he had seen some examples of it when he was on other realms, but the way the governments and social programs of the main realms he had spent time on - Asgard, Vanahem, Alfheim and Niðavellir - didn’t exactly have issues with poverty. Oh, certainly there was a measure of income inequality and classes of peasants, merchants, and nobility, but the last time anyone in those realms had faced issues like homelessness or hunger in those realms had been back thousands of years before Loki was born, in the days of the old Aesir-Vanir wars. Loki knew that if he had grown up on Jotunheim the story would most likely be much different. Even Thor, that golden-do-gooder this realm of Midgard had come to love and admire, had no real frame of reference for poverty either and had been exposed to even less in his sheltered life than Loki.

When everyone in the room had been fed and a few had even gotten a chance to get some seconds, Steve informed Loki it was time to get their own meal. Loki soon found himself and the Captain
eating their noon meal among a group of men in heavy coats who seemed a little surprised or embarrassed to see Steve there. At the same time, Loki got a sense some of the men were also distrustful of his own presence in the area, not sure what to make of the person who had accompanied Steve Rogers to feed them. Loki himself felt a bit uncomfortable, not only among strangers but also knowing that the morning before he had ordered a necklace for Sigyn that would have fed all of them exceedingly well for at least the next month.

Steve chatted amiably with the men around him, as if they were old friends as opposed to virtual strangers. Loki was a bit more self-conscious and while he knew how to turn on the charm in political situations, his ability to converse openly and convivially extended foreign dignitaries and nobles, those well within his class. Loki had never been one who could easily strike up a conversation with a common soldier - like Thor could - and his pleasantries with shopkeepers usually extended only to whatever he was purchasing from them. Beyond that, Loki typically kept his mouth shut. It gave him a reputation for being aloof and not to be trifled with, and Loki didn’t mind that a bit.

After completing their own meals and a few more minutes chatting with the men they were sitting next to, Steve and Loki returned to the kitchens to help with the cleanup process. When they were finished, most of those who had come for the meal were gone, and though Loki was curious, he didn’t ask exactly where they had gone off to. Instead, he followed the Captain to the subterranean conveyance that allowed residents to navigate the city underground rather than the pesky, constantly clogged streets. Other than running, it was the Captain’s preferred mode of transportation - a fact that bewildered Stark.

“So,” Steve said, as the two of them were waiting in line for their designated train, “what did you think?”

Loki wasn’t quite sure how to respond. What did he think about what? Having to cook and clean? Having to serve others? The fact that Midgard apparently largely ignored its own rampant problem of homelessness and hunger? Loki may have been tortured, brainwashed and sent to conquer this measly planet by an alien overlord bent on universal death and domination, but at least Loki was smart enough to realize it was much easier to control a fed, sheltered and happy populace than it was to attempt to corral differing social classes constantly on the edge of going to war with one another over limited resources. Of course, he was rather sure that was not the response the Captain was looking for. Instead, Loki did what he did best: bent the truth.

“I’m not sure what to think,” Loki replied. Steve nodded and gave an understanding smile, as if this was just the kind of thoughtful answer he had been hoping for.

“I can understand. It’s a little overwhelming,” Steve nodded. “I grew up in a time with this was even more common than now and I still can’t get used to it. I always thought by now we’d have problems like hunger and disease and homelessness. Of course, Tony’s dad also promised us flying cars, so…”

“Why is your society so behind the times with everything?” Loki asked curiously.

“I’m not sure,” Steve admitted. “I’m sure Bruce or Tony would have a theory for you.” Loki rolled his eyes, not particularly interested in the “theories” of Midgard’s so-called brightest minds.

The train came to a stop in front of them and they boarded. There seemed to be an unspoken rule about not communicating or even making eye contact with other beings upon Midgardian subterranean conveyances, so Loki knew his conversation with the Captain was done for now. However, Loki had no misgivings that the topic was far from over completely. He just wondered what the endgame was for whatever plan the Captain had cooked up for him.
The following day, Loki was informed that he and Sigyn would be accompanying the Widow and Barton to some sort of demonstration. He was advised to wear clothing suitable for exercise and blending in with Midgardians. Loki seemed to think doing both was impossible until Sigyn reminded him of the existence of sweatpants. On the way to their destination, the Widow explained further as to why she had recruited Loki and Sigyn to help her and Clint. Every once in awhile, Natasha used her Black Widow skills to teach women’s self-defense classes, particularly at shelters. Clint would be serving as her test dummy, which he regularly volunteered for anyway. As Natasha and Sigyn had trained together some, Sigyn would be helping out with Loki as her own test dummy. Naturally, Natasha’s only advice to Loki on what he should do was let Sigyn take the lead and try not to get an erection.

Loki could tell just from the atmosphere in the room when he entered that some of the women taking the class were more ready to be in the presence of men than others. Following Clint’s lead, he try to offer gentle smiles and stayed behind Sigyn as much as possible. Natasha demonstrated some basic moves and then added Clint into the mix, taking him down knocking him about with the moves she had just used. She then had Sigyn and Loki follow her instructions, showing how a smaller woman like Sigyn could even take down a bigger man like her husband. Despite his best efforts, Loki couldn’t help but find the way in which his wife so effortlessly incapacitated him alluring.

As Loki’s god-like physique might literally shatter the bones of mere mortals, Natasha then had the women practice on Clint or on her if they were still not in a place where they were ready to be that close to a man. By the end of the class, all of the women were smiling and a few of those who had been more reticent at the beginning opened up. Some had specific questions for Natasha about how to handle certain situations. One woman’s soon-to-be-ex-husband had enjoyed attacking her from behind. Another had a boyfriend who choked her until she couldn’t see or breathe. Another wanted to know what to do if she had a panic attack or PTSD episode when during an assault.

By the time punch and cookies were being passed out to celebrate the end of the session, Loki wanted to know how Midgard’s so-called justice system was letting the men behind these assaults and attacks walk free while the female victims were being corralled into a hidden building until they could rebuild their lives. Of course, he was also having to keep one eye on Sigyn to make sure she didn’t slip out the back door and take these men into her own hands as some sort of avenging angel. Perhaps a good letter to her mother would be all that was needed to sort things out. One to his own as well. Frigga and Freyja had never really gotten along as girls, but if there was one thing they agreed on it was punishing men who deserved it.

“What’re you thinking about?” Clint asked him curiously. Both men and taken their punch and cookies to lean up beside a wall in a far corner of the room to the women would feel more comfortable approaching Sigyn and Nat.

“To be honest, my mother,” Loki said.

“Me too,” Clint admitted. Loki looked at him curiously. “Sometimes I wonder if she’d had a place like this if she’d’ve put up with my dad’s shit or taken us and run. Maybe things would have been better than they were.”

“The Widow says you accompany her frequently on these outings,” Loki mentioned.
“Well, if I can save one person from going through what my mom went through, I figure it’s worth it,” Clint shrugged. “So, what about this makes you think about your mom?”

“My mother taught me how to fight,” Loki said. “Well, my mother taught all of us how to fight.”

“All of who?” Clint asked.

“Me, Sigyn, her sisters… Thor,” Loki shrugged.

“No way,” Clint shook his head. “I would have thought Goldeneye would have at least taken an interest in Thor.”

“When he was older, yes,” Loki said. “But by the time we were able to play with other children outside the nursery, Mother had taught both Thor and I how to make a fist and where to send it if need be. And the magic she instructed Sigyn and myself in was not just of the making healing salves and helpful potions variety. My mother’s prowess as a battle mage is almost as famed as her swordsmanship. Vanir girls are taught from an early age to wield weapons, but my mother is especially skilled with hers. The Allfather gave her current sword to her as a wedding present. It is called Tornur, which means ‘thorn.’ Mother says he gave it to her because ‘every rose should have a thorn to protect it.’ Mother learned archery from a young age and taught as that to us as well. I understand she also won a javelin contest at one of Vanaheim’s annual spring festivals before she and my father married.”

“Your mom sounds like a badass,” Clint said.

“I believe that is a Midgardian compliment,” Loki smirked. “While Asgard does not have a reputation for teaching defense to its women, Mother made sure that every handmaid, every servant and every courtly lady who passed through her door learned some manner of skill.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go ahead and say the next time your mom wants to hang out, the Avengers will totally be down,” Clint nodded.

After the class had officially adjourned, Loki found him crowded into the small backseat of one of the sports cars the Widow had “borrowed” from Stark’s collection for their outing. He didn’t mind being crowded into the backseat with his wife, though Sigyn was bouncing around in excitement from getting to help out the Widow’s demonstration. She already wanted to go back the next time the Widow offered a class and wanted to learn more of the physical fighting tactics the Widow taught. In an ideal world, Loki would have his wife safe from everything. In a more realistic ideal world, he would have his wife blast someone with her seiðr before they got within a hundred yards of her. However, he knew sometimes the world was a cruel place and the more she learned to protect herself, the safer Loki felt. Naturally, he also didn’t mind when she eagerly showed off one of her new skills - even if it led her to flipping him over the divan.

Sigyn continued her delighted chatter the entire way back to the Tower and the entire ride up the elevator to the living quarters. Natasha didn’t reply much, but smiled and nodded indulgently, seeming a bit proud of her self-defense protege. Clint, on the other hand, was struggling to stay conscious after four hours without a cup of coffee or a nap. Darcy and Jane had actually begun to develop a theory Clint might suffer from a mild, undiagnosed form of narcolepsy. Loki himself was feeling a bit tired, even as Sigyn was pulling him happily back toward their rooms so they could change their clothing. However, the second the door shut, her demeanor changed dramatically.

“Where did they put your sceptre?” Sigyn inquired.

“Yes, as if they would tell me,” Loki huffed. “Why would you even need it?”
“You heard the tales of those women today! Someone must be punished!” Sigyn insisted. “You would let such cruel creatures roam about the world, free to prey on another innocent?”

“And what happened to behaving myself so that our exile will end and the Allfather will not chop off both of our heads?” Loki mused. “I thought I was here to prove to the masses that I am not, by nature, a violent, homicidal maniac.”

“Then you can stay here and I will do it,” Sigyn insisted.

“And I’m sure it will end up my fault,” Loki huffed. “I can hear your mother now talking about how I must have influenced you or controlled you into doing something you did not wish.”

“Maybe I could get Thor to accompany me,” Sigyn challenged.

“He does like bashing heads first and asking questions second,” Loki agreed. “But dearest, as wonderful as the idea of your vengeance might seem, perhaps it will not give these women the closure they need. Besides, even you cannot unweave what the Norns have set into motion.”

“I still think something should be done to them,” Sigyn huffed. Loki gave his wife a brilliant grin.

“Sigyn, do you recall that incantation I used upon Thor once?” Loki asked. “The one that made him very itchy in… certain areas for weeks on end?” Sigyn grinned up at her husband and then pulled in into their laboratory to get the needed ingredients.

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For the third day in a row, Loki found himself carted out into the city by one of the Avengers to help them in some charitable task. This time, it was Barton who was bringing him along. Loki was wise to keep to himself any comments about how he was once the one ordering Barton around as the archer grunted out directions and once even pulled Loki back from the path of a cab that decided not to stop for a crosswalk. Loki insisted the cab would have suffered more damage, and while Clint wouldn’t have minded testing that theory, Fury had laid to clear rules about Loki-related media coverage. The two of them stopped outside of a building that touted itself as some sort of learning center, though it was quite different from any hall of learning Loki had ever attended.

“Where are we?” Loki asked.

“So, you know I’m deaf,” Clint said, pointing to the tiny hearing aids SHIELD had given him and then Stark had improved. And then had to slightly unimprove after Clint realized he was hearing his own eyeballs moving around in his skull.

“Yes,” Loki shrugged. “Since birth?”

“Partial since I was about three,” Clint said. “Dad smacked me too hard in the head one time and I lost about 75 percent in one ear. Then there was a thing with the circus I used to work for when I was a teenager. Too close to an explosion. I’m down to about 80 percent in my good ear and 85 in the bad one. So, I’ve learned to sign and read lips when I don’t have my hearing aids in.”

“Which is usually when you forget where you put them,” Loki nodded.

“They’re like the size of rice grains,” Clint said defensively. “Anyway, because I still had most of my
hearing when I learned how to read and talk, I’m pretty okay. But a lot of kids who are deaf - especially those born deaf or who go deaf before their language abilities fully develop - have a hard time learning to read and to talk. So, sometimes, when Fury isn’t breathing down my neck and I actually have time off from work, I come here.”

“To…?” Loki said.

“Man, for a guy who always goes on about his smarts you take a while to catch on,” Clint snorted. “This place teaches kids who can’t hear how to read. I work with them a lot, and I figured since you like to read, you might want to help out.”

“Alright, lead on,” Loki instructed.

Despite his initial sarcasm, Clint noted Loki seemed very interested in the facility. At first, Loki’s interest seemed focus merely on the myriad shelves of children’s books though Clint soon noticed the trickster giving fond looks and smiles to the children already gathered there for after school reading activities. And Loki was not giving these children his usual, creepy villain smile but rather the fond, affectionate and even genial smile he reserved largely for his wife. Clint had to drag Loki away from peering over the shoulders of the children to spy what was going on in the colorful picture books and introduce him to the facility’s administrator.

“Hey, Alice,” Clint said to her with a smile, signing as he spoke. “I brought my friend Loren here to serve as my assistant.”

“You’re very welcome here, Loren,” Alice replied, signing as she spoke.

“I um…” Loki began.

“Loren doesn’t know how to sign,” Clint said has he signed back to her. “He does speak a lot of other languages, though.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Alice said to Loren, not signing this time.

“Likewise,” Loki said shaking the woman’s outstretched hand. She then turned to address the children in the room.

“All right everyone,” she said, signing as she spoke. “Our special reading friend is here with us today.” Though they couldn’t hear, the children seemed to all instinctively look up and toward the woman. And then they looked at Clint.

Look immediately realized the Archer must be some sort of celebrity to these children as more than a dozen small bodies stood up and rushed forward to him. Clint was excitedly embraced by just about each child who then began rapidly signing to him all at once. Clint was doing his best to keep track of all of the different questions and conversations going on at the same time. Despite Allspeak not having evolved to meet the needs of this particularly new form of Midgardian communication, Loki could tell without knowing the meanings behind the hand signs that the fact an Avenger was in the room wasn’t the only reason these kids were excited. Clint was obviously more than just special to them, a superhero who shared the same disability they had.

Alice corralled the children into what was a nice little reading area with one tall chair for adults and various pillows and bean bags for the children. As the designated reader, Clint got the adult chair and Loki found himself forced to sit either in one of the child-sized chairs or on the floor. Deciding that sitting on the floor was less of an indignity than being too big for the chair, Loki opted for the floor. Loki’s duties were to show off the book to the children and then turn the pages when Clint was done.
reading them. In addition to reading aloud, slowing enunciating each word so that the children could better develop their lip reading skills, he also signed each word. Before each page was turned, Clint and the children would have signed conversations about the page.

Clint read about three books to the kids before Alice decided it was time for the kids to break up into their smaller reading groups and read to each other. Still, Clint stuck around and visited with each of the three-person reading groups encouraging the kids and chatting with them through both sign and lip reading about the books they were reading. Though Loki couldn’t understand the signs the children were making, he did show some interest in a few of the books. If he was interested in a particular book, he would sit with whomever was reading it until they finished, even if Clint had moved on to sit with the next group. One of the children even decided to attempt to teach Loki sign language, pointing to words on the page and then signing their equivalent until Loki began to mimic his actions. The child would occasionally correct Loki’s hand gestures, but became very excited and animated when Loki seemed to be getting the signs down pat himself.

Loki had to admit he was a little sad when it was time for them to leave. Clint taught him how to sign goodbye to the kids and then they headed out to one of Clint’s favorite restaurants to order takeout to take back to everyone at the Tower. As they waited in line for their food to be ready, Loki even used his handheld talking box to look up a few of the titles the children had been reading. While he and Sigyn had no children of their own, he knew his wife would appreciate the colorful drawings and meaningful tales. Idis might even enjoy getting a few stories told to her as well. She was, after all, the only child of Asgard’s most famous bard. Clint had a smirk on his face when he saw Loki placing orders for “Goodnight Moon,” “Where the Wild Things Are,” and “The Snowy Day” through his phone.

“Thanks for behaving,” Clint said. “I would have had to shoot you otherwise and while the kids might have loved that, Alice has a strict policy about getting into fights.”

“Yes, well, I was too stunned by the fact that you can actually read - and apparently in two languages - to really get up to any mischief,” Loki shot back.

“There’s the asshole we all know and tolerate,” Clint snorted.

“I must admit, your young friends do have good taste in literature,” Loki mentioned. “Hopefully too much exposure to you won’t change that.”

“Hey, I read shit,” Clint said. “Besides, it’s more about getting the kids to read at all, so Alice usually lets the read books about what they’re interested in. If these kids can’t read, they can’t succeed, and it’s harder to teach kids to read once they’ve passed certain language thresholds. Used to, kids could be four or five before they even realized they were deaf. Things are better now, but deaf kids are still reading at lower rates and lower averages than their hearing counterparts.”

“Which I understand is already not that high in this particular area of Midgard anyway,” Loki huffed.

“Hey, I’ve heard you complain about the state of neglect of libraries in your own world,” Clint said. “So you’re not one to talk, mister.”

“I am not trying to undermine what you’re doing,” Loki said defensively. “In fact, I think it’s admirable. Perhaps if Thor had someone he looked up to - other than our Mother - who read to him frequently he might actually think about things before just hitting them to see if that helps.”

“Seriously, that guy runs through more toasters per month than I think most people own in their entire lives,” Clint agreed.
“I would like to learn this language of yours,” Loki informed Clint. “Allspeak, apparently, only covers auditory languages. And I find the idea of using gestures for communicating intriguing.”

“You want to learn ASL?” Clint said, surprised.

“Well, if you don’t wish to teach me…” Loki began.

“No, I’ll teach you,” Clint said, before pausing, momentarily surprised that he had just agreed to teach Loki something. “I’m just surprised you want to learn, is all.”

“I don’t like not knowing things and not being able to communicate with others,” Loki explained. “And I think Sigyn would enjoy it, too. Perhaps you can teach both of us.”

“Yeah, it might be smart for us to have a buffer,” Clint agreed. “Maybe this whole thing is working out.”

“What thing?” Loki demanded.

“So, where will our outing be today?” Loki asked Steve casually. “Cleaning up the park? I have gotten a lot of experience in refuse removal while on Midgard. Or perhaps going on one of those allegedly ‘fun’ runs for some cause? Will we be washing stray animals? Should I change my clothing?”

“We can wash the stray animals?” Sigyn asked happily.

She had been invited along for this particular outing along with Thor, Widow and Clint. The other three Avengers had taken one of Tony’s cars and were already at their destination, but Sigyn loved riding “inside the Midgardian underground snake” and so she and her husband had opted to take the subway with Loki. The God of Mischief had apparently figured out the Avengers were forcing him to do good deeds and was being, in words Clint had said aloud but Steve and Natasha had only thought, a little shit about it.

“No, darling,” Loki backtracked as Steve tried not to laugh at Loki’s own facetiousness blowing up in his face. “I was merely…”

“There are many homeless creatures in Midgard,” Sigyn said. “I am sure bathing them is the least we could do to help them find good homes. I am sure my friends Rajani and Healer Goetz would love to have us help out!”

“We’re actually going to meet some friends of mine,” Steve explained. Sigyn seemed a bit disappointed. “But I’m sure we could work out something to help your animal friends in the near future.”

Loki huffed, realizing he had probably just trapped himself into washing some felines along with whatever helpful activity had been planned for this day. It wasn’t that Loki particularly minded the occasional kind gesture. He just hated being forced to be nice to people. If it was genuine and came from himself, Loki could be downright delightful but years of being forced to be nice to his brother and other diplomatic shills for the sake of Asgard made Loki detest being forced to put on a fake smile and lend a helping hand with things for someone else’s sake. Sigyn and his mother, perhaps,
were the exceptions to that rule. And when they finally arrived at the Senior Citizens Center, Loki found himself forced to shape up because of how excited his wife was.

Widow, Clint and Thor were already settled into their activities. Natasha was looking over some old photos in an album with a few of the residents while Clint was playing Wii Bowling with another group. A line of women led to Thor, who was letting all of the elderly visitors to the center get a good squeeze from his arm muscles. Loki couldn’t help but roll his eyes at that. Steve was instantly called over to a poker game being played by several men in World War II Veteran baseball caps. One of the men had grown up in the same neighborhood as Steve and had been a freshman in high school the year Steve was a senior. After bumping into him in the old neighborhood, he had told Steve about the center and now, the Man with a Plan came down frequently to visit with some folks in his own age group. Loki looked up to find Sigyn had happily situated herself in a ladies knitting circle over in a corner.

“Well, are you gonna play me or just stand there?” a man’s voice said as Loki felt his leg get hit by a cane. Loki looked over to find he was standing in front of an elderly man and a chess set.

“Pardon?” Loki replied.

“And they say I’m hard of hearing,” the old man huffed. “Are you gonna just stand there or are you gonna play me? Or do you youngins even know what chess is?”

“I know what chess is,” Loki insisted, taking a seat in front of the man.

“Yeah, but do you know how to play it?” the man huffed.

“I might even teach you a few things,” Loki huffed.

Steve kept one eye and one ear on Loki and the man - Stan, the others said he was called - as the two of them played chess. Through his enhanced hearing, Steve could hear the two of them bickering and sniping back and forth at each other, but from what Steve could tell, that was just how Loki made friends. Eventually, the sniping turned into laughter - when the two men were concentrating on the game pieces before them. As the hours passed, the other Avengers and Sigyn circulated among the various groups, but Loki remained playing chess with his new friend until it was four p.m., time when the center closed so its denizens could head to their early bird specials and other evening rituals. Even so, Loki and his new friend insisted on finishing their last game.

“I am not sure what you have done with my brother,” Thor informed Steve, as they waited for Loki to finish his game, “but I am glad of it. He has not been so easy to open with strangers in the past. He is truly turning over a new branch, as you Midgardians say.”

“Turning over a new leaf,” Steve corrected politely. “And yeah, I think he’s having a good time and learning something.” The chess game complete, Loki and his new friend exchanged a few barbs before Loki headed over to where Thor and the Captain were waiting.

“Where are the others?” Loki inquired, though it was obviously he was most interested in his wife.

“They’re finding us a restaurant for supper,” Steve explained. “So, did you have fun?”

“This afternoon’s excursion was tolerable at best,” Loki sniffed.

“If I didn’t know you better I’d think that was an insult,” Steve smirked. Loki rolled his eyes.

“Well, are we to sup this evening or not?” Loki huffed, trudging out of the room.
“Ah, the more my brother changes, the more he stays the same,” Thor said to Steve apologetically.

“I’m not worried,” Steve grinned. “He’s already asked when we can come back here. And to the soup kitchen. And he’s going back to Clint’s reading group next week. Thought he’d leave self-defense to the ladies, though.”

“You have done well, Friend Steve,” Thor smiled before his face changed to a more serious look. “But must we truthfully help Sigyn wash animals tomorrow?”
Or, in which, a trip to an art museum provides insight and inspiration

The entire Tower had been on edge for the better part of the week. Some terrorist cell was wreaking havoc again, apparently the same cell that had kidnapped Tony all those years before. Clint, Natasha and Steve had awaited a call from Fury to handle things, but after three days and no call, Steve had finally called the one-eyed director himself. Fury had then informed them that Homeland Security was looking into everything and SHIELD was already handling things through other avenues. Natasha and Clint both took that to mean SHIELD had some sort of double agent on the inside and were afraid sending any combo of Avengers into the fray might compromise whatever they were already working on.

Meanwhile, Jane had also hit a rut in her work and, by Darcy’s estimate, needed a good break from the lab for a while so she could come back to her problems later. While Jane wasn’t exactly ready to throw in the towel and take a good break from work just yet, Darcy did remind her they hadn’t really done the tourist thing around New York that much since their arrival. Sure, they had gone shopping and Jane had taken them to the Hayden Planetarium just about every “break” from work she could, but they hadn’t done any of the typical tourist stuff like seeing the statue of Liberty, going to the top of the Empire State Building or Times Square. They quickly ruled out anything that would have them outside or near water for a long period of time as it was December, so it was decided one of the museums would probably be the best bet.

Considering the rest of the Tower’s occupants needed a distraction for the day as well, Darcy and Jane brought up to the group over breakfast their desire to get out and see something in the city. It was Steve who offhandedly mentioned he had wanted to get down to the Met to see a couple of exhibits before the end of the year. There was one on baseball cards, another on George Bellows, and a Matisse exhibition he wanted to see before they left. Natasha had also recommended he go see the Warhol exhibit as part of his catching up on history. Darcy was intrigued by the photomaneplation exhibit currently on display, and the Christmas creche exhibit seemed perfectly seasonal. The fact that the Fifth Avenue museum had displays on art, armor and culture throughout the years from different parts of the earth men that just about everyone in the Tower would find something they were interested in to look at as well.

After breakfast, Sigyn woke Loki to get him ready for the outing while Jane helped Thor dress in Midgardian attire that was suitable for the weather. Thor was apparently one of those people who didn’t mind wearing short sleeves, even when snow was falling down around him. Natasha, too, got ready in an outfit and black wig that naturally disguised her true identity, giving her a sort of Boho-beatnik appearance both Clint and Steve thought was immensely appropriate for a visit to the art museum. Still not pleased to have been awoken, even if it were for something that could be considered an intellectual pursuit, Loki nursed a mug of coffee and glared at everyone during the entire ride to the museum. Only Sigyn escaped his foul mood, mainly because she had smartly cuddled up to him and had tucked her head between his chin and shoulder so he couldn’t see her.
“What is this place again?” Loki huffed as Natasha meandered the massive SUV around traffic.

“Art museum,” Clint gruffed back.

“Oh, Midgardians have found a place to memorialize their little scrawlings?” Loki harrumphed.

“I’ll have you know the Met houses one of the best collections of art and culture in the world,” Steve said defensively.

“There are also many weapons and armor!” Thor said enthusiastically.

“And Midgardian clothing from throughout the ages,” Sigyn nodded. “And silverware and great works of jewelry!”

“And before you ask,” Natasha cautioned Loki, “none of the real stuff is for sale.”

“There is a gift shop, though,” Steve explained.

This seemed to mildly placate Loki, though he was still miffed as to why the Musée Marmottan-Monet had been so unwilling to part with a few paintings or why the Kremlin Armory had been so nasty about his attempt to purchase the Russian imperial jewelry collection. It wasn’t as if they even had a monarchy to use the things. Stark had even threatened to turn off his phone if Loki made another inquiry to the Smithsonian’s gem and mineral collection about what items they might be willing to part with for a small fee. Loki’s arguments that the majority of the items weren’t even on display and therefore of no use to the American public did not placate Tony at all.

Asgard, as it turned out, was not very big on museums and so the concept of displaying works of art and ancient artifacts to be gawked at by paying crowds was more than a little foreign to Loki and Thor. Oh, certainly some of Bor and Buri’s old things were on display at the palace and there were things with quasi-religious purposes on display at temples and libraries across the realm, but Asgard didn’t really do museums. And just about anything that was worth gawking at - ranging from stolen Jotnar relics to Frigga’s bride gifts to Odin’s staff and other symbols of power - were usually locked away in the royal vaults for the express purpose of not letting anyone see them.

Certainly, the Vanir had somewhat of a museum of sailing devoted to some of the most famous sailors and ships that had sailed their seas, but the museum was more for entertaining tourists than the local populace, who already knew all the legends and stories. The museum had to be sailed to and was allegedly constructed by a crackpot Vanir prince whose royal father gave his youngest son enough money to build this temple to Vanir sailing history in the hopes it would keep his less-than-sane offspring occupied and away from court. The Dwarves, too, had a quasi-museum to the metallurgy and minerals, but this was located as a display in one of the premiere Dwarven banks and was more used to entice customers to invest in the bank than to educate Dwarven children. In fact, most Dwarven children learned about minerals, gemstones and their properties from a song that Sigyn still absent-mindedly hummed on occasion. It was actually a very catchy tune and easy to get stuck in one’s head.

“Alright,” Steve said as Natasha parked the car in the lot. “There’s a lot to see here and I know everyone wants to see different things, so let’s figure out who wants to do what and maybe we can divide up into groups, that way everyone gets to see what they want.”

As Thor, Loki and Sigyn most likely wanted to see the Medieval arts and armor exhibits, they were grouped with Steve, who was the best tour guide for the museum’s older collections. Jane decided to go along with them to help out with Thor while Darcy partnered with Bruce, Natasha, and Clint to see some of the more contemporary stuff as well as the Asian and Middle Eastern galleries on the
second floor. The group would meet for lunch and then split up again, with Steve going to see the specialized exhibits he was interested in with Bruce and Natasha. The rest of the group would then split up accordingly into what they wanted to see next. Sigyn, Loki, Jane and Darcy had opted to see some of the costume exhibits afterwards while Thor and Clint would go see the rest of the European stuff on the second floor, the others joining them later.

Loki was not pleased that his group first got dragged to the Arms and Armor exhibit by an over-enthusiastic Thor. Loki himself was much more interested in the medieval art and sculpture. However, Sigyn was interested to see how Midgardian smithing had differed from Dwarven smithing over the ages, and her hopeful eyes had led Loki to keep his protests to a grumble. Sigyn reassured him they would see what he wanted to view as well and the two of them followed behind the rest of the group. While Jane and Thor sometimes held hands as the small group meandered through the exhibits, Loki and Sigyn were definitely the awkward PDA couple out of the group, constantly with their arms around each other and whispering into each other's ears, causing the other one to snicker.

And Loki had to admit it was charming to see Sigyn marvel at Midgardian smithing and armor working. She about squealed at the helmet styled after a sea conch and took a picture with her talking box to show her grandfather. The scimitars and daggers from the Mughal Empire had also reminded both Sigyn and Loki from similar weapons used on Vanahaem. Steve had to remind Loki again that the items were not for sale when Loki inquired about the cost of a particular green dagger Sigyn had admired. Thor was momentarily disappointed to learn that he could not try out the various weapons on display, but his disappointment quickly disappeared when he was distracted by the intricate figures carved into a Saxon shield. Steve also had to explain to Thor that, no, he had not used any similar equipment during the fighting of the Second Great Midgardian War and that, thankfully for Steve, all of the items on display just about predated him by at least 50 years. Jane was just impressed that Sigyn seemed to know the metallurgical makeup of just about every item on display without reading the display card.

“This suit reminds me of the Man of Iron,” Sigyn whispered conspiratorially to Jane. “And not just as it is gold with steel and copper alloys.”

“How did you know that?” Jane said, reading the card to see Sigyn was correct. The pair were staring at a suit of armor believed to have belonged to Henry VIII. Steve wondered idly if Tony would appreciate the comparison.

“And these things were actually worn?” Thor mentioned to Steve. “They look more for display. I would imagine they were terribly uncomfortable and not very useful in battle.”

“Unless the point of the battle was who looks the most ridiculous,” Loki agreed.

“A lot of this stuff was worn by the people in charge, the kings and generals and stuff,” Steve explained. “You know, the guys who are there to be seen and order you around, not really fight. Especially a long time ago, the people actually in the thick of the fighting wore whatever they could bring from home. Government-issued uniforms are fairly new in the scheme of things.”

“I am surprised the bodies of mere Midgardians could handle the weight of such things,” Thor shook his head. “Especially without seiðr to lighten the load.”

“Ridiculous,” Loki agreed.

“Husband!” Sigyn said, eagerly bounding over to her husband and then pulling him toward the suit of armor she and Jane had just been admiring, “come see the etching on the armor!”
The Arms and Armor section finished, the group headed back to the medieval art and sculpture exhibits that they had to pass by entirely in order to see the armor for Thor. Both Loki and Sigyn were extremely impressed with the artistry and attention to detail. The jewelry was naturally of particular interest to Sigyn though Loki was still a little miffed the museum was for display only and not some sort of bazaar of ancient artifacts for his consumption. This section of the museum didn’t entertain Thor as much as the previous one, but he still found an appreciation for a glass-blown drinking horn and the tapestries on display.

Steve was also having a devilishly hard time explaining to Thor and Loki who the man on most of the medieval art was and why he was being tortured. Jane offered no help but did seem entertained by Steve’s attempt to explain Christianity and his personal Catholic theology to two people considered by some sectors of the world to be gods themselves. Thor, Loki and Sigyn also gave Jane and Steve their own opinions on how the tapestries were created based on what they knew of weaving and embroidery from Frigga. The tapestries had also been a particular favorite of Steve’s own mother on the rare times when mother and son would come down to visit the exhibits.

“I’d like to see you weave sometime,” Jane mentioned to Sigyn. “I know it’s a bit more elaborate than just knitting.”

“The principles are similar,” Sigyn insisted. “I’m sure it wouldn’t take you long to catch on. After all, even Loki and Thor know some basics.”

“You know how to weave?” Steve asked Loki and Thor, curiously.

“Not much and not well,” Thor admitted.

“Mother mainly taught us to keep us occupied on rainy days when we were younger,” Loki explained. “We often had to sit with her and help.”

“Until their fighting got so bad she would send one or both of them off on an unnecessary errand just for a moment’s peace,” Sigyn pointed out. “And as, of the two, Thor usually had the harder time being still, he spent the least time at the loom.”

“Loki is a much more talented weaver than I,” Thor nodded. “And I never really got the grasp of the magical aspects.”

“There is magic in weaving?” Jane asked skeptically.

“It is how the Vanir tell the future,” Sigyn explained. “The Norns weave the paths of the world, and so they that weave may have a glimpse into what will come.”

“Mother goes into a rather trance like state sometimes as she weaves,” Thor nodded. “When she comes out of it, she sometimes has an indication of what may or may not happen. Sometimes it’s as simple telling me not to leave my boots outside because it is going to rain overnight. Other times she sees things of more serious matter.”

“Did she see this mess?” Jane asked curiously.

“I doubt it,” Loki huffed. “She probably would have said something.”

“That’s the tricky part of it all, though,” Sigyn admitted. “When one weaves the future, one can see what may come to pass or what will come to pass, but there is little one can do to avoid outcomes. In fact, by attempting to avoid an outcome one usually ends up bringing it about. Even had the Allmother seen something, there would have been little she could have done in the way of warning someone. Only the Norns may reweave fate. They alone have that power.”
“And they are not to be trifled with,” Thor said gravely in the face of the other Midgardians, who seemed a bit skeptical of this.

“Oh, look at this ornate box!” Sigyn said, pulling Loki over to see a gilt creation in the next museum case.

Steve explained some of the transitions between medieval and Renaissance art to the Asgardians and a curious Jane. Loki, for his part, wanted to know why more Midgardians didn’t decorate their homes like the galleries depicting Renaissance rooms in Venice, England and Northern Europe. Steve made a mental note that he or someone probably needed to take the Asgardians down to the Cloisters to see the rest of the museum collection. The group was fifteen minutes late to the appointing meeting place for lunch and had barely finished going through all the European galleries in time to make it that late. They found Clint asleep at a table while Bruce and Natasha discussed Russian-Asian cultural exchanges over the years. Surveying the cafeteria before him, Loki crinkled his nose in disgust.

“Where,” Loki demanded of Steve, annoyed, “have you taken us?”

Loki was annoyed that, being under the direction of the penny-pinching Steve Rogers, they were forced to eat their noonday meal in the museum’s cafeteria rather than the pricey Dining Room overlooking Central Park they most likely would have dined at if Tony was present. Loki’s main argument was that the cafeteria had a distinct lack of seafood options for Sigyn when compared to the Dining Room, which featured everything from swordfish to tuna to octopus. Naturally, Loki himself wasn’t about to eat octopus, but it was nice to know Sigyn had the option to do so. Momentarily shelving the knowledge that Loki had an aversion to food with tentacles, everyone came up with their own arguments about why they shouldn’t have to spend so much money on lunch, only for Sigyn to announce she wanted to eat in the cafeteria because it had a wider dessert selection. Loki huffed and puffed at being sabotaged by his own wife, and showed his dissatisfaction throughout lunch by eating his burger and fries with a knife and fork. And either as a protest or because of his deceitful nature, Loki had managed to snag himself a second dessert without paying for it.

“So, did you guys have fun downstairs?” Bruce asked curiously.

Thor launched into a diatribe about Midgardian armor and its varying degrees of usefulness while Sigyn occasionally chimed in with her own comments about design and metalwork used to create the armor. The Asgardians, it seemed, had decided that Midgardian armor was beautiful and proper as showpieces but rather useless when it came into practical application. Unless, Loki suggested, one’s goal was to cook their opponent inside suit much like Clint cooked his cans of baked beans in the microwave. Clint and Sigyn then veered off into their own conversation about the crossbows while Bruce and Steve discussed the Asian and Middle Eastern galleries. Steve had a lot of insight into Japonaiserie and its influence, though Bruce warned him he might get more than he bargained for if he looked into how Japanese traditional art was still influencing modern artists. A muffled comment from Darcy then had the rest of the group explaining to Thor that he didn’t need to know what “hentai” was, especially since it had an entire subgenre that would put Loki off his lunch.

“I still can’t believe that a lot of the artists I used to admire as a kid are hanging up here now,” Steve mentioned, successfully changing the topic of conversation. “I mean, I had pie in the sky dreams
about one day going to Paris or somewhere to study art, you know. Meeting Picasso and going to see all the museums there. Too bad I only got there in the middle of the war. Hell, if I’d never gotten the serum I would have loved to work for the MFAA.”

“I’m sure if all your old sketchbooks had been available and not locked up in a SHIELD vault some of your stuff might be hanging up here,” Natasha pointed out.

“Because it was good or because Captain America drew it?” Steve snorted.

“You do good stuff,” Bruce insisted.

“Yeah, your doodles in meetings are always cracking everyone up,” Natasha nodded.

“I have that copy of the one you drew of Stilwell on my bedroom wall,” Clint mentioned.

“What was it you wanted to be? Like, if you had gotten your art degree, what would you have done with it?” Bruce asked Steve curiously.

“I don’t know,” Steve shrugged. “I always liked doing comics, but working in the studio at some big ad agency or somewhere probably would have been a better way to pay the bills. For a kid who grew up with hardly two cents to rub together, you’d think I’d have loftier ambitions than a career that might not guarantee me room and board from month to month.”

“At least your goal was somewhat realistic,” Clint shrugged. “When I was a kid, I just wanted to get paid to eat ice cream all day.”

“They do have food tasters,” Bruce pointed out.

“Not to taste the food; to eat it,” Clint replied. “I wanted to get paid to eat ice cream.”

“There is such a job?” Thor asked curiously, only hearing the tail end of the conversation.

“No, which is why it was a terrible idea for me as a kid,” Clint shook his head.

“What did you want to be as a kid, Thor?” Steve asked curiously.

“I never had to think about it,” Thor shrugged. “I always knew what was expected of me.”

“He wanted to be a goat farmer,” Loki interjected.

“Well, if I didn’t have to be king of Asgard, I always thought that would be nice,” Thor admitted, a little embarrassed. “But I’ve always known it wouldn’t happen. Loki has more freedom in that. He wanted to be a magister as a boy and now he is.”

“I wasn’t a terribly ambitious child,” Loki admitted. “I just wanted to be a magister and eat sweetmeats.”

“What did you want to do as a kid?” Darcy asked Sigyn.

“Early on I wanted to be a butterfly,” Sigyn shrugged. “Then I thought about being a weaver or a a smith like my father. And being a healer was always in the back of my mind. Of course, my sisters and I were always reminded by our mother to not have too many professional ambitions as our main purpose was to find good husbands for the glory of Vanaheim. Though, that hasn’t exactly worked out like she planned.”

“Either that or a dragonfly,” Sigyn replied. “I didn’t exactly get the concept of occupations as a small child.”

“She was absolutely adorable, however,” Loki grinned, causing Sigyn to giggle and then offer him a bite of her dessert. It was soon decided that everyone should split up for the afternoon before Loki and Sigyn’s dessert sharing got more pornographic than usual in public.

Steve, Bruce and Natasha headed up to the modernist galleries to look around while Loki went with Darcy, Jane, and Sigyn to see what was on exhibition in the costume hall. Soon after, they joined Clint and Thor, who were admiring the more modern European paintings. With those galleries completed, the group joined up together to take in what they could of the American Wing and still leave enough time to hit up the gift shop before closing. Even though not everyone had seen every gallery, there was a general consensus that it might not be a bad idea to spend another day at the museum before Tony and Pepper returned from California. Even Loki had to admit not all of the Midgardian artifacts on display weren’t completely terrible. And, out of the entire group, it was Loki who spent the most time trying to pick out what he wanted to purchase from the gift shop.

Darcy selected a Met travel mug and a poster for her room while Jane chose a nice scarf and set of artsy notebooks to scribble down various ideas and work in. Thor had fallen in love with a CD of medieval music and a book about the armor collections, clutching both close to his chest and even reluctant to give them up so the cashier could scan them. Bruce had gotten a calming musical CD himself as well as a book on architecture. Clint had purchased a book for himself about the art and applications of medieval crossbows while Natasha had opted for a nice scarf and a book featuring the Russian art collections at the museum. The amount of books Steve wanted to purchase about equaled the super soldier in weight, and despite attempts from Bruce, Natasha and Clint that Steve didn’t need to buy one of every book in the store, Loki urged Steve on, probably in the hopes he could borrow some of the books at a later date.

For his part, Loki selected several necklaces he liked for Sigyn as well as a pair of Assyrian-style bookends for himself. He also selected a book on the Met’s unicorn tapestry as a gift for his mother, though he did his best to be stealthy about it. Sigyn, true to form, just wanted the replicas of primitive sculptures of a hippo and doe, claiming the statuaries were too cute and she had to have them. She also had gotten a book on Midgardian silverworking which no doubt would make it back to her family in Niðavellir at some point. Loki just hoped they didn’t have too much of a laugh at Midgard’s expense.

“This museum was most entertaining.” Thor pronounced as they headed back to the massive SUV borrowed from Stark Tower. “I look forward to my return.”

“I need to take you to the Natural History Museum,” Jane mentioned.

“That’s just an excuse to take him to the planetarium,” Darcy snorted.

“I’d like to go to the planetarium,” Steve mentioned offhandedly.

“I’ve been meaning to go to see the wildlife,” Banner said.

“And they’ve got dinosaurs,” Clint agreed excitedly.

“They also have gems and minerals exhibits,” Jane said to Sigyn slyly, causing her to clap her hands and then shoot Loki with her best begging glance. Loki sighed and wrapped her closer toward himself.
"I suppose we have our next outing," Natasha smirked.

"Huzzah!" Thor cheered.

The day was finished with supper before heading back to the Tower, and Loki was less than enthused to find Steve had located for them another inexpensive meal at a pizzeria with a self-serve station not too unlike the cafeteria. Of course, Loki didn’t voice his displeasure because Sigyn was far too happy with the endless salad bar and had discovered a new Midgardian dish she delighted in - something referred to as macaroni salad. Steve, apparently, also enjoyed this dish as well and it delighted Clint - and then Tony who he had immediately texted - to learn that macaroni salad was one of the things Steve pre-dated. Loki didn’t mind the dish, but it wasn’t his first choice. However, as Sigyn happily munched her way through the salad bar - putting the all-you-can-eat aspect of it into question - Loki merely continued cutting into his stromboli and casting asperous glares at his dining companions.

Thor had also ordered the stromboli after seeing Loki’s arrive. He had also gotten a sausage, pepper, and onion gyro sandwich, an entire tray of lasagna, and enough garlic bread that might have fed the rest of the table. Loki was not pleased at how Thor had delighted that they had selected similar entrees, particularly that Thor was frequently asking Loki if his stromboli was also delightful. It had been one of those small facets of their brotherly rivalry growing up. One brother always wanted what the other one had and the one who had it never wanted his brother to receive the same. Despite Frigga’s constant harping that both of them having the same thing didn’t hurt either of them, Loki already felt Thor had too much in his favor and relished the few opportunities he had to have something Thor didn’t.

Looking to his right, Loki took some solace in the one thing he had that Thor certainly did not. Oh, Thor may marry some day, but Loki always took great pride in the fact that no woman his brother could marry would ever equal Sigyn - at least in Loki’s eyes. This Jane Foster was a close one, though. She was the most intelligent woman Thor had ever been with. Well, the most intelligent woman Thor who had ever been with that hadn’t ended up trying to kill Thor. In a way, Loki felt sorry for his brother when it came to Jane. Certainly, the Allfather would never approve of a long-term relationship between his eldest, golden son and a mere Midgardian. Even if the Allfather did approve, there were too many factions at work at the Asgardian court to allow any such union to go forward. Of course, Loki had a feeling things would end long before it came to that.

Jane Foster was, in Loki’s humble opinion, way out of Thor’s league. He could tell she was rather smart and even on Asgard would have been considered somewhat of an academic. Had she and Thor both been from the same plane of existence, he doubted very much they would be interested in each other. After all, Thor’s exoticness as a new alien species was chief among what had initially attracted Jane to him. Loki was certain that at some point Foster would outgrow her fling with his erstwhile brother and move on to greener pastures, and Thor would spend a great deal of time moping about it, probably never once realizing that doltishness probably caused the thing in the first place. And even if they managed to prove Loki wrong, the God of Mischief would always feel there was no one better than his own wife.

"Which was your favorite of the tapestries?" Sigyn asked Loki, drawing her husband out of his thoughts and back into the conversation happening around him. "I rather liked the one with the elephant, but the ones depicting the elements and seasons were very colorful and detailed. They must
have taken much work.”

“I liked the one with the falcon hunt,” Loki decided. “Reminded me of Mother’s work. Especially with all the flowers.”

“I liked the one with the shepherdess on it,” Thor announced without being asked.

“You would,” Loki huffed. “It was the only tapestry with goats on it.”

“I liked the one where the monkey was trying to kidnap the kid,” Clint offered. “Who knew stuffy old folks from the 1400s had a sense of humor.”

“If you liked those,” Steve said to Loki, ignoring Clint and Thor’s debate over whether or not the money kidnapping tapestry was based on a real event, “there are plenty more tapestries at the Cloisters Museum. I’ve been meaning to hit it up as well.”

“Yes,” Loki said with his typical princely air. “We shall have to arrange something.”

“I must say our visit was rather inspiring,” Sigyn admitted to Steve. “I have a great urge when we return home to set up my own loom and get to work. It has been a while since I have engaged in any particularly intricate weaving. Most of my recent projects have just been busy work intended to pass the time.”

“That piece you wove for Stark was very nice,” Loki pointed out. “And didn’t take a small amount of time, either.”

“Yes, but that was to replace the one you and Thor ruined,” Sigyn huffed at him. Loki wanted to argue that setting the blanket alit on the stove had been Thor’s doing and Thor’s doing alone, but he decided it might not be in his best interest to protest.

“I know what you mean,” Steve said to Sigyn, thankfully distracting her from Loki’s past misdeeds. “I always feel creative after leaving a museum or gallery. I suppose that’s why they always had those fancy salons in Paris and places where creative types would gather around each other. Creativity breeds creativity, I guess.”

“Are you going to be up all night… painting?” Clint asked, making Steve roll his eyes at Clint’s bad attempt at a joke. “Will you paint me like one of your French girls?”

“My what?” Steve asked, confused.

“I told you,” Natasha said, beaning Clint in the back of the head, “he hasn’t seen that movie yet.”

“Lame,” Clint pronounced.

“Like you could sit still long enough to be painted,” Natasha snorted.
Before she closed up her lab for the holiday season, Jane needed to complete one last major experiment. Bruce and Sigyn had agreed to help her and Darcy with the project and Natasha had signed on as muscle if need be. However, the last thing Jane really needed were Thor and Loki poking around in the lab while she was working. As much as Jane loved Thor, his idea of “helping” usually ended up in things getting broken and she often found herself distracted by him walking around the lab in his tight Asgardian leather pants. Loki, by the opposite token, was always keen to point out when he thought one of Jane’s experiments was going sideways or if he thought calibrations on a piece of equipment were off. When he wasn’t critiquing Jane’s methodology, he was usually attempting to convince Sigyn to join him in one of the supply closets for a semi-public conjugal rendezvous. If Jane had to ban a third person from her lab, it would probably be Clint who occasionally popped out of the ceiling vents at inopportune moments, lured in by the smell of freshly made coffee.

So, to keep the peace and prevent any lab-related shenanigans, Steve had kindly agreed to fall on a more metaphorical grenade by taking Clint, Loki and Thor out for the day. The problem was finding something that would entertain his three friends. Clint and Thor had notoriously short attention spans while Loki was notoriously finicky about what he paid attention to in the first place. A shuddering fear came over Steve like it did all hardened New Yorkers who realized they were going to have to entertain out-of-towners in the city. He was going to have to take the Asgardians to the usual tourist traps. In the back of his head, Steve could hear the laughter of everyone in his old neighborhood. After all, if there was a terrible time to have to show someone around the city it was during the holidays.

While not a born New Yorker, Clint had a place in Bed-Stuy long enough that he could be considered a convert to the city. In fact, the building where Clint lived was across the street from a building where Steve and Bucky would sometimes go at night for poker games with one of the guys Bucky worked down at the docks with. The neighborhood was no longer the strange mix of Jewish families, Italian immigrants and migrants from the American South who had come up to New York in search of better pay and equality. Clint had similar opinions to Steve about gentrification, which Tony had learned once after mentioning an upscale hipster boutique in a lower-class neighborhood was a relative improvement to the area. In this particular moment, however, Steve was trying his best not to frown as Clint laughed about Steve’s game plan for the day.

“Rockefeller Center, seriously?” Clint laughed, wiping tears away from his eyes. “That place is going to be crowded. You really think that’s the place to unleash Thing One and Thing Two?”

Steve looked over with a sigh at Loki and Thor, who were arguing over who got to push the elevator button. As if incensed by their bickering, JARVIS started the elevator of his own accord, causing the two brothers to then fight over who had taken up so much time the elevator had decided to start on its own. It never ceased to amaze Steve how the two thousand-year-old godlings could revert to bickering toddlers over something as simple as who got to push a button or who was the first in line.
“As long as we can keep them slightly apart for the majority of the day, I think they should be fine,” Steve reasoned. “Besides, I think it might tucker them out, and they’re much more pliable when they’re tired or full of food.”

“It is a solid strategy in theory,” Clint said. “But I don’t know if it will really work out in practice. I mean, you really think they’re going to get tired ice skating around tourists? Do they even know how to ice skate?”

“We’ll find out,” Steve shrugged.

It turned out Thor and Loki knew much more than just how to ice skate. While Loki swept himself around the rink with the grace, poise, and concentrated frown of a professional figure skater, Thor had a sense of speed and reaction time that would make a hockey player envious. Both men easily weaved in and out of the crowd, Loki more with a look of indifference while Thor had a smirk of exhilaration as if he was trying to see how many times he could circle the rink in a single minute. Clint shuffled around on the ice himself, making sure the two brothers didn’t aggravate each other, while Steve sat on a nearby bench drinking cocoa and watching everyone else’s stuff. Before the serum, he wasn’t in any kind of health to be physically exerting himself on a frozen rink in the middle of December. Now, he was worried proximity to the ice might give him flashbacks of his own time being frozen.

Both he and Clint were surprised to find Loki and Thor eventually skating alongside each other, having what seemed to be an actual, normal conversation than a fight. However, even Steve’s super hearing couldn’t pick up what they were talking about over the crowd and the brothers always seemed to be at just the right angle where Clint couldn’t read their lips. Both Clint and Steve at least hoped that whatever the two were talking about wouldn’t come back to bite anyone. If they had overheard the conversation, however, both men probably would have laughed.

“Do you see him as well?” Thor asked Loki curiously.

“The man with the white beard?” Loki nodded. “Haven’t gotten a look at his face.”

“Would that do any good?” Thor pointed out. “Even you and Mother cannot see through his best illusions.”

“Please,” Loki huffed. “Besides, in that outfit and giving out sweets to children? Do you really think I need to see through a mask to see that is him?”

“I thought so as well,” Thor agreed. “But why is he here?”

“How should I know?” Loki huffed. “Probably to spy on us or cause us grief. That’s usually the case, isn’t it?”

“Loki,” Thor cautioned.

“Oh, name one time in the past couple hundred years when him showing up out of the blue has ever benefited either of us,” Loki pointed out. “Although, last time it was you who was in the most trouble.”

“Yes,” Thor admitted begrudgingly. “Though I thought he had given up on coming to this realm.”

“Please,” Loki huffed. “You really think the two of us together are not enough of a lure to give up that whole boycott? Besides, I don’t think he’s been honest about not coming here in the past thousand years or so. There are times he sneak off and even Mother couldn’t find him.”
“It was his favorite place to come,” Thor admitted.

“What’s going on?” Clint asked, skating over to him.

“Reminiscing,” Thor said. “About our childhood.” Clint looked skeptically at Thor, and Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Thor could attempt to lie, but he had a definite tell. Loki and their parents had always seen through it. And Clint wasn’t that stupid to be oblivious to Thor’s terrible attempts at mistruths.

“Our Mother used to take us skating when we would visit her relatives in Vanaheim in the winter months,” Loki explained. “Occasionally, the Allfather allows some winter weather in Asgard as well to give its denizens a reprieve from perfect temperatures. Though skating is more of a challenge and less enjoyable when there is a real risk of falling off the side of the realm.”

“To tell the truth, I much prefer skiing,” Thor admitted. “Less likely to break through ice and get wet.”

“The ice here is artificial,” Clint pointed out.

“Oh, Asgard has the ability to create artificial ice,” Loki harrumphed. “There are just some more traditional folks who believe that goes against the spirit of manufactured winterscapes.”

“You guys live in a weird place,” Clint said. Loki and Thor both nodded in affirmation.

After about three hours, even Thor was feeling cold enough to consider leaving the ice rink. Loki never seemed to get cold, no matter how many hours the brothers had spent playing in the snow and ice. Once, Thor had been jealous of his brother’s ability to withstand freezing temperatures while Loki had been annoyed that he was always made to go inside around the same time Thor started to feel chilled. Now that they knew Loki was a Frost Giant and therefore not susceptible to the cold weather in any way, shape or form, neither brother brought up this little snippet from their childhood. Instead, when Thor skated off the rink and got ready to take off his skates to put on his shoes, Loki followed suit without being asked.

To warm up and because Steve and Clint still had a few last minute Christmas gifts to buy, they decided to head inside and shop around. Clint and Steve decided it would be best to divide Thor and Loki up, but there was a brief discussion over who would be in charge of which godling. As Steve and Clint debated who was best to keep an eye on Thor and Loki, the two brothers were focused on the jolly man ringing a bell in front of a red kettle. This man looked just like the one they had seen earlier. The brothers exchanged a worried look.

“I get the sense we are being followed,” Thor mentioned.

“Really now?” Loki rolled his eyes, annoyed. “It’s not as if it’s overt.”

“What do you think we should do?” Thor asked.

“Nothing for now,” Loki said. “Perhaps he will go away in his own time. Just be as boring and unremarkable as possible.”

“Alright, Thor,” Steve said, “you’re with me. Loki, you’re going with Clint.”

“I reserve the right to shoot you if I have to spend more than thirty minutes comparing ties and or scarves,” Clint informed Loki.

“Yes, Norns forbid you learn anything about looking stylish,” Loki huffed, Clint following close on
“Maybe I should have gone with your brother,” Steve frowned.

“No, he and Barton enjoy sniping at each other,” Thor shrugged. “Besides, I doubt Loki would have the patience for aiding in your holiday shopping.” Steve nodded and the two of them headed off in the opposite direction from Clint and Loki.

Their first stop was a home goods store. Thor had gotten weighted vest, ankle weights, wrist weights and after-workout heating and cooling pad, though it was hard to see how the weights were anything but a slight convenience to the muscly god. Steve hadn’t gotten anything from the home goods store, deeming it too expensive, but had gotten some shave creams and moisturisers at the bath and beauty store Thor had hit up next to purchase some lotions and soaps Jane liked to use. Both men had gotten some Hello Kitty goods for Jane, Darcy and Sigyn, Thor because he had terrible impulse control and Steve to even out his Christmas gifts. Steve also found a coffee mug for Natasha and some cheesy patterned socks for Clint. Thor also bought himself a book about unicorns and a giant, smiling plush ice cream cone the girl at the checkout counter told them was “totes kawaii.”

Across the concourse, Loki and Clint had a less clear cut path about what they were shopping for. Loki had purchased a few notebooks and pens for himself as well as a variety of jewelry for his wife, including a sodalite necklace, tourmaline necklace, forest agate pendant, some silver bracelets and a very nice mother-of-pearl pendant. Loki had then gotten a scarf for himself as well as two for Sigyn and several new silk-type robes. Loki and Clint had also purchased something from every one of the chocolate shops in the area. Clint had eaten about half of his chocolate already and was attempting to swipe Loki’s but was having no success when the pair met Thor and Steve back at the appointed spot. Sensing hunger was upon the group, Steve decided it was time to take lunch suggestions.

Naturally, Steve had wanted to go to the cheapest restaurant in Rock Center, which happened to be an old-style deli. Loki, however, wanted the most expensive restaurant there whose cheapest item was an a la carte order of French-style steamed potatoes for ten bucks. The growling of Thor’s stomach mandated a quick solution, and so Steve suggested a gourmet soup and sandwich bar, convincing Loki that on Midgard, sometimes the priciest of foods were not always the most delicious. Loki decided this assessment must be true after completing his first shepherd’s pie and then quickly ordering a second along with a chicken pot pie and black forest ham sandwich for himself along with a to-go order of wild mushroom soup, ten vegetable soup, and seafood jambalaya for his wife. Thor set a record for Sloppy Joe consumption and then discovered his new favorite Midgardian food - chorizo. Clint and Steve found out they were on opposite sides of the lobster bisque/clam chowder debate, which Loki offered to have Sigyn settle for them as if her word would be final on the entire issue for everyone for all time.

Finished with their meal, the group headed back toward Stark Tower. Loki and Thor had both expected to head back to their chambers only for Steve to inform them he wanted to visit the market at Grand Central. It was puzzling to both Thor and Loki as to why the Captain wanted to shop for groceries, especially as JARVIS typically did so for them. Clint had explained that the open-air bazaar feel of the market was more akin to how foodstuffs had been sold in Steve’s day. It was also similar to how foods were sold on Asgard - not that Thor or Loki had ever been required to purchase their own foodstuffs. They meandered about as the Captain made a few purchases, and then Clint made them head down to the bottom floor to get coffee. Loki had been disappointed to find out that a store he thought was a magical shop based on its name was in fact a bath and beauty shop.

“There he is again!” Thor pointed out as Loki eyed the window display of aroma diffusers in disgust. The godling turned his focus to find Thor was not pointing to a physical person but rather a picture on an advertisement for some sort of holiday market.
"I highly doubt he has manifested himself into a Midgardian advertisement with a terrible font selection and clashing text colors," Loki huffed.

"Maybe it is not him," Thor said. "Maybe there is someone on Midgard who only wishes to cast an illusion. For nefarious purposes, no doubt. Someone wishes to cull the Midgardians to their shifty aims."

"That is the most thick-witted suggested you have made all day," Loki rolled his eyes. "Honestly, what end would that possibly serve? Most Midgardians know nothing of Asgard and even those that do largely still refuse to believe there is any truth to it. If one was trying to make such an impact using a person hardly anyone in this realm has ever heard of? I am sure they would be more likely to pick someone actually recognizable."

"What's going on, guys?" Steve asked, handing over the coffees he had ordered for them. Clint was still waiting for the six cups he had ordered just for himself.

"Nothing," Loki and Thor said at the same time and suspiciously quickly.

Steve glanced between the two brothers. Years of getting into his own scuffles and causing his own mischief - albeit often aided and abetted by Bucky - had caused Steve to know such a quick and unanimous response was not to be trusted, especially since Thor was having trouble meeting his eyes. Steve hoped the two of them had just been discussing something embarrassing rather than keeping a secret that would cause anyone real harm. Then again, Steve knew he could trust Thor to come out with anything eventually. The guy didn’t keep secrets very well. When Clint returned with his own tray of coffees in hand, the group finally returned back to the Tower.

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"Sigyn, we must conference," Loki announced as he burst into their chambers, Thor at his heels.

Sigyn looked up from where she was comfortably curled up with a book and a blanket on one of the sofas to see her husband and brother-in-law. Both were shedding their Midgardian outerwear after having set down several bags and containers. Thor was having a particularly hard time taking off his sweater, not able to get it up and over his chin. When he was finally free from the apparel, his hair was flying in all directions. Sigyn wasn’t sure if that was because the sweater had generated static electricity or because Thor sometimes still shot off his own electric sparks when he was frustrated.

"What has happened?" Sigyn asked, as Loki moved to place containers of what smelled like soup in the cold-keeping device.

"The Allfather is on Midgard," Thor announced gravely.

"What?" Sigyn snorted.

"I, too, would be skeptical," Loki nodded as he returned from the kitchen. "But we both saw him. In various places."

"He was following us," Thor agreed. "In one of his more favorite disguises, I think. The red robes Mother made for him to wear in wintertime."

"I do not know why he must spy on us thusly," Loki huffed, stomping back and forth.
“I think you are paranoid,” Sigyn replied with a roll of her eyes before flipping the page in her book.

“But it was he!” Thor insisted. “There was no doubting it!”

“Was there an eyepatch?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“You know he doesn’t require one when he changes forms!” Loki snorted.

“Yet he still often keeps one,” Sigyn pointed out.

“By that logic, he should be disguising himself as the Furious One,” Loki snorted.

“They do have a rather lot in common,” Thor said, as if finally connecting the dots of a conspiracy theory.

“There is absolutely no way the Allfather has suddenly abandoned Asgard to spy on the two of you,” Sigyn snorted.

“And how can you be so confident?” Thor replied.

“Well, since his two sons are no longer there to aid him he has to take on quite more responsibility around Asgard. Someone has to run things, after all,” Sigyn pointed out. “Not to mention that in her last letter I received yesterday, your mother mentioned that Elves have brought up that whole trade tariff issue again and so he has constantly been in meetings with various dignitaries, merchants and ambassadors dealing with that. And then there are all the preparations needed for the Winter Solstice and related activities.”

“It was him,” Thor insisted.

“No doubt about it,” Loki agreed. Sigyn groaned, annoyed that neither brother seemed to be listening to her.

“Well, if the Allfather has decided to grace Midgard with his presence - even if he is doing so covertly,” Sigyn challenged. “perhaps it would be best if we alerted the Midgardians?”

Steve and Clint were in the common room, listening to Darcy and Natasha regale them with the events of the lab that day. Jane and Bruce had apparently science-d themselves out and were now taking much-needed naps in their respective quarters. To celebrate the alleged end of all things science related for the remainder of the holidays, Darcy and Natasha had broken out some hot cocoa and snackfoods. Steve had contributed some of the items he had just bought at the market, though Clint had already hidden his share of the chocolate horde he and Loki had acquired in various nests of his throughout the building. It was into this scene that Sigyn marched Thor and Loki, announcing to the others that the pair had an important announcement about a secret Asgardian visitor to the realm.

“So, what’s going on?” Steve asked, concerned. Thor and Loki looked at each other, but neither made any move to voice their concerns. Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“Honestly,” she huffed. “The two of you are fine to banter about your conspiracy theories in private,
but when it comes to actually sharing them…”

“It isn’t a theory!” Thor thundered.

“Though there may be some amount of conspiracy afoot,” Loki frowned.

“What’s going on?” Clint groaned. Loki and Thor again glanced at each other, but said nothing. Sigyn groaned.

“These two,” Sigyn said, glaring at the brothers, “seem to believe the Allfather has secretly come to Midgard and is spying on them.” Clint and Darcy exchanged confused glances while Natasha rolled her eyes and took another sip of cocoa. Steve was the only one who seemed to actually treat the matter seriously.

“What makes you say that?” Steve asked him.

“We have seen his figure throughout the day today,” Thor explained.

“The Allfather often disguises himself and goes wandering so that he might learn secrets of the people,” Loki said. “He does it throughout the realms, but this would be the first time in more than a thousand years he has come to Midgard. Well, that we know of.”

“You saw him?” Steve reiterated.

“Not as himself, but in one of his disguises,” Loki explained.

“What kind of disguise?” Clint asked.

“Oh, his normal white beard, but wearing his red sleigh-riding robes mother made for him,” Thor explained.

“Wait…” Darcy frowned before typing into her StarkPad and then showing it to them. “Is this who you saw?”

“Yes!” Thor and Loki exclaimed. Clint busted out laughing and Darcy couldn’t control her giggles either.

“What is so funny?” Loki demanded.

“Dude,” Darcy laughed, “that’s Santa Claus.”

“Is that the alias he uses?” Loki huffed. “Not exactly imaginative. Though I suppose the Claws aspect does create some fear.”


“It is the Allfather,” Thor insisted.

“Santa Claus as a mythological figure,” Steve pointed out.

“Kind of like us?” Loki shot back.

“He’s a story made up as an excuse to exchange gifts on Christmas,” Clint shook his head.

“And a symbol of good cheer and charitableness during the holidays,” Darcy explained. “Sure, he’s based on the historical Saint Nicholas, but so many different cultural traditions and Coca-Cola ads
changed him completely from his factual persona.”

“It was Odin!” Loki insisted.

“Okay,” Steve said, trying to be logical about the whole thing. “Let’s compare notes here. Sure, your dad…”

“Not my father,” Loki interjected.

“Has a long white beard and is known to wear red robes,” Steve explained, “but so do hundreds of Santa impersonators and, honestly, people around the world.”

“Perhaps these Midgardian legends of this Sainted Claws are inspired by the Allfather,” Sigyn reasoned. Thor and Loki exchanged another annoyed glance.

“What do you know of this Santa, then?” Thor demanded.

“He’s knows when you’re sleeping and knows when you’re awake?” Clint huffed.

“The Allfather knows all,” Thor nodded severely. “He has Heimdall to watch for him.”

“I mean, that does make more sense that a guy on the North Pole whose omnipotent,” Darcy agreed.

“Santa breaks into people’s houses via their chimney to leave toys for good children,” Clint explained.

“And how does that differ from the Allfather?” Loki snorted.

“He does not break and enter,” Thor pointed out.

“Your father distributes toys to children on Christmas?” Clint asked skeptically.

“It is one of his Allfatherly traditions designed to make him look wonderful and benevolent in the eyes of the populace,” Loki huffed.

“The Allfather is born on the feast of Yule,” Thor explained. “Much as Sigyn is born on Lithasblot.”

“Our grandmother nicknamed him Jólnir because of it,” Loki said. “Her pet name for him. And she was the only one who could call him that. In fact, there is a rumor that nickname is why one of our uncles is banished to Alfheim.”

“Instead of having gifts brought to him, he decided early in his reign to distribute gifts to the people,” Thor explained. “He and the einherjar ride through the realm and distribute toys to all of the children and gifts of fruit and mead to their parents.”

“Oh, see Santa pulls a sleigh with eight reindeer,” Steve explained.

“Our father distributes toys from a sleigh pulled by his eight-legged horse,” Thor explained.

“He’s not my father,” Loki said at the same time Clint interjected. “Wait, no one’s told Steve about Rudolph? Do you predate Rudolph?”

“Rudolph Hess?” Steve asked, alarmed.

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” Darcy explained.
“Wasn’t that some kid’s book?” Steve frowned.

“Oh, it has a song now and everything.” Clint grinned.

“If a reindeer has a red nose, I think you might need to put him down,” Thor offered.

“So,” Steve said, getting things back on track. “The two of you believe that Santa Claus is your father…”

“Not my father!” Loki interjected.

“...come down to Asgard to spy on you,” Steve continued, “because Santa has a long, white beard, gives children presents around the time of the Winter Solstice and pulls a sleigh with eight reindeer?”

“Nine reindeer,” Clint corrected.

“Where does your dad get these gifts anyway?” Darcy asked Thor.

“The elves, mostly,” Thor shrugged. “It would be too overwhelming for the merchants of Asgard alone to make them. And the elves see is as spreading good solstice cheer to give gifts to the other realms.”

“Your father distributes toys created by magical elves?” Darcy gaped.

“Where does your Santa Claus get his?” Loki inquired.

“He has magical elves that work for him in some sort of workshop,” Clint said. “Actually, now that I think it about, it’s never clear if it’s a workshop or sweatshop where these elves are quasi-enslaved. No one ever really touches on if they get pay and benefits or whatnot.”

“Do children also leave cookies for your dad to eat?” Darcy asked.

“No, but many do bring out hay for Sleipnir,” Thor shrugged.

“What do you think of all this?” Steve asked Natasha.

“I didn’t grow up with Santa Claus. Or even Ded Moroz and Snegurochka,” Natasha shrugged.

“Gesundheit,” Darcy said.

“Ded Moroz and Snegurochka or Old Man Frost and his granddaughter the Snow Maiden,” Natasha explained. “He is a magical wizard who brings children presents on New Years. If they are not part of the Black Widow program, naturally. Of course, children must beware and guard their gifts from Baba Yaga, who will try to make them an evil bargain for their goods.”

“Tell me more of this Grandmother Witch,” Loki inquired.

“No,” Clint, Darcy, Steve and Thor said at once, causing Natasha to roll her eyes. She might tell Loki some Baba Yaga stories later. It could be fun to see him trying to track down a mythological witch.

“I doubt the Allfather is here,” Natasha said, changing the subject. “Fury would have told us something if there was any indication of unexpected Bifrost activity.”

“The Allfather does not need the Bifrost to traverse between the realms,” Loki snorted. “Yet he expects others to always use it.”
“Even so, I doubt very much he’s spending his time working as a bellringer or at Macy’s,” Steve pointed out. “I mean, he’s got a whole country to run, right?”

“When he is not inconveniently asleep or decides he’s bored for the day and will disguise himself to see what people around Asgard are up to,” Loki huffed.

“Mother once had to track him down to an inn on the outskirts of town from a game of ninepins because the ambassador for Vanaheim had been waiting three days not see the Allfather,” Thor admitted. “It would not be unlike him to go wandering.”

“Are we seriously going to have to take these two out and have them sit on Santa’s lap to convince them it’s not their dad?” Clint asked worriedly.

“Why in the Nine would we sit on his lap?” Thor asked confused. “We’re much too old for him to be reading us bedtime stories anymore.”

“Yes,” Loki groaned, as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “The Allfather has disguised himself and come to Midgard so that he might read us a bedtime story. Thor, you are so utterly moronic.”

“I think I have a solution to this,” Darcy suggested.

Roughly an hour and one Rankin-Bass special later, Steve was reading more about the history of stop-motion animation while simultaneously telling Darcy everything he knew about Fred and Ginger. Natasha had spiked her hot cocoa in order to deal with the people surrounding her as Clint made terrible attempts to field the confusing questions about the magic of the movie from Sigyn and Loki. Only Thor seemed slightly disappointed after the conclusion of the film, though he had been delighted at the nice happy ending and the animated creatures.

“You’re actually upset that your dad didn’t sneak down here to spy on you?” Darcy mentioned to Thor, who was pouting a bit.

“Well, I suppose it was nice to think he missed us,” Thor shrugged. “Especially during this time of year.”

“I’m sure he’s got his own way of watching out for you,” Darcy pointed out. “I mean, he does have Heimdall, right?”

“I suppose,” Thor shrugged.

“Look!” Sigyn said happily as a pair of ravens swooped into the room carrying a satchel. They deposited it into Sigyn’s hands before making themselves ready to land.

“Huginn! Muninn!” Thor said happily.

The two ravens perched themselves on the back of the sofa near where Thor was sitting. It seemed obvious to everyone save Thor that the twinned ravens had given him a once over and found him still as disinteresting as ever. While Huginn settled into the perch, Muninn hoped over and began pecking at the back of Loki’s head. Loki shooed the bird who then squawked and seemed to hover around him, as if it was waiting to relieve itself.
“Get off me, you feathered lump,” Loki huffed. Muninn let out an angry squawk at him and then returned to Huginn’s side.

“Be nice, Loki,” Sigyn cautioned.

“Those cretins would peck my nose off or bite me,” Loki replied. “I have no reason to be kind to them.”

“Oh, they aren’t so bad,” Thor said, reaching to pet one of the birds only to be fiercely pecked by both. The birds then squawked angrily at Thor for yelping in pain before flying off.

“What was that about?” Clint asked.

“Yule presents!” Sigyn exclaimed as she reached into the satchel.

“See! The Allfather did not forget us!” Thor said happily.

“What’s in there? A candy cane apiece?” Clint snorted. Sigyn sat the satchel down on the floor and then produced a package nearly twice the size of the satchel from within it.”

“Did we also mentioned the Allfather has the same bigger on the inside technology of your Sainted Claws and Dr. Who?” Loki pointed out.

“What’s going on?” A sleepy Jane said from the doorway where she and Banner had arrived, expecting dinner to be on the table.

“Presents!” Thor said happily.

The Allmother and Allfather had generously sent Yule presents for all the Avengers as well as their sons and daughter-in-law, though Loki smelled his mother’s influence on all of the gifts sent for him. Packages from Sigyn’s family had also been sent as well as gifts from Lady Sif and the Warriors Three. Darcy had put on Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in the background of the Winter Solstice gift giving celebration, suggesting they check with Sigyn to see if Loki would be up for Rankin Bass’ Jack Frost later. Gifts for Pepper and Tony stored under the tree for when they returned, the rest of the group dove into their presents.

For their part, most of the Midgardians were a bit surprised at what Asgardians considered to be appropriate holiday gift giving presents. Clint had received some archery equipment including Asgardian arrows and crossbow bolts, an intricately made leather quiver, and several pairs of medieval-style archery gloves and guards. Jane and Banner’s gifts were all related to science in some way, but Thor seemed annoyed at the fact that these were basically Asgardian versions of children’s chemistry sets and toys. Darcy and Natasha had both received various Asgardian perfumes, scented oils and healing potions as well as a set of quills and ink for Darcy and a set of Asgardian throwing knives for Natasha. Steve had also received several healing potions, his own intricately carved drinking horn, a pair of boots in his signature colors and a book on strategy Sigyn had to magically translate so he could read it.

For the Asgardians, gifts were a bit different. Loki and Sigyn each received numerous potion ingredients and texts as well as a healing kit from her sister Nanna. Idunn had sent some treats and a very terse note about the amount of children’s toys Loki and Sigyn had shipped from Midgard to Idis for her own Solstice celebration. True to form, the Allmother had also woven everyone a new hat, scarf and pair of gloves, which was apparently a tradition for her to do for her children and now their friends. She had included a letter as well, addressed to her sons and daughter-in-law.

“What does she say?” Thor asked eagerly.
“She hopes the two of you are getting along,” Sigyn summed up. “And to dress warmly. She is grateful for the gifts we sent her and said they help her not to miss us so much. And she says to be good and hopes we shall see her again soon.”

“There’s something on the back,” Steve pointed out. Sigyn flipped the letter over.

“Oh, there is a postscript here…” Sigyn began.

“What does it say?” Loki asked as his wife began to laugh.

“She says the Allfather swears he has not been down here spying on anyone. He has Heimdall to do that for him,” Sigyn laughed, “but she said sometime she will have to tell us about the winter the Allfather spent on Midgard before the two of you were born. Apparently, Frigga is delighted to learn that Midgard has not completely forgotten the atrocious red riding habit he wore that year, nor the mischief he and his brothers caused by breaking into homes via chimney whilst drunk. Enough mischief that the Allfather Bor even briefly left Asgard to fetch them home for punishment. Which resulted in some manner of reparations for the Midgardians they had disturbed.”

“What,” most of the group responded.

“It seems the stories of your Santa Claus may have partially begun with an ancient rumor about the Allfather as a young princeling come to visit Midgard,” Sigyn giggled, “though perhaps the persona of Santa is much more flattering than the true story.”

“I can’t believe this,” Darcy shook her head.

“So, your dad is Santa?” Clint asked Thor. “Does that mean I should send my list to him next year?”

“I don’t know,” Jane frowned. “I think I like the fat, jolly Santa better than the idea of your father. He’s pretty strict, isn’t he?”

“Fat and jolly are not exactly descriptors I would use for him, no,” Loki snorted, though Thor didn’t seem displeased by this news in the least.

“See! This Santa Claus is Odin!” Thor said proudly. “The Allfather will grant everyone’s Christmas wishes from atop his mighty eight-legged steed! Huzzah!”

“Sometimes,” Loki groaned, “I’m glad I am adopted.”
The events of the past few days left the occupants of the Tower reeling and feeling utterly useless. The day after the arrival of gifts from Asgard had been Bruce’s birthday. A big green frosted cake, Bruce’s favorite foods and a video card from Pepper and Tony had put everyone to bed that evening in a good mood. The next morning, they awoke to the news that Tony’s friend and Pepper’s security head, Happy Hogan, was now in the hospital suffering from life-threatening injuries. Sigyn had been terribly upset to learn the man who had been so kind to her and really everyone was hurt. As Loki attempted to calm his wife, he and the rest of the Avengers and associated parties got to watch Tony giving out his home address in Malibu on television, begging a known terrorist to come and attack him.

Subsequent calls made to the Stark mansion out west were not going through and calls made to Fury from Steve, Natasha and Clint were also going unanswered. Pepper’s phone also seemed to be off, despite the flurry of texts and calls that had been sent to her. The best they could do was when Natasha hacked into Maria Hill’s phone to demand an explanation as well as what plan the Avengers should take to protect Tony and take down this so-called Mandarin. The response had been that SHIELD had everything under control and that no calls to the Avengers were being issued for fear of escalating things with the terrorist cell. Eventually, Natasha managed to get JARVIS to get through to Tony, who was apparently hanging out in his California home’s panic room. Tony himself said he didn’t want anyone else getting involved, but that didn’t sit well with his friends. Steve, Natasha and Clint had been suited up and ready to leave since they first heard Happy was in the hospital.

That answer had been good enough until the next morning when the group watched live on TV as Tony’s house was destroyed and he was declared missing, possibly killed in action. JARVIS seemed to have gone offline in the Tower and so it was useless to see if they could contact Tony that way. There was no word from Pepper, either, or if she had survived. Bruce had basically moved himself into the Hulk containment cell after that, unable to deal with the stress. Steve and Natasha were trying to patch themselves through to Fury, Hill and really anyone with SHIELD to get better information on what was going on. Darcy was even helping them by attempting to hack through the various SHIELD databases, only to find out SHIELD knew even less than they did. Clint, meanwhile, was also working with Natasha to get any information they could out of their less-than-savory acquaintances and contacts about the Ten Rings. When Rhodey had called, the group found he knew even less about what was happening than they or even SHIELD did. Rhodey didn't seem happy that what little more SHIELD knew than the military they hadn't yet communicated. Thor was trying to calm Jane, who was completely freaking out, while Loki found himself assisting Sigyn as she spent the better part of the day stress baking. She sent a get-well-soon package to Happy in the hopes he would wake up by the time they arrived.

Pepper gave them a call from a hotel in L.A. that afternoon letting everyone know she was alright, but didn’t want to stay too far from Happy. She had no idea where Tony was either, but seemed relieved to know the rest of the group was working on a solution. She also told them to start looking into a company called AIM, some sort of military think tank. However, when they tried to call her
back later, they were unable to get in contact with Pepper again, creating even more worries. Not long after, they got the heads up from Rhodey that Tony was fine. Rhodey himself was being sent on wild goose chases around the world. Next thing they knew, Rhodey was out incommunicado too. By Christmas Eve Day, it was unclear where any of the three of them were. Thor was ready to hit up Heimdall for information and Fury was sending explicit instructions not for anyone to get involved, especially if the chatter he was hearing was to be believed. Still, the remaining Avengers spent the entire day tracking anything and everything they could about Stark and his possible location. Bruce was still down in his cell and Jane and Sigyn spent the better part of the morning down there with him. They returned upstairs around lunch, at which time JARVIS seemed to have come back online. However, his main focus was where Tony needed him and so they only got an occasional ping from him reminding them Tony was at least alive. SHIELD had not been asked to come in on anything, and so Fury’s orders were still to stand down.

“This is ludicrous,” Steve pronounced, “we haven’t heard anything from Pepper and Rhodes. And Tony’s apparently alive, but we have no idea where.”

“His credit cards pinged in north Florida late last night,” Natasha pointed out.

“Why hasn’t he contacted any of us then?” Steve pointed out.

“He called Rhodes,” Clint pointed out. “Maybe he’s not in a good place to talk.”

“The least we can do is track down this Mandarin,” Steve grumbled.

“Everyone in the entire U.S. government plus Interpol, MI-6 and just about every one of our allies terrorism bureaus is tracking this guy,” Natasha sighed.

“What about the search on AIM?” Steve asked.

“Mostly a clean record,” Darcy explained, “though there are some unaccounted for explosions and missing persons cases that no one ever looked into.”

“Let’s keep digging there,” Natasha nodded.

“I can’t take this,” Jane moaned.

“Go help Sigyn decorate the Christmas cookies,” Darcy suggested. “And maybe try to explain to Loki that the shape he keeps decorating is a Christmas tree not a bloody spearhead.”

“I like the arrowhead Christmas trees,” Clint frowned.

“Certainly ate your weight in them,” Natasha mumbled.

The afternoon and early evening was filled with conflicting accounts that the vice president was going to be kidnapped then that the president had been kidnapped and Tony had rescued a bunch of political aides from falling out of Air Force One. Steve - with some help from Darcy - then had to explain the executive branch of government and its line of succession to Thor, Loki and Sigyn while Natasha and Clint spent time cussing out Fury and Hill over various channels as to why they hadn’t been officially dispatched from SHIELD. Then, at a quarter to midnight, JARVIS opened up a screen that revealed a worse for wear Tony sitting in a private jet.

“What in the…” Steve began.

“Oh, man, you guys aren’t going to believe the week I’ve had,” Tony groaned.
A chorus of questions about how he was and what had happened resounded, which Tony took to in
typical fashion with a smirk.

“There was this ship graveyard,” Tony explained. “And Rhody saved the president, and I think the
president wants a suit now. And the Mandarin was an actor and the real Mandarin was a guy I pissed
off on Y2K and Pepper killed him and now she’s got this thing that makes her even hotter than
normal, but we’re working on it. And I destroyed all my suits. And Happy is going to be fine and
I’m going to have heart surgery, but other than that everything is really great and we’ll be back at the
Tower in time for New Years.”

The room was silent again for a minute before a chorus of accusations and demands about why he
had put himself in danger.

“Yeah, it’s nice to see you guys too,” Tony groaned. “Look, Pepper is sleeping off some residual
effects. I’m headed out to California to check on Happy and then we’re off to Seoul. There’s a
doctor there who might be able to handle my shrapnel thing. And Pepper’s overheating thing. Sort of
Pepper’s Christmas present. I’ll be back on the thirty-first. In the meantime, delight in the Christmas
miracle Tony Stark has brought you - a Starkmas Miracle, if you will, - and drink all the eggnog you
can for me.”

“You could have called us, Tony,” Steve pointed out, disappointed. “Why didn’t you ask us for
help?”

“Um… because I’m an egomaniac who likes to take credit for everyone?” Tony snorted. “Don’t
worry. You guys will get to handle the next several crises that emerge since I am currently suit-less
and may continue to remain so. It’s been an eye-opening couple of days.”

“At least you’re okay,” Bruce sighed, emerging from his containment cell for the first time in days.

“Good to see you, too Brucey-Bear,” Tony grinned. “How are you holding up?”

“Surprisingly better than you,” Bruce admitted.

“We’ll talk when I get back into town,” Tony said. “In the meantime, say hello to Dread Pirate Fury
if you talk to him before I do. I’m sure Coulson will be around with the debrief soon enough.”

“If the gifts Sigyn sent with you are destroyed we aren’t buying you more,” Loki said.

“Loki!” Sigyn said, furiously.

“Pepper was actually keeping all of them at the office so I wouldn’t go snooping,” Tony admitted,
“but thanks for being your usual prickly self, Reindeer Games. And please tell me someone has
made him watch Rudolph. Alright, I gotta go. See you guys later!”

“How does he do that?” Jane sighed as the video closed up. “Five minutes on the phone and I no
longer want to strangle him for being irresponsible.”

“Speak for yourself,” Steve grumbled, Natasha nodding in agreement.

“Well, I think he’s right,” Clint said, earning suspicious glances from everyone else. “About the
eggnog, at least. Everyone who can get wasted should do so. We’ve had a rough couple of days too.
I’m ready to find some catharsis at the bottom of a bottle.”
Promptly at eight in the morning of Christmas Day, Sigyn began rifling through the various pots and pans in the communal kitchen to start making a big breakfast before the ritual gift giving celebration. Darcy was helping her and the rest of the Avengers were sprawled out across the common rooms either in various states of sleep or relaxation. Steve and Thor hadn’t been able to sleep, both too wired from the events of the previous week. Natasha had closed her eyes but remained alert. Bruce had gone to sleep almost as soon as Tony alerted everyone he was okay while Clint and Jane had knocked themselves out with eggnog and what was left of Natasha’s birthday stash of vodka. Loki had fallen asleep, taking up most of the couch, with Sigyn at his side, and continued to sleep even after his wife had wiggled away from him and begun banging around to make breakfast.

“Good morn,” Thor said to the two women, standing up and stretching.

“Good morn to you as well,” Sigyn nodded to him before looking at Steve, “and the happiest of winter holidays to you, Captain.”

“Thanks,” Steve replied quietly tiptoeing around his friends in their various states of sleep.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded, motioning him forward. “Thor, turn on the holiday lights.” Thor nodded and plugged in the tree and associated decorations Darcy and Sigyn had strung up with help from various tower residents over the past week and a half. His task done, Thor went to polish off the remaining Gingerbread Pop Tarts as the others cooked.

Soon, pancakes, waffles, muffins, and Steve’s mom’s recipe for boxty were cooling on pans while Steve finished up the various sausages, cured ham, and bacon. Darcy was working to make eggs to each resident’s specification while Sigyn chopped up various fruits and made sure there was plenty of cream for pancake and waffle toppings. As the cooking progressed, more of the denizens of the Tower awoke. Bruce was first, offering his help in the way of getting started on the dishes so all the dishes dirtied by cooking would be clean by the time breakfast was served. Natasha woke up next joining the others in the kitchen to get started on an array of breakfast teas, hot chocolate, and coffee for the group. Jane rubbed her eyes, oriented herself with her surroundings and then offered to help set the table with Thor. By the time breakfast was finished, only Clint and Loki were still asleep and they both awoke upon hearing and smelling the various breakfast dishes being set around the table.

“Typical,” Natasha muttered as Clint rubbed his eyes and then jumped up, stealing an entire carafe of coffee from Bruce and then pushing everyone out of the way so he could get a seat nearest to the bacon. Loki had found something far more delectable after awakening and had wrapped an arm around Sigyn’s waist, doing his best to distract her with neck kisses as she sat a plate of pancakes down on the table.

“I can’t decide what smells more delectable,” Loki whispered into his wife’s ear. “This meal or you.”

“Be good,” Sigyn warned him. “After breakfast there are presents to open.” Loki sighed and then slid into a chair next to his wife. The only good reason, to Loki’s mind at least, for being up so early in the morning was to seduce his wife. He would tolerate being up so early for the promise of a hot breakfast and gifts, but he wouldn’t pretend to be happy about it.

“It’s a great spread, you guys,” Jane said, settling into a seat next to Thor.

“We’ve got good plans for lunch, too,” Darcy said. “In fact, some of it is already started. Sigyn’s a
great multi-tasker.”

“A what?” Loki demanded to know, not sure what the Midgardian term meant.

“It means she can handle multiple tasks at the same time,” Bruce explained.

“Oh,” Loki nodded before kissing the back of his wife’s hand. “That she can.”

“Seriously.” Clint said to Thor, “you guys need to see about updating that Allspeak charm. Especially for the Digital Age.”

“I have the same concerns and shall bring them before the Allfather,” Thor agreed.

“I am sure Asgard’s scholars will be keen to see how Midgardian language has changed in the last thousand years,” Sigyn nodded. “Getting a chance to do so would be a unique opportunity indeed.”

“Slow down, Clint,” Natasha said as the archer nearly choked on a forkful of sausage and eggs.

“But I want to open my presents!” Clint moaned. “So eat up, everyone. And quick.”

“You’re like a small child,” Natasha rolled her eyes before taking a sip of her tea.

“I understand, Friend Barton,” Thor smiled. “I, too, delight in seeing the happiness on the faces of others after they see what gifts I have bestowed upon them.”

“No, Clint is just selfish and wants to see what he got,” Natasha replied at the same time Loki coughed out something that sounded like “pompous ass.”

After some conversation - mainly about what kind of damage control was needed after Tony’s holiday escapade and what sort of duty Fury would have them pulling as a result - breakfast was finished. As Sigyn levitated the plates to the sink so they could begin washing and drying themselves, Clint dove into the pile of presents with his name on it. Natasha rolled her eyes at Clint’s childlike gusto when it came to digging through his gifts, but she knew that being a child of the foster system he had very few happy Christmases from his childhood he could remember. Natasha had none herself - not even aware of the holiday until she was older - and Bruce likewise had few happy Christmas memories.

Everyone else had opened about one gift by the time Clint had opened all of his gifts and had begun playing with the bargain bin suction cup bow and arrows Tony had gotten as a gag. In fact, Tony had gotten a gag gift for just about everyone shore up with a serious gift from Pepper that she had signed both their names to. It was a toss up as to who was the worst gift wrapper of the bunch. Thor had apparently just picked out colorful wrapping paper that he found amusing, and so half of everyone’s gifts from him had been wrapped in paper depicting cutesy zoo animals and “Happy First Birthday” on it. Clint had left most of his gifts in the bags they had been purchased in and wrapped those that remained in bits of old newspaper. Steve, of course, grinned at seeing Clint’s gifts because they reminded them of of the newspaper and plain brown paper most of the gifts of his childhood had been wrapped in.

Jane and Darcy easily won the best wrapped contest with gifts in themed paper based one each person with complimentary bows and ribbons. The gifts Sigyn and Loki had given as a couple were a close second, however. In addition to the gifts Sigyn had picked out and then forced Loki to help her wrap in spectacular fashion, everyone got a cheerful, glittery white card from the couple wishing them happy holidays. Loki and Sigyn had both signed their names in runes on the inside of the cards and Sigyn had written the name of the recipient on the outside of the card in runes as well. The combination of seeing their name in the Asgardian language as well as Sigyn’s beautiful, flowing
calligraphy was a delight in itself to the group. Loki’s hand, it appeared, was a bit more crisp and precise than his wife’s.

The bulk of Loki’s gift haul were books, though he didn’t mind as literature was usually what he liked to receive. Bruce had gotten Loki some copies of ancient Indian literature to read. Steve had gone with poetry, getting Loki copies of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Langston Hughes. Natasha had continued the poetry theme with a couple of Pushkin books as well as a collection of Anna Akhmatova. Despite the better judgement of just about everyone around him, Clint had decided to have a laugh by getting Loki a book about Houdini and his history as an escape artist and magician. Darcy and Jane had gone in together on a set of gourmet coffee mixes and a coffee mug with Shakespearean insults written across it. Tony had gotten Loki a sno-cone machine as a joke - though Sigyn was very pleased with it - and Pepper had evened out their gifts with some books by Tolkien, who Loki had developed an affinity for.

Sigyn’s gifts included some decorations for her garden from Steve, a selection of nail polishes from Natasha, a big stuffed teddy bear from Clint, a vegetarian cookbook from Bruce, a package of fluffy socks from Darcy, and a two-pack of flannel blankets from Jane. Pepper and Tony had gifted Sigyn a cute stuffed octopus, a book on fish of the North Atlantic and a promise to hit up the aquarium out in Brooklyn when it warmed up and Cap was back in town. This then prompted a twenty minute diatribe from Steve about how great Coney Island and Luna Park were back in the day.

The Asgardians had waited to present their winter gifts to the Midgardians on the appointed day but had already exchanged gifts themselves when the packages from Asgard had arrived for Yule. Loki received a book he had wanted from Sigyn and a Midgardian t-shirt from Thor that said “If they made a color darker than black I would be wearing it.” Loki had tried very hard not to smile when reading the shirt, which had made Thor extremely happy. Sigyn had gotten some new necklaces from her husband as well as a new set of alchemical glassware from Thor, who in turn had gotten a nice set of Midgardian work boots and a charm for the window of his apartments in the tower designed to bring happiness and good luck. Of course, Loki had decided not to adhere to the previously agreed upon plan that the three would exchange gifts with each other on Yule and then with everyone else at the Midgardian Winter Celebration. Sigyn found a box with two new necklaces in it tucked away at the bottom of her gift pile, and knew instantly who it was from.

“Loki!” Sigyn chastised. “We agreed! Gifts on Yule only!”

“And since when do I require some sort of holiday or festival to grant gifts to my wife?” Loki asked with a smirk and a raised brow.

“I do not think it would behoove you to respond,” Thor mentioned lightly to his sister-in-law as she opened her mouth to argue. “I believe you have been losing this argument for more than two hundred years.” Sigyn frowned, realizing Thor was right.

“Very well,” Sigyn shrugged, placing a peck on her husband’s cheek, “I suppose I shouldn’t expect you to follow the rules anyway.”

“Come,” Loki said, gesturing to his lap, “let me put your new gifts on you.” Sigyn rolled her eyes but did as her husband instructed, letting Loki move her braid out of the way before he put on the necklaces.

“Your brother gets his wife a lot of necklaces,” Steve mentioned offhandedly to Thor as Loki paused to admire his wife wearing her new jewelry. “Is that an Asgardian thing?”

“In a way,” Thor explained with a shrug. “Marriage customs vary across the Nine Realms, but one that Asgard, Vanaheim, Niðavellir, even Jotunheim and Muspelheim have is that of wedding
necklaces. Alfheim does not participate because they are far older and think themselves above such things and Midgard has too many traditions to keep up with.”

“Marriage necklaces?” Steve prompted. “Is that kind of like exchanging rings during the ceremony?”

“No,” Thor shook his head. “Some of the realms exchange rings though most participate in a handfasting with some kind of rope or silk. No, marriage necklaces I suppose are akin to your tradition of an engagement ring. Once the betrothal is sealed, marriage necklaces are exchanged to show the value the groom places on his bride. Or from one spouse to another, as the case may be. The more necklaces one provides their betrothed the more love is shared between the couple. Or, to be fair, the more wealthy the groom often is. The bride then wears the necklaces to the ceremony to show how well loved she is. When my parents were married, Father had granted Mother so many necklaces that she had to have four attendants behind her carrying the remaining necklaces on each arm to show them all off. After the marriage, the bride often wears the necklaces on anniversaries and other special dates for the couple. Or just a few around her neck for each day to show her husband’s love.”

“If that’s something done before a wedding, why does Loki do it now?” Steve asked.

“When Sigyn and Loki married, no one knew it was Loki disguised as Theoric,” Thor replied. “So the necklaces Sigyn wore to the ceremony were all ones Theoric had gifted to her. She returned them to his family afterwards, but I think it has long bothered my brother that Sigyn did not wear marriage necklaces gifted by him. As a result, he buys her necklaces whenever he can. I daresay she might have the largest collection of marriage necklaces of any woman on Asgard.”

“That’s very sweet of him,” Steve nodded.

“Alright, nerds,” Darcy announced, “more than half of you haven’t showered or changed clothes in days, so I think we should all regroup and then meet back here in an hour to continue the Christmas festivities.”

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It had taken a little more than an hour for the entire group to return to the common room, clean and refreshed. Several of them had been wearing the same outfit since Tony disappeared. Clint, Natasha, and even Steve and Bruce had to try to hide their laughter when Thor appeared wearing a rather ugly Christmas sweater. Rather than a prank from his brother or a contest between Darcy and Jane to see if he would wear it, Jane insisted Thor had picked out the abomination himself and delighted in it. The monstrosity looked like it was from the wrong side of the 80s with glitter and bead embellishments. Sigyn and Loki also emerged wearing matching green Scandinavian styles in his and hers, which Sigyn admitted Loki had picked out for them. More than one of the group wondered if there was some sort of connection between Asgard and Nordic sweater traditions or if it was just a coincidence.

Jane, Natasha, Clint, Thor and Loki set themselves up in communal living room to watch the remnants of the Christmas parade on TV followed by various history channel specials on Christmas traditions to educate Thor and Loki about the holiday. Steve, Bruce, Sigyn, and Darcy worked to put the finishing touches on the massive Christmas lunch that had been magically started almost as soon as breakfast was over. Sigyn and Darcy had apparently planned the meal together based on Steve’s recommendations for Christmas fare, as the super soldier had never really had a Christmas with a big,
fancy traditional meal owing to growing up poor, in the Depression and then serving as a soldier.

The meal included turkey as the main course. Darcy was used to ham, growing up in Virginia, and while Steve had said goose had been more traditional for his family, it was decided turkey was a happy medium. Sigyn also apparently had a thing about geese, which Darcy learned during the planning phase in between worrying over Tony’s possible death. Sigyn seemed to have some sort of PTSD flashback whenever the word “goose” was uttered, and Loki and Thor advised not to bring it up. There had apparently been an incident when Sigyn was quite small and first living in Asgard. It was taboo to speak of it where she might hear. So, turkey it was for the main meat.

Along with that, Steve had wanted an oyster cocktail - similar to a shrimp cocktail and apparently the Christmas appetizer of the rich and fancy in the early 1900s. Sigyn delighted in the concept, despite Darcy and even Bruce’s initial misgivings about shellfish. Accompanying that were dressing, gravy, mashed potatoes, cranberry relish, green beans, buttered squash, fruit salad, spiced apple sauce, a sweet potato casserole and rolls. For dessert, there was to be a yule log cake and plum pudding over spiced cider. In fact, Steve had already made much of the plum pudding and brandy butter three days before, using his mother’s old recipe. Every so often that morning, he would disappear off to douse it with another layer of alcohol and, much to Jane and Darcy’s delight, promised it would be brought to the table on fire as per tradition.

About five minutes before the meal was ready to go, JARVIS pinged in with the announcement that Tony was calling. The AI briefly hijacked the widescreen TV so the group could see Tony, who was apparently in the hospital room checking on Happy before he and Pepper took their flight to Seoul that evening. Pepper had stepped out of the room briefly to deal with some PR damage control and give some messages to those who would be handling the running of SI while she had their brief but much needed retreat. Happy was still sleeping in his hospital bed, though he definitely looked better than when Tony had first contacted them about the attack.

“Merry Christmas, Tony,” Steve said before Tony could even greet the group.

“Merry Christmas to you guys,” Tony said. “Thanks for the haul, by the way. Pepper really liked the Hermes scarf and she’s definitely going to need all that relaxing bath stuff later. And thanks for the collection of cool silver dragon steins, Siggy Stardust.”

“My brothers made them,” Sigyn informed Tony. “They are branching out into more decorative items as of late.”

“Well, tell them they’re regular artisans,” Tony said. “Great detail.”

“Yes,” Loki snorted. “Artisans. When they aren’t causing trouble.”

“I thought you liked mischief,” Tony smirked.

“Not when it involves him being trapped down a mine shaft for a whole day,” Thor smirked. Loki scowled at his brother’s head and resisted the urge to throw a pillow at him.

“So,” Steve said, switching gears. “You and Pepper are alright? Do you need someone to come and hang out with Happy until you get back? And are you sure you’ll be back for New Years? You don’t have to come throw a big party, Tony, especially not if you need serious medical care. Your health should come first.”

“Pep already gave me this lecture. Followed by Rhodes,” Tony pointed out. “Once he’s done with his debrief and mountain of paperwork, Rhodey is meeting us in Seoul. Your buddy Coulson is stopping by before Pep and I fly out for a debrief, and he’s got some West Coast SHIELD folks
hanging around Happy just in case.”

“And Pepper?” Natasha asked. “How is she doing?”

“Physically, she’s stable,” Tony said. “Mentally, I’m sure there’s going to be some recovery needed there. But I’m not too worried. There’s this doctor in Seoul whose pioneering some pretty neat stuff. I think she’ll be able to get Pep and me sorted out in no time.”

“Helen Cho?” Banner nodded. “I read her paper on creating synthetic tissues by grafting a simulacrum of organic tissue so it bonds. It’s really groundbreaking work on the nano-molecular level. I know she’s already been using the cellular regeneration technology on burn victims.”

“I understood maybe half of those words,” Clint said before turning to Steve. “You get any of that?”

“Don’t look at me for an explanation,” Steve snorted. “I just learned about the whole DNA helix thing a few months ago.”

“At least you had a biology class in high school,” Clint snorted. “They don’t teach biology in the circus. Though I’m sure it would be a great place to do so…”

“I’ve already had a video call with Dr. Cho,” Tony assured them. “She thinks she can work out what’s going on with Pep. Actually, she said removing all my shrapnel might be easier than what’s going on with Pep. But given that JARVIS was kind enough to download as much of AIM’s data as he could before we lit that place up like a Christmas tree, I think we’re halfway there to figuring things out.”

“Anything to help Ms. Potts, Sir,” JARVIS intoned.

“Well, if your healer friend cannot figure out what needs to be done,” Sigyn offered. “I am sure I could write to Eir and the Allmother for their advice. I am sure there is something in the wealth of healing manuals and texts in Asgard or Vanaheim that could help.”

“Thanks for the offer, Mrs. Mischief,” Tony nodded. “Pep and I appreciate it. Hopefully, it won’t come to that, though.”

“We’ve already begun sifting through some of that AIM data,” Pepper informed Tony. “It might give us some valuable information about AIM, the Ten Rings and some of the other terrorist organizations they may have been working with. I’ll be sure to pass on any pertinent information.”

“So long as it meets my SHIELD clearance,” Tony snorted.

“We actually uncovered something really creepy already thanks to Steve,” Clint admitted.

“HYDRA had a subdivision - one of Strucker’s special projects - known as AIM, which were the German initials for the project,” Steve explained. “Literally translated, it was some sort of internal department for identification and experimentation with new medical technologies. Possibly to help Strucker not be so red in the face. I kind of busted up one of their bases…”

“When you and my dad took that airplane joy ride over the alps?” Tony nodded. “Why haven’t I heard this before?”

“AIM was the department’s official name, but it wasn’t exactly an official department,” Steve said. “Like I said, one of Strucker’s special projects he kept from the higher ups. You know, so they wouldn’t know his botched serum turned him into a giant red skeleton. In most of his writings, it was referred to as Bienenstock or the beehive because everyone who worked in it had to wear these
weird yellow chemical suits to protect themselves. Something about how they all looked like worker bees in the hive. Damn Nazis.”

“What is a Not-See?” Thor asked. “Is it invisible?”

“Giant red skeleton? Sounds like being invisible might be an improvement for such an odious creature,” Loki huffed.

“I’ll give the history lesson later,” Bruce sighed.

“So, Killian’s company has the same initials as a creepy Nazi medical experimentation group,” Tony shrugged. “It’s weird, yeah, but doesn’t mean anything. Hell, Stark Industries has the same initials as Sports Illustrated. Better believe I used that sort of line to get in with a few swimsuit edition models.”

“It also has the same initials as the Système international d'unités,” Bruce pointed out, with a glare at Tony.

“Yeah, but I seriously doubt the Metric System looks hot in a swimsuit,” Tony snorted.

“Did you know Killian’s middle name is Gunther?” Natasha asked Tony.

“No, but I kind of feel sorry for him now,” Tony snorted. “Aldrich Gunther Killian? His parents must have hated him to give him a name like that.”

“Aldrich Gunther Killian II, actually. He was named for his grandfather,” Natasha continued, “Dr. Aldrich Gunther Killian, or Dr. Albrecht Gunther von Kalnein as he was known when he was worker for Strucker at the original AIM.”

“Um… what?” Tony said.

“Operation Paperclip,” Bruce groaned. “Sure, they’re Nazis, but they’ve got good brains in their heads. Let’s secretly bring them to the U.S. to work in our space program, medicine, and technology because what they did is less important if it helps us beat the Russians. No offense, Tasha.”

“None taken,” Natasha smirked. “Dr. von Kalnein was Austrian by birth. Grew up outside Salzburg. Joined the Nazi party while still in medical school and found his way into Strucker’s medical experimentation division. After the war, his research into rapid healing technology prompted him to be snapped up by the U.S. government. The changed his name to Aldrich Killian and put him to work in a government lab. One of his first projects was a team effort to replicate the Super Soldier Serum. By the 1970s, he was no longer working for the government and instead for Austin-based Modern Pharmaceutical Solutions, which changed its name to FuturePharm in the 1980s. Your Killian did an internship there in pre-med.”

“Holy fucking shit,” Tony groaned. “I mean, Jesus Christ.”

“That was Steve’s reaction, too,” Clint nodded.

“Without the blasphemy,” Steve mentioned.

“Are you not supposed to invoke the name of this god on his date of birth?” Thor frowned.

“Well, Cap, if I’d have known he was a Nazi spawn I would have given him an extra punch in the face for you,” Tony said. “Pep is so going to freak out when I tell her this whole Extremis thing might have roots in creepy illegal Nazi experimentation.”
“Well, she’s always welcome to talk with Steve and me about it,” Bruce said.

“You guys should start a support group for people who had weird reactions to scientific experiments,” Tony nodded.

“I’m sorry to give you this news, Tony,” Steve admitted. “I’m sure Pepper is having a hard enough time as it is, dealing with all of this.”

“We’ll figure it out. It’s what you do, I guess,” Tony shrugged. “In the meantime, I kind of wish I’d gotten around to digitizing all of Howard’s old notes and correspondences in stuff. That way JARVIS could search for it and I wouldn’t have to deal with the Old Man’s stuff. I don’t know if there is anything about AIM - present or past - in there. Howard was long gone by the time I met Killian Jr. though if Senior had any dealings with the serum he might have talked to old Howie.”

“We can go through them if you like,” Steve offered.

“They’re here at the California facility,” Tony sighed. “I might see if I can have someone ship them out. In the meantime, J-Man, make sure I look into digitizing all that stuff. I’m sure we can find someone willing to do it.”

“I’m great with a scanner and accept overtime pay!” Darcy announced from the kitchen.

“Alright, we’ll talk when I get back,” Tony nodded. “You guys have a Merry Christmas and I’ll get back in touch when I can or if anything happens.”

“Be safe,” Steve urged before the rest of the group said their goodbyes.

“Alright, enough work and sadness,” Sigyn asked as Tony’s face disappeared. “Let us eat and be merry today!”

“Huzzah!” Thor grinned “May each and everyone one of us be blessed by the gods!”

“Thor,” Clint snickered, “did you just misquote Tiny Tim?”
Thanks to Tony, Dr. Cho and some Skyping with Banner, Pepper was back to her mostly normal self in a few days. The next day, Tony went under for open heart surgery to remove his shrapnel. Despite Pepper and Rhodey convincing him to stay in Seoul, Tony insisted on being on the first flight to New York on New Year’s Eve Day so he could be there for the countdown party schedule at Stark Tower. Pepper insisted everything could be cancelled, but Tony wouldn’t hear of it. Pepper had pointed out most doctors wanted patients to wait four to six weeks to fly after surgery, but Tony had pointed out Cho’s cradle technology had probably made his heart healthier than it was before he went to Afghanistan in the first place. She had also cleared him for flight, much to Pepper’s annoyance.

For Pepper’s sake, however, Tony was doing some of the things she asked. He was wearing the god-awful socks that were said to reduce ankle swelling after surgery and was doing the stupid exercises she had read about online. More fruits and veggies were coming to his diet and alcohol was taken out of it completely - at least for his recovery phase. He had no problem letting Rhodes do all the heavy lifting of baggage at the airport and Tony had always hired someone to do his chores for him, so that wasn’t a problem. Unfortunately for Tony, the fact that he refused to heed Pepper’s concerns about staying in Seoul and flying meant that Pepper was being very strict on the no-sex-for-four-to-six-weeks rule following heart surgery. Tony wasn’t happy about it but considering everything he’d put her through since - well, since they’d met - Tony decided he could make the sacrifice.

The entire second half of his December had been chaotic and weird, so it warmed Tony’s now perfectly healthy heart to walk into the communal living area that afternoon and find his house guests gathered in a way that, for them at least, was normal and unassuming. Steve, Darcy, and Natasha were pouring over various notes and texts - both physical and on StarkPads - related to AIM and their possible other nefarious connections. Bruce was consulting with them as well, though he was mainly focused on finally making some e-book purchases with the gift cards he had gotten for Christmas. Clint was aslepp under the dining room table where they were all gathered.

Jane was curled up with a blanket and some warm tea, reading through a stack of astronomy journals she needed to catch up on. Sigyn was sitting opposite her on the couch, also curled up with tea and a blanket and reading an ancient grimoire that closely resembled the witch’s book in “Hocus Pocus.” Tony tried not to imagine what the badly sewn together covering was made out of. Everyone in the room seemed calm, collected, and completely ignorant to the fact that Thor was angrily shouting as he chased Loki around the room. The brothers catapulted themselves over furniture, nearly knocked into priceless antiques and Loki even slid through Thor’s legs like a baseball player stealing a base, causing the slightly older god to let out a shout of rage. The chase resumed putting Loki on one end of the kitchen island and Thor on the other, putting them at a temporary stalemate as each brother echoed the moves of the other.
“Return the talking box changing device!” Thor demanded of Loki from across the island.

“Never!” Loki called back.

“I wish to watch the game upon the gridded irons!” Thor said.

“You have watched nothing but that for the past three days!” Loki shot back. “It should be someone else’s turn to control the talking box!”

“And that person is you,” Thor snorted. “No one wishes to watch your marathon of Midgardians choosing new dwellings, Loki!”

“Just because you have no eye for interior design does not mean the rest of us should be relegated to watching uninformed idiots clamor over an animal skin” Loki huffed. “Anyone who wanted to see that could just follow you and your useless friends on a hunt!”

“What is going on here?” Tony stage whispered to no one in particular.

“Loki’s developed a fondness for HGTV,” Darcy explained, not even looking up from the papers she was analyzing. “House Hunters, specifically.”

“No, I gathered that,” Tony said. “I was more curious as to why you guys were letting the two of them run around like wild rhinos - rhinoceroses? rhinoceri? - while they fight. They’re each pretty single-handedly capable of destroying everything around them.”

“Thor has been watching a lot of football,” Clint admitted from the floor. “I mean a lot.”

“And Loki’s been letting out purposefully loud, dramatic sighs every five minutes because Thor is watching football,” Natasha said. “It was getting annoying.”

Loki suddenly bolted away from the kitchen, holding the remote up over his head like some kind of torch or weapon. Thor lunged forward to capture Loki, but missed him by a hair’s breadth. The thunder god let out a positively shrill shriek as he tumbled face first onto the floor, leaving dent shaped like his head in it. Loki cackled and then shot past the dining area and toward the opposite side of the room, jumping over and then hiding behind a recliner. Not one of the people gathered around the table to go over all the AIM documents looked up at this. Tony wondered how long Thor and Loki had been chasing each other around the room before anyone had noticed. Enraged at Loki’s escape, Thor shot up from the floor and chased after his brother, cursing the entire way.

“And how are Jane and Sigyn coping with this?” Tony asked.

“They both got tired of the fighting,” Bruce said. “Sigyn put a spell on both of them that’s basically the same thing as the Cone of Silence. She and Jane can’t hear anyone who isn’t sitting on the couch.”

“To be fair, Thor and Loki haven’t actually hurt anyone,” Steve pointed out.

“Yeah, just left a dent the size of Thor’s head in my floor,” Tony snorted. Darcy, Steve, Natasha, Bruce and Clint looked up from where they were sitting for the first time and over at the impression in the marble floor roughly the same size and shape as Thor’s head.

“If it helps,” Steve pointed out, “Loki’s really into interior decorating now, so I’m sure he knows how to patch it.”

“What is going on?” Pepper demanded as the elevator doors opened.
She and Rhodes walked out of the elevator to where Thor had Loki in a headlock and Loki was attempting to wrap his legs around his brother’s neck so he could Black Widow him to the ground. Loki’s arms were longer than Thor’s and so he had held out the remote as far away from Thor as he could. Thor seemed to be having a hard time trying to subdue his brother and reach for the remote at the same time. Pepper’s exclamation and the way her Louboutins were tapping against the floor drew the attention of both men, frozen in an extremely ridiculous pose.

“He started it!” Both brothers said to Pepper at the same time.

“Well,” Pepper said, striding forth and taking the remote from Loki’s hand, “I’m ending it. No TV until tonight.”

“But…” Thor protested.

“Good job, Thor,” Loki spat, wiggling his way out of Thor’s now relaxed grasp. “You had to ruin it for everyone!”

“Tony,” Rhodes said, “if I ever come to visit you and something completely off the wall is not going on at your place, I’m going to know something is really, really wrong.”

“I live in a magical world, Rhodey,” Tony smirked.

“Lady Pepper!” Sigyn said, noticing her friend for the first time and eliminating the silencing charm. Jane looked up and around, bewildered and then also seemed glad to see Pepper. Sigyn flounced over and hugged Pepper. “I am glad to hear you are well. Please let me know if there is anything I can do.”

“Thanks,” Pepper smiled, “and thank you for offering to help. I think I’m sorted out now, though.”

“Perhaps some day I can meet this Healer Cho,” Sigyn nodded. “Her tool sounds not terribly different from a Soul Forge.”

“Soul Forge?” Rhodey frowned.

“Best I can tell,” Jane explained, “it works somewhat akin to a quantum field generator. But it also has molecular regeneration abilities not so different from Dr. Cho’s cradle.”

“The Soul Forge is designed to heal both the physical and metaphysical,” Sigyn nodded. “Though its metaphysical applications are generally relegated to seiðr and related illnesses. The recalibration of the psyche is much too delicate a procedure for a Soul Forge.”

“Um, okay,” Rhodey frowned.

“Basically, don’t go to Asgard expecting treatment for PTSD,” Tony translated.

“But they can put your head back on you so long as it’s only mostly chopped off,” Clint offered.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said. “I’m going to go put my stuff in my room… as long as it’s still available?”

“Always for you, Sugar Bear,” Tony replied. “Put up my stuff while you’re at it?”

“Tony,” Pepper frowned. She looked at Loki and Thor. “The two of you aren’t doing anything. Take our bags to our rooms.”

Loki opened his mouth to protest being employed like a servant, but a harsh glare from his wife shut him up. Loki knew that Tony and Pepper had been through an ordeal as of late, and he sympathized
with them, he truly did. In fact, Loki knew how Tony must have felt to be without his main source of
power - his technology - and still have to find out a way to save his beloved against a frightening
enemy. Loki didn’t want to imagine how he would feel if some nameless wizard infected Sigyn with
a curse as terrifying and vile as the Extremis one that had been laid on Lady Pepper. He, too, would
have gone to great lengths to find a cure as well. True to form, Thor was already gathering up as
many bags as he could to show he was better at brute strength than his younger brother. While he
carried less baggage, Loki at least attempted to carry his goods in a fashion that would prevent
anything from being broken or damaged.

“IT is good to see Sir Stark and Lady Pepper well,” Thor commented off hand as the two brothers
made their way up to the penthouse.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “I am glad the healer was able to set things to rights.” Thor nodded and was
quiet for a moment.

“Sir Stark and Lady Pepper have been through much together,” Thor said.

“They have," Loki nodded. Thor was again very quiet and Loki sighed. “What are you trying to get
at, exactly?”

“Sir Stark attracts much trouble as the Man of Iron, though he strives to do good. This foul Creature
of the Northern Speech targeted him specifically because of that,” Thor said. “Others have as well. It
seems almost kinder to have sent Lady Pepper away for her own protection. I am surprised a woman
with such intelligence and skills as she has has left herself.”

“Even if Stark was foolish enough to send the keeper of his keys away, I doubt very much she
would listen,” Loki snorted. “She is an intelligent woman, after all. And I find those tend to be the
most stubborn variety.”

“You have done so, though,” Thor pointed out. “Sent Sigyn away because of danger.”

“Oh, I have tried,” Loki huffed. “It never works out. Sigyn is far craftier than most realize. She may
even be better than Mother at sticking her nose into business she has been begged to have no part
in.”

“My lady Jane is the same way as well, I fear,” Thor admitted. “After all that has happened with
Stark, I fear… I fear her association with me might lead Jane to trouble or to be hurt. I do not wish
for that to happen.”

“Please,” Loki rolled his eyes. “There are a thousand more reasons for someone to wish harm to your
Lady Jane than the mere fact she shares your company - for whatever mysterious reason. Lady Jane
has nearly successfully created the first bridge between realms not completely under the thumb of the
Allfather. She probably has a better understanding of the mechanics of Bifrost travel than half of
Asgard - yourself included - and she is very close to mastering portal usage and interdimensional
theory sans seiðr. Not a very easy thing to do. No, anyone with a half a brain would seek her out not
for you but because of her discoveries. In fact, it’s a wonder the Allfather himself hasn’t carted her
off to some dungeon so that Midgardians aren’t suddenly beaming themselves up to Asgard for a
lark.”

“I am… not exactly comforted by your words, brother,” Thor admitted as they set the bags they were
carrying down in the antechamber of Tony’s rooms.

“Oh, I see how things are,” Loki huffed. “I am a traitor and a coward when I lie, but when I tell the
truth I am unfeeling and unkind.”
“I suppose it is good for Jane, with all the knowledge she possesses, to have a protector,” Thor reasoned. “Someone should be there to aid her when those who would do her harm or abuse her knowledge threaten.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “I suppose that’s why she hired the Lady Darcy.” Thor glared at his brother as Loki let out a laugh and jetted back to the elevator. Thor couldn’t help but smirk at his brother’s retreating form and then chase after him.

Over a late lunch featuring all of his and Pepper’s favorite take out food, Tony explained his entire Mandarin-Killian-AIM debacle to the assembled group in greater detail - some of those details being overly embellished by Tony’s unique flair for storytelling. When Tony was finished summing up his experiences, Natasha informed him that there really weren’t any other new red flags that had been raised about AIM and Killian, other than the fact the company had done a few consulting projects for Oscorp and Hammer Industries in the past. SHIELD had already conducted an interview with Oscorp CEO Norman Osborn and his lawyers at their headquarters just a few blocks over from Stark Tower.

Osborn said his company had only brought AIM in for a consulting project that was aiming to help develop a biological/chemical compound that would help build muscle mass, mainly to help treat muscle wasting diseases like muscular dystrophy but also possibly for the bodybuilding/health market. Osborn said he never met with Killian directly, and that the partnership had been broken off after about a year-and-a-half after the Oscorp Board of Directors decided it wasn’t viable. The project had been scrapped, mainly due to the board’s lack of confidence in the results AIM was putting into the project. He said the board felt AIM was more concerned with furthering its own goals than actually helping Oscorp with the project, allowing Oscorp to do most of the work but still wanting to take credit. Hammer would be interviewed once SHIELD got things cleared with the supermax prison where he was now being held. Tony really wanted to be a fly on the wall for that meeting, but Fury had decided Tony’s presence might not get the wanted results.

“Honestly,” Tony admitted, “I’m surprised Osborn let anyone consult with him. Guy is just about paranoid people are going to steal ideas from him. Not exactly one for group projects. Though he’s got a mean chip shot. Seriously, if you ever end up playing a charity golf game, he’s the guy you want on your team.”

“Rich guys,” Rhodey rolled his eyes.

“What is golf?” Loki asked. “I assume one uses a club based on the term…”

“You are not allowed to teach him golf,” Clint ordered. “He’s snooty enough without having a country club membership.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce shrugged. “The driving range can be a good place to channel anger.”

“We’ll take you guys to play putt-putt when it gets warmer,” Tony promised the Asgardians. “You’ll like it Cap. You’ve got to avoid things like windmills and there are cool things on the course…”

“I know what mini golf is, Tony,” Steve rolled his eyes. “I even played it. They used to call it Tom Thumb Golf, and me an’ the Chorus Girls played a course in Rochester when we did a show up there.”

“Well, I learned something new today,” Clint said. “Which brings me to my grand total of new things I can learn in one day. So, when does this New Year’s shindig of yours get underway, Stark?”
“Did you not already celebrate the coming of the New Year on your Old Holy Evening?” Thor asked, confused.

“Maybe the Midgardians your old man came into contact with did,” Tony said.

“New Years on January was implemented by the Catholic Church modeling after ancient Rome,” Jane explained. “Though some groups still celebrated March 25 - known as Lady Day - as the date of the New Year or at least the beginning of the fiscal or political year.”

“It’s the Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary,” Steve explained. “Though we always celebrated it in August because we were Irish.”

“They changed the calendars from the ancient Roman one to the Gregorian one in the 1500s,” Jane said. “Though some didn’t catch up until the 1700s.”

“And a lot of cultures do still consider other dates to be the New Year,” Bruce nodded. “A lot of east Asian cultures on lunar calendars hold their New Years Day sometime around February while others in east and southeast Asia hold it anywhere from March to Mid April. And then religious New Years, like Islam’s Muharram or Judaism’s Rosh Hashanah can fall on different days every year.”

“The Asgardian New Year does not begin for another two days,” Thor said. “It is twelve days after Yule.”

“Well, we aren’t on Asgard are we?” Sigyn pointed out as Loki added under his breath “Thank the Norns.”

“Right, you guys and your different moon cycles and whatnot,” Tony nodded. “Our new calendar begins tonight. At midnight.”

“How does one celebrate an Asgardian New Year?” Jane asked curiously.

“Oh, in the usual manner,” Loki snorted. “Feasting, drinking, dancing, setting things on fire…”

“So, the way we do New Years won’t be completely foreign to you,” Clint smirked.

“Joyful,” Loki harrumphed.

Loki had not been keen on the idea of night of feasting, drinking and partying among the residents and employees of Stark Tower right up until Tony mentioned that his New Year’s Party was formal-wear only. Then, Loki had taken Sigyn back to their chambers and spent the better part of the afternoon trying to determine which one of his lavish suits would best put every Midgardian in attendance to shame. It was only after Loki picked out a highly embellished Dolce and Gabbana gold and black suit - which Tony later said looked like something about of their Tsarist Russia Uniform collection - that Sigyn even bothered to select her own outfit, quickly settling on a gold dress that matched her husband’s. Loki did so love it when they matched and given that he was going to be subjected to an evening of drunken, dancing strangers as well as Thor in full Asgardian-feast-and-party mode, Sigyn decided it was best to begin buttering Loki up early. In fact, to even further calm her husband Sigyn allowed him to braid her hair rather than doing it up magically herself. Something about braiding his wife’s hair, tying various ornaments and ribbons through it, always was calming to Loki. It also allowed him to playfully tease his wife and for the two of them to spend a few intimate moments together. Sigyn didn’t exactly mind the entire process either. Before she had married, she and her sisters often sat together preparing for nightly feasts or
special occasions on Asgard, gossiping and giggling as they dressed each other’s hair and helped each other into gowns. While it had always been a fun process with her sisters, Sigyn found it took on a completely different tone when she allowed her husband to help her dress and style herself. Loki had a way of making the entire thing overtly sensual. And though she would never admit it to them, he had a better fashion sense than several of her sisters.

“IT looks divine,” Sigyn smiled, patting her hair once her husband had finished his creation.

“You look divine,” Loki replied, taking her hand and kissing it. “It’s a terrible shame that the Asgardian court will miss out on your sumptuous appearance this night. Not that any of them could ever fully appreciate your beauty.”

“If you keep up with all that flattery,” Sigyn teased, “someone might start to believe you.”

“I suppose we should leave now,” Loki sighed. “It wouldn’t do to arrive after Thor has eaten all of the canapés. What Midgard’s fascination with miniature food is, I’ll never know.”

“I’m sure Sir Stark would be willing to put some massive beast on a spit to roast if it made you feel more at home,” Sigyn smirked. “He does love to accommodate his guests.” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I know we’ve spent all this time getting ready, but perhaps Stark wouldn’t mind if we missed his little party,” Loki replied, “so we can better accommodate each other?”

“We should at least put in an appearance as we said we would,” Sigyn pointed out. “After all, I want to show off how lovely my hair is.”

Loki pretended to be completely put out by this suggestion, but still escorted Sigyn to the elevator and then up to the party, keeping his palm on the small of her back but occasionally venturing a finger or two lower in teasing. The party was already well underway with various Stark employees scattered throughout the party deck. Clint and Natasha were already over by the bar while poor Steve, who arrived five minutes earlier than the invite and found himself and Pepper the only people there, was being mobbed by a strange group of Stark employees consisting of several young women under thirty who thought he was handsome and several men over fifty who wanted to see if there was any chance Cap had encountered their dads during the war. Bruce was comfortably relaxing with some of the members of the R&D department, talking about new scientific research and various projects. Darcy was hanging out with several young women her age from the PR department who she had made friends with.

Rhodey was chatting with some of the other MIT grads who had come to work at SI. The following day, Rhodey had volunteered to fly out and stay with Happy until he was well enough to come back to New York. Since the military was doing a report on what had happened, Rhodes had been placed on a temporary administrative leave with pay. he was also being invited to the White House in a few months for a ceremony. Tony insisted Rhodey should have gotten a promotion to general at this point, what with saving the president and his heroism at the Stark Expo. Rhodes attempts to explain that the next rank was in fact brigadier general and not general fell on deaf ears as Tony waxed philosophical on starting a letter writing campaign to the Senate - one annoying senator in particular - on Rhodey’s behalf.

Loki himself was not sure where Sigyn meant for them to end up. During the last party of Stark’s they had attended, he had sat in a corner and been given a rather wide berth from the other guests while Sigyn flitted about from person to person, group to group, occasionally stopping to flirt with him or see if he wanted his food and drink refreshed. It had worked out rather well, but then again, Thor was at this particular soiree. And despite the fact that Loki didn’t mind being a wallflower, Thor always seemed to think it was his duty to ensure Loki was included in festivities. Therefore,
Loki had a feeling Thor was going to try to drag him into the thick of whatever this celebration entailed. Sigyn had been waved over by Darcy, introducing the pair of them by their aliases. Loki stood on the periphery of the group of women while they admired each other’s outfits. Taking a drink from a passing serving tray, Loki scanned the room to get the lay of the land. His surveillance was interrupted by a boisterous voice from across the room.

“Til árs ok friðar!” Thor thundered at Tony before going to shake the hands of several other people gathered around.

“What was that?” one of the girls in the group asked.

“A traditional New Years greeting,” Loki explained absent-mindedly. “It means ‘for a good year and peace.’”

“Victoria and Loren are from Norway, as you know,” Darcy explained rapidly. “So, they’re a little bit more familiar with some Asgardian things than the rest of us.”

“Have you ever heard Thor speak Asgardian? Is it really similar to Old Norse?” one of the girls asked curiously. Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes and call her a simpleton.

“There are similarities between the two,” Sigyn explained. “In fact, there are some commonalities between current Norwegian and Asgardian as they both have similarities to old Norse. Though there are different pronunciations and spelling. And… I would assume both languages have changed somewhat in a thousand years. Language is rather fluid, after all.”

“It’s so weird to think he’s an alien,” one of the other girls said. “Do you think it’s true of other mythological figures? Cuz there was this picture of Apollo in one of my college text books and if that guy turned out to be real, I wouldn’t mind him falling out of the sky and into my lap.” The girls giggled as Sigyn and Darcy made their excuses to greet Thor and Jane, Loki begrudgingly.

“You’ve got everything packed up, right?” Jane asked as soon as they approached.

“Packed, loaded and ready to leave tomorrow,” Darcy nodded.

“What is happening?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“Quadrantids meteor shower,” Jane explained. “I need to do some additional readings. Darcy and I are heading out to the Custer Institute on Long Island for two nights of stargazing.”

“This whole stay up all night party deal is actually great for orienting our sleep schedule,” Darcy nodded. “Especially since we’ll have to be up all night for two nights in a row.”

“The showers peak is supposed to be on the third, but I don’t want to miss anything,” Jane reasoned.

“We’re staying at a cute little B&B Jane let me pick out as a consolation for the fact we aren’t going to the beach,” Darcy said.

“Darcy, it’s not supposed to get higher than 40 degrees,” Jane rolled her eyes. “Why on earth would you want to go to the beach?”

“Well, I hope your fact-finding mission… er… finds all the facts you require,” Thor said gently.

“If you can keep it from being cloudy, it’d be much appreciated Big Guy,” Darcy informed him.

“You must tell me of the observatory when you return,” Sigyn said excitedly. “And all about the
shower! And naturally, if there is any help I can do with your readings…”

“I appreciate it,” Jane grinned. “Though I’m sure most of it is going to be just Darcy and me complaining about how cold it is and how short the shower was. The things I do for science.”

“Come, brother,” Thor suggested to Loki. “I believe we should fetch libations for the womenfolk.”

“I am sorry,” Loki responded annoyed, “who is this brother of yours? I don’t believe we have been properly introduced. My name is Loren Olson, lately of Norway. And you are?”

“You aren’t exactly keeping up the charade, Thor,” Sigyn agreed pointedly. Thor sighed.

“It is nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Olson,” Thor grumbled. “I am Thor of Asgard. Now, would you like to help me fetch libations for the ladies?”

“Perhaps the ladies would also like some finger sandwiches, crudité and antipasto?” Loki inquired.

“You’d probably like the crab puffs and salmon tartare,” Darcy said to Sigyn. “And grab the piggies in a blanket for me if you see them.”

“The what?” Loki frowned.

“I shall show you,” Thor said excitedly, pulling his brother away from the ladies. “They are like hot dogs but in miniature and wrapped with fluffy biscuits! It is most delectable!”

“I will not doubt your word,” Loki huffed.

He eyed up a passing tray of Italian meatballs, grabbing a few sticks for himself as he followed Thor through the crowd. Somewhere between when they acquired the drinks at the bar and began chasing various waiters around the room, Thor had acquired a tray of his own and was using it to balance the various drinks and hors d'oeuvres they were collecting for the ladies. Loki and Thor ate what they could on the way, and while there were a fair amount of fish and vegetarian options for Sigyn, Thor had to grab Loki by the collar and pull him away from more than one server after Loki became very specific and annoying in his questioning of each food’s origin.

“Where have you two been?” Sigyn asked worriedly.

“Apologies,” Loki said smoothly, handing his wife her drink and a plate of little nibbles he had procured for her.

“Yes,” Thor frowned, “Loki was interrogating a server.”

“He asked if we wanted to know anything about the dish because he knew all about it and could tell us,” Loki huffed. “How was I to know he would find me inquiries to difficult for his simple mind.”

“You asked him what quadrant of the North Sea the haddock came from,” Thor pointed out.

“And he didn’t know!” Loki huffed, as if the entire thing was a major insult.

“Why would that have mattered?” Jane asked. “What quadrant it came from?”

“He asked us if we wanted to know anything,” Loki shrugged. “Why would one pretend to be an expert on a subject they truly knew nothing about?”

“I think he meant for you to ask stuff like if the fish was wild caught or where the farm that made the cheese is located,” Darcy pointed out. “Not, like, the name of the cow who made the cheese.”
“And why wouldn’t he know the name of the cow?” Loki inquired, “Especially since he said he was well versed in the dish.”

“Loki asked where the fish was from originally,” Thor explained. “And when he said ‘The North Sea,’ Loki wanted him to narrow it down further.”

“I bet the fool couldn’t find the North Sea on a map,” Loki huffed.


“Yes,” Sigyn said calmly. “My husband would apparently like to know what quadrant of the North sea the haddock comes from.”

“Why do you need to know that Lokes?” Tony asked.

“It’s apparently part of a battle of wits with a server,” Sigyn explained. “Very imperative, I’m certain.”

“Well, if it’s that important to you, Mischief, I’ll ask the caterer,” Tony said.

“And find out what’s in this chive sour cream dip,” Darcy said. “Tell Pepper I’ll give her my first born if she gets me the recipe.”

“How about I get you the recipe and you keep your firstborn,” Tony suggested. “If the kid turns out like you, Pepper’ll pawn it off on me and we both know that’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I am surprised at you, husband,” Sigyn said, popping another shrimp into her mouth as Tony stalked off. “Annoying a servant like that.”

“I apologize I was attempting to engage in some manner of wits with a Midgardian,” Loki huffed. “I will remember not to do so in the future.”

“I’m sure there are better ways for your to make your mischief than harassing Sir Stark’s staff,” Sigyn pointed out.

“Yeah, why don’t you freeze up the drinks at the bar or something,” Darcy nodded. Loki choked on the deviled egg he had just swallowed.

“How do you know about that?” Loki demanded, still half choking.

“How would Loki freeze anything?” Thor laughed. “He doesn’t have his…” Jane and Darcy both winced as realization dawned on Thor’s face. Darcy mouthed a ‘sorry’ to Sigyn. With a sigh, Sigyn grabbed both Loki and Thor by the arm, leading them out of the room toward somewhere they could talk privately.

“How long have you had these powers?” Thor demanded to know.

Ensconced in the barely used library on the communal floor, Sigyn felt dizzy after watching her husband nervously pacing back and forth across the room. Thor was leaning up against the desk in the room, his arms crossed over his chest in disapproval. Sigyn wasn’t sure what Thor was more cross about: the fact that Loki was manifesting ice powers, the fact that these powers were being kept secret, or the fact that everyone seemed to know about that secret save for Thor himself. Loki was
very annoyed that somehow the tale of his powers had gotten out. He wasn’t sure which one of the
Avengers had betrayed his trust to Darcy - and apparently Jane given her reaction - but he wasn’t
going to make the mistake of trusting anyone in the Tower again.

“Loki didn’t fully begin experimenting with them until just before the Feast of Thankfulness,” Sigyn
explained. “He has been working to control them, to make sure he does not hurt himself or anyone
else with them. Well, unless it is necessary.”

“I thought the Allfather bound his seiðr,” Thor pointed out.

“The Allfather is not a fetterer,” Sigyn said, feeling like she was explaining it for the thousandth time.
“He can bind seiðr to an extent, but not completely remove it. And this is seiðr Loki was born with
as a Jotun. The Allfather wouldn’t have been able to remove that. Even a skilled fetterer would be
reluctant to do so. Just like when the Allfather stripped you of your powers, he left behind enough
that when you completed your quest it would all return. One cannot make a creature bound by seiðr
entirely devoid of it without severe consequences for both the one being fettered and the fetterer.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Thor asked.

“Oh,” Loki snapped. “So you’d go running to the Allfather first chance you’d get? So I would get
locked up in some empty dungeon somewhere just because I began manifesting powers due to my
status as your ancient enemy?”

“You have to admit, Thor,” Sigyn pointed out, “you don’t exactly have a stellar record when it
comes to keeping secrets. And if I suddenly began manifesting Jotnar seiðr… well, you wouldn’t
exactly be the first person I confided it in.”

“He’s not even toward the top of the list!” Loki huffed.

“We sought the help of Sir Stark and Sir Banner as they both know what it is like to deal with
newfound powers and, in the case of Sir Banner, the need to control them,” Sigyn said. “They are
also men of experimentation and logic. When Sir Stark had to leave, he asked the Lady Widow to
step in with help. And Sir Barton… accidentally found his way into one of the practices.”

“And somehow your paramor and her servant know of this!” Loki huffed. “I bet it was Barton who
told them. I’m sure he salivated at a chance to spill one of my secrets knowing full well the access I
have had to his own thoughts and memories!”

“I… I am sorry you did not feel safe to trust me with this,” Thor said finally. “And I promise I will
not tell anyone of your newfound ability. Not unless you wish me to.”

“Oh, and how can I believe that?” Loki spat. “With the amount of times you tattled on me growing
up? And I you are the worst secret keeper ever!”

“I am not!” Thor insisted. “Mother still doesn’t know what happened to that scrying orb or what
happened to the yellow primrose plant!”

“No, she knows what happened to the primrose,” Sigyn admitted airily. “Watched the two of you do
it. I think she is still waiting for one or both of you to come forward with an apology.”

“Thor started the fire,” Loki huffed. “I just… wasn’t very good at putting it out.”

“I think we can both admit I was worse at putting it out,” Thor smirked. Loki looked away but Thor
catched a hint of a grin on his brother’s face. “Loki,” Thor said seriously. “I swear to you, on the roots
of Yggdrasil, that I will not betray this secret of yours. If I do, may Mjolnir turn on me in battle and I
“Fine,” Loki sighed, deciding Thor must be serious to deliver such a serious oath. “Though that still does not tell me which one of your Avenging compatriots betrayed my trust.”

“We shall discover the source of the treachery,” Thor agreed, just as the library door shot open revealing Jane, flanked by Stark and Steve.

“What gives, Foster?” Tony huffed. “You said they’d be killing each other.”

“Well, I thought…” Jane began.

“Is this about Loki’s ice powers?” Steve asked confused.

“By the Norns!” Loki shrieked. “Is there anyone in the Tower who does not know my secret? Shall the cafeteria workers suddenly request I provide cubed ice for the daily employee luncheons?”

“No one told me,” Jane explained. “Or Darcy. We figured it out… kind a… Well, I mean, Bruce was asking us some theoretical questions about ice in space and since Thor said you’re a Frost thing, we sort of put two and two together and figured…”

“And how did you ascertain this?” Loki asked Steve, annoyed.

“Yeah, Cap,” Tony asked, confused. “How did you find out about this?”

“When Clint made fun of him during the Rudolph movie and then Clint’s hot chocolate froze up all of a sudden?” Steve shrugged. “I figured it was too mean of a thing for Sigyn to do and considering whatever magic Thor has seems to just extend to rain storms…”

“Thunderstorms!” Thor corrected.

“Hoist on your own petard, Lokes,” Tony clucked.

“I suppose now I will have to tell the Furious One of this development,” Loki huffed. “And soon enough the Allfather will know and then I will find myself confined to a cave somewhere.”

“More than likely Fury will just put you to work,” Tony pointed out. “You know… freezing stuff or whatever.”

“At least no one in Asgard knows,” Thor said to Loki comfortingly.

“Actually…” Sigyn frowned, causing Loki to groan. “Heimdall has seen this. And both the Allfather and Allmother know.”

“What?” Loki hissed. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“There wasn’t much to tell!” Sigyn insisted. “Your mother wrote to me that Heimdall had told her and the Allfather of your newfound powers. The Allfather said to update him if you used them for any nefarious purposes. Your mother asked if you wanted her to send you any rotating orbs for target practice with your newfound abilities.”

“I cannot believe this,” Loki huffed.

“I didn’t tell you because I knew it would upset you that they knew,” Sigyn apologized. “And that you might be upset enough to stop practicing. And you have been getting so good with it!”
“I would like to see a... demonstration of this ability,” Thor admitted to his brother quietly. “If you were... up to it.”

“He hasn’t let me see anything,” Sigyn pouted.

“We’ll let Loki figure out a time to do his Snow Miser routine later,” Tony said. “As it is, I’ve been absent from my own party for way too long. And you guys best get upstairs if you want to make the midnight kiss. Steve, I’ve got a gorgeous brunette lined up for you...”

“No, Tony,” Steve groaned.

“Come on,” Tony begged, leading Steve out of the room.

“Darcy didn’t mean to upset you,” Jane said to Sigyn and Loki. “She is really sorry and beating herself up about letting this slip. She doesn’t want you to be mad, either Thor.”

“We shall go talk to her,” Thor suggested, leading Jane from the room so his brother could be alone with his wife. The door closed behind them, Sigyn waited for whatever blustering accusation or angry tirade was about to come out of her husband. Instead, Loki just let out a tired sigh.

“Well, I suppose I can’t begrudge you for keeping a small secret from me,” Loki admitted. “Not when I’ve kept so many larger and dangerous ones over the years.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” Sigyn said. “And I didn’t want to stall your progress. I did what I thought was best. And I wasn’t planning on keeping it from you forever... I was just waiting until you would be more receptive...”

“Which is undoubtedly why everyone thinks you are the most patient woman in Asgard,” Loki snorted.

“Please don’t be upset,” Sigyn said, biting her lip in a way she knew her husband wouldn’t be able to resist.

“I’ve already forgiven you, lykyng,” Loki smirked. “No need to play the coquette.”

“And you aren’t angry at our friends?” Sigyn said. “After all, they didn’t tell your secret. They are just more clever than perhaps we give them credit for.”

“No,” Loki sighed. “I suppose I can’t be too angry at them for displaying intelligence rarely seen in this realm.”

“So, should we head back to Sir Stark’s party?” Sigyn asked hopefully.

“No,” Loki leered at her predatorily. “I think we can finish our own little party right here.”
Loki wondered if he should have been more upset about his newfound Jotnar abilities becoming public knowledge when he found himself having to demonstrate them before a crowd two days later. With Jane and Darcy off on their stargazing mission and everyone having slept off hangovers from New Years, Loki had wanted to get back into his regular morning practice routine. Instead, he found the rest of the Tower’s inhabitants curious for a display. And if he was going to show Thor and Steve his abilities, there was no way he could avoid letting Sigyn see them for the first time as well. His one consolation was that, so far, he hadn’t managed to turn his entire body blue though his fingers and hands sometimes had more of a blue tint than normal after a morning of practice.

Tony, being the showman that he was, had taken the decision for Loki to show off his powers with gusto. When the group arrived in the Hulk containment area of the basement, they found Tony had already set up a wide variety of containers for Loki to demonstrate his newfound ice abilities, ranging from a small juice glass to a large aquarium filled with water. There was also a fishbowl, a whiskey decanter, a series of chemistry glassware, a blender pitcher, and something Bruce, Natasha and Clint were pretty sure was a bong. Instead of being on a platform like the other glass objects, Tony had also pulled out the kiddie pool and filled it up with water as well.

A part of Loki wanted to tell Tony he wasn’t some hired minstrel and if Stark wanted a command performance he could do it himself. The only thing keeping Loki from throwing a temper tantrum was the fact that Sigyn was sitting on the other side of the observational glass in the Hulk containment area, eagerly awaiting her husband’s demonstration. She has spent the entire elevator journey down to the area regaling Thor and Steve with how talented her husband had become in his newfound abilities - despite the fact she hadn’t actually witnessed them - and how proud she was of him for overcoming his issues with his heritage to embrace this new side of himself. If someone had asked Loki as little as three Midgardian years ago how he thought his wife would react to news he was secretly Jotnar and in possession of their natural ability to manipulate ice, he would have said she would be among the Asgardian crowd demanding he be burned at the stake - the traditional Asgardian punishment for Jotuns who broke the law. Yet here she was, bragging about him to anyone that would listen.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen,” Tony said, drawing attention to where he was standing with Loki on the other side of the glass from the observers. “We have a real treat of a show for you today. Straight from… where were you from, Lokes?”

“A cold rock in an abandoned temple on Jotunheim, I suppose is the best guess,” Loki harrumphed.

“Okay…that’s rough,” Tony frowned before putting his showman smile back on. “Straight from the eighty-sixth floor of his building, I present to you Loki! Master ice manipulator and all around snark sensation! Give it up folks!”

Spirited applause from Sigyn and Thor along with lackluster applause from everyone else followed. Tony looked at Loki as if he expected a theatrical bow out of the mischief maker. Loki only looked...
back at Stark in annoyance and disgust. Part of Loki wanted to demonstrate his abilities by freezing Stark solid, but Sigyn had been so proud of him and he didn’t want to disappoint her. He would have to find a way to get back at Stark later. At present, Stark was indicating how many ounces of water each container held and how Loki would manage to freeze the water without freezing the glasses or breaking them. He then sat the tiny juice glass before Loki to begin his demonstration.

Without a hitch, Loki froze the water in all of the containers ranging from the tiny juice glass to the kiddie pool, earning him a smattering of applause. Then, following a bit more of Tony’s showmanship, Loki proceeded to unfreeze all the water, which earned him even more applause. Tony seemed giddy by the fact that Loki was so successful in this endeavor, despite the fact it required no real effort from Tony himself. In fact, Loki was beginning to think he should have asked Stark to stay on the other side of the observation glass. That was until Stark leaned over and whispered to him:

“You wanna show them what you’ve been working on lately?”

Loki nodded in the affirmative and Tony proceeded to then empty all of the containers of their newly melted contents. Bruce and Natasha had seen some of this before, but it was a new talent for just about everyone else - i.e. Clint - who had been previously aware of Loki’s ice abilities. Loki was still getting the kinks out of this particular aspect of his ice manipulation and - despite Tony’s insistence it was not just perfectly fine but also welcome - had broken Howard’s remaining highball glasses in practice. With a deep breath, Loki began at the smallest juice glass first. This time, instead of freezing water inside the glass he made ice appear within the glass unaided, without breaking the glass or freezing it. He lost some composure when he got to the aquarium bowl, cracking it slightly, but managed to finish the task and not harm any of the other containers.

“And now,” Tony grinned, “my favorite part!” Loki sighed. Stark had been working with him on this because he thought it was hilarious. Loki figured he might as well do it just this once. After all, Tony had absolutely delighted in this side project of theirs.

“Cap, Thor,” Tony said, producing two beer steins. “Would you like a drink?” As Tony poured the beers he produced into the glass steins, Loki froze the exterior and chilled the contents a bit. Tony then pulled up two daiquiri glasses. “Clint, I heard you had a thing for banana daiquiris. Siggy, I think you’d like these as well.” With a roll of his eyes Loki froze the exterior of the cups as Tony mixed up the tumbler and then Loki froze up the tumbler itself before Tony poured out a sloshing alcoholic mixture. Finally, Tony produced a bottle of vodka. “Widow, this one’s for you.”

Tony began to pour out the bottle into emptiness but before the liquid hit the table, Loki was able to form four small shot glasses entirely made of ice to capture it. Tony then signalled for Bruce to open the hatch between the observation room and the containment room, allowing the group to come fetch their drinks. Natasha downed three of the vodka shots, leaving a final one for Tony, who seemed sadden that she hadn’t shared equally. Clint began happily sipping his daiquiri as Steve and Thor clanked drinks before testing them out. Sigyn sped past her own drink to hug her husband.

“You were magnificent!” Sigyn beamed as Thor downed the rest of his stein and clapped his brother on the back.

“Well done!” Thor agreed. “Such mastery could not have been easy in such a small amount of time.”

“Yes, well,” Loki muttered, both proud and a little embarrassed at this praise.

“He’s been practicing every day,” Bruce said to Thor. “Sometimes for several hours.”

“If nothing else, you’ve learned to make a mean banana daiquiri,” Clint nodded, finishing off his
own and then sliding Sigyn over hers. She took a sip and then squealed.

“This drink is most delicious, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said happily. “You must show me how to make it.”

“Sure thing,” Tony nodded, “though it might be hard to find triple sec and rum on Asgard.”

“This is the best way to drink vodka,” Natasha pronounced, before breaking up the remaining ice cups in her hands and then pouring them into one of the remaining cups. She then snatched the rest of the vodka bottle and began pouring it in.

“What’d you think, Cap?” Tony asked.

“You definitely have your dad’s showmanship,” Steve said. “If the whole inventor thing doesn’t work out I’m sure you could get a job with one of the sideshows down at Coney Island.”

“Thanks… I think,” Tony frowned, “but I meant about Loki’s cool new talent.”

“You’ve definitely shown a good work ethic and a lot of dedication,” Steve said to Loki. “And not everyone would be responsible enough to train and harness their powers before going out in the world and using them. I know you don’t want everyone to know about this, but if that changes and you feel comfortable enough, I’m sure this would be a real asset to the team.”

“If that were the case,” Loki frowned, “I suppose you would have to inform the Furious One of my abilities.”

“There would be no way of avoiding it,” Steve admitted, “but if you don’t want to go that route, I respect that. I don’t want you to feel like we’re pushing you too far too fast with these abilities, and I don’t want you to use them in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or that you aren’t ready for.”

“But anytime you want to help me bartend, I’m in,” Tony informed Loki. “We already talked about pina coladas and I want to try and see if I can recreate that sangria slushie recipe Pep was raving about a few weeks ago.”

“We should do a margarita night!” Clint said excitedly.

“Tash loves watermelon margaritas!” Clint announced to the group. Natasha grimaced and folded her arms over her chest. The look on her face seemed to indicate she was debating changing her favorite margarita flavor just because Clint had ousted it to the rest of the world.

“Now that you are managing containers well enough,” Sigyn asked her husband, “what shall you be working on next?”

“Constructs, I believe,” Loki said.

“Ah, like the weapons of ice the Jotnar are famed for,” Thor nodded. He turned to the rest of the group. “Frost Giants are capable of encasing their limbs in ice, creating spears, swords, glaives and a plethora of other weapons from ice to defend themselves. They may use other weapons as well, but ice is always a last and deadly resort.”

“I fear doing so will require the changing of my… appearance,” Loki frowned. “And that can be dangerous.”

“The whole you freeze anyone you touch thing?” Tony nodded. “Unless they also freeze anyone
they touch?”

“We plan on experimenting to see if there is some way of controlling it,” Bruce explained to Sigyn. “Loki already has displayed some amazing amount of control, so I’m sure it won’t be too difficult with him.”

“I have never encountered a Jotun who did not manage to freeze another he came into contact with,” Loki pointed out.

“Loki is right,” Thor nodded.

“Yes, because the two of you have encountered… what… a dozen Jotuns maximum? And all in the middle of battle as well.” Sigyn huffed. “If the Fire Giants can control what and who they burn every time they accidentally tunnel into Növallir, I’m sure Frost Giants are no different.” Loki opened his mouth to protest, but was interrupted.

“Let’s debate Frost Giant physiology some other day,” Tony interjected. “Right now, I think we should celebrate Loki’s success. And party.”

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Loki did his best not to act excited about the little shindig Stark was throwing him, complete with a cookie cake Stark had written “Congrats Loki” in sugary sweet blue frosting. Clint had used the remaining frosting to add little snowflakes around the cake, in addition to the decor already placed there by the bakers. Loki reasoned Stark just liked excuses to throw parties and this one hadn’t been carefully planned or thought out, just thrown together in fifteen minutes with the order of a blank cookie cake and leftover streamers and decor just lying around the Tower. Various delivery foods had also arrived at the Tower and had been laid out in a verifiable buffet of last minute cuisine.

The truth of the matter was this was the first time in a long while that anyone had thrown him a fete just because. Oh, certainly Sigyn was always glad to see him and celebrate in his achievements, but Loki did not experience the same amount of exaltation and celebration as his brother. Whenever Thor returned from a hunt or a pillaging trip there was always a feast and the slaughtering of some sort of fattened animal for the heir to the throne. When Loki returned from a diplomatic trip, a research mission or one of the myriad quests he was sent on, rarely was there a celebration to welcome him back. Some had been organized by his mother, particularly after very long absences from Asgard, but it had always annoyed Loki that Thor returning after a night camping in the woods merited more of a celebration than him returning after three weeks of researching magical fungi in the woods of Alfheim. Of course, diplomacy, learning, and espionage were not necessary celebrated in Asgard.

His manifestation of Jotnar seiðr certainly wouldn’t have merited celebration by Asgardian standards, yet here on Midgard he found himself sitting in one of Stark’s overly plush recliners, a piece of cookie cake in one hand, a drink in another, and a ridiculous party hat Sigyn has fished out of Stark’s stores of decorations atop his head. Loki wouldn’t have let anyone else adorn him with the ridiculous little cone-shaped hat with the pom atop it, save for the woman who was now dancing around with her third daiquiri of the day. Seeing how much she had enjoyed the banana flavor, Stark had mixed up a batch of strawberry, lime, and peach flavored drinks to see which one Sigyn enjoyed the best. Clint was now passed out on the floor attempting to keep up with her, and would no doubt be upset he missed the arrival of the take out food. Loki himself was still nursing one of the strawberry variety Sigyn had insisted he drink.

“To Snow Miser!” Tony toasted before downing peach daiquiri himself, “and his amazing talent for freezing shit! No matter what, Lokes, you can always fall back on bartending!”
“These Midgardian drinks are sweet but delicious,” Thor pronounced from the recliner twinned with Loki’s. After Sigyn, Clint, and Steve had tried a glassful each, Thor was single-handedly finishing off the peach variety. “Their alcohol is not as strong as ours, but Stark believes with caned sugar we too could make a variety of this rum.”

“I am not sure the Allfather would approve that your diplomatic missions to Midgard yielded only a new recipe for inebriation,” Loki snorted. “Though it might make you the most popular prince in Asgard’s history if you can find a way to make it as strong as mead.”

“Aye,” Thor nodded. “That might take some experimentation. I wonder if Mother would let me have use of her labs…”

“For brewery?” Loki snorted. “I have my doubts. She would be very cross if you broke anything, and you know she would make you clean it after use.”

“You are right,” Thor frowned.

“Doesn’t Volstagg have a cousin who works at a brewery?” Loki suggested.

“He does!” Thor said excitedly. “I will have to speak with him once I return to Asgard. This will be a most pleasant venture!” Thor then shot up to consult with Stark about what exactly would be needed for rum, which left Tony both confused and entertained.

“What has Thor so excited?” Sigyn asked, happily sliding into her husband’s lap as she sipped on her own drink.

“He intends to bring a new form of drunkenness to Asgard,” Loki said. “No doubt the Allfather will be pleased.”

“Particularly if he allows him to sample the first batches,” Sigyn smirked. “I daresay the Allfather might be willing to a great amount of requests then.”

“Hopefully it will be better than Asgard’s pathetic excuse for wine,” Loki snorted. “What is the purpose of saving funds on importing the drink from Alfheim and Vanahem when all Asgard can produce is something that might pass for bloodyed piss in taste.”

“And how would you know what that tastes like?” Sigyn asked.

“Why is Thor even still here?” Loki continued with a pout. “He was only supposed to stay until Sir Stark returned. And Stark has done so.”

“He has received no summons to return to Asgard,” Sigyn replied. “And I believe he will take whatever time with Lady Jane that he can. Think of how hard it must be for your brother… so frequently separated from the woman he loves. And you know Odin hardly approves of the match.”

“Wife, you know I haven’t hard nearly enough of this concoction of Stark’s to start feeling sorry for Thor,” Loki snorted.

“Then finish what you have and I will fetch you more,” Sigyn grinned. Loki rolled his eyes but began sipping his drink as commanded.

“So,” Tony said, taking the seat Thor had recently vacated. “Two-thirds of the way through your time. Any thought on how you’re going to spend your final four months here?”

“I am surprised you haven’t found a task to assign me yet, to tell the truth,” Loki said.
“Well, you have been working hard on developing some personal skills, which I think should count for something,” Tony said. “And I have been busy what with the whole Pepper, Happy, me and the president nearly dying thing. Sorry if that’s gotten in the way of you doing physical labor. Though I understand you’ve been going out with Steve and Clint about twice a week to do some things of a charitable nature.”

“That is where you have been sneaking off to?” Sigyn said to her husband, a smirk on her face.

“As if you didn’t already know,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“You’ve been displaying some tremendous personal growth,” Tony nodded. “Maybe not as much as I’ve experienced recently, but you’re off to a good start.”

“He’s also threatened to kill Thor a lot less in the past few weeks than he did when he first came here,” Natasha pointed out, startling Sigyn and Stark but not Loki, who had somehow sensed her stealthy approach.

“I suppose my patience has gotten stronger,” Loki said idly. “Norns know Thor hasn’t gotten less annoying in the past few months.”

“Brother!” Thor called from across the room, as if to accentuate Loki’s point. He was holding a lot of giant margarita glass filled with more peach daiquiri and a dozen cocktail umbrellas. “Look at all the tiny rain prevention devices I have fitted into my goblet!”

“Good going there, Thunderstruck!” Tony called. Thor grinned, raised his glass and then went back playing with the umbrellas as Steve and Bruce talked beside him.

“I daresay we shall have to bring a bag of those back with us to Asgard,” Loki pronounced. “It would keep Thor entertained through years of council meetings.”

The first of the take out orders soon arrived and Clint woke up long enough to stuff his face with Chinese food, complain about how day drinking hangovers were the worst, and then promptly fall back into a drunken slumber. Thor took a heaping helping from every beef dish that had been ordered and then proceeded to eat his meal with all the gusto and manners of a rabid wolf. Sigyn similarly took a bit from all the seafood and vegetarian dishes but her plate was much more neat and organized than Thor’s. She also waited patiently for her husband to finish gathering his own meal before digging into hers. Loki and Sigyn were always prim and proper eaters, but when they were so close to Thor, both the fastidious nature of Loki and Sigyn’s table manners and the slovenliness of Thor’s seemed exaggerated. Tony still hadn’t forgotten the last time Loki had eaten a hot dog - bun and all - with a knife and fork, a move so positively against the entire culture of New York hot dogs that Steve had to physically remove himself from the area until Loki was finished.

Speaking of Steve, Tony was rather impressed the super soldier knew how to handle chopsticks as well as he did. Steve liked to remind Tony that not only had he spent two years with Morita, who had learned how to use chopsticks before he could walk, but also he had frequented Manhattan’s Chinatown in the 1930s because Chop Suey was cheap and filling. In fact, Steve said he had even heard Irving Berlin play at a club frequented by several Tammany Hall figureheads in the area.

When Tony asked why Steve and his friends were hanging out with members of Tammany Hall, Steve quickly changed the subject and allowed Bruce to extrapolate on how Asian cultures adapted their cuisines for American customers.

Bored with Steve and Bruce’s discussion, Tony turned his attention to how Natasha was even able to stealthily and quietly slurp soup. Pepper always seemed to have the same ability. No matter what - whether it was something as messy as BBQ wings or something as loud as a bag of potato chips at
two in the morning - Pepper always seemed to be able to eat it flawlessly without embarrassing herself or anyone around her. Tony had once eaten an entire cheeseburger that fell on the floor of a Burger King because it was three in the morning and he was that wasted.

“Sir,” JARVIS intoned, interrupting Tony’s thoughts and the rest of the conversations going on around him. “You have a call from Colonel Rhodes.”

“Put him up, Jarv,” Tony replied. The screen opened to show not only Rhodey but an awake Happy.

“Look who got up while I was getting a sandwich,” Rhodey smirked at the screen.

“Hey, Hap,” Tony grinned. “What have I told you about sleeping on the job?”

“Tony, I’ve got to tell you…” Happy began before starting to cough.

“That Killian is the Mandarin and AIM is putting its volatile Extremis project into the bodies of U.S. soldiers and committing terrorist attacks?” Tony said. “You missed a lot while you were out, buddy.”

“You’re okay? And Pepper?” Happy asked.

“Fine and dandy,” Tony said. “We’ll have a nice long chat about it when you get back to New York.”

“Have you received the cookies I sent with Colonel Rhodes?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“You had to tell him to make me share, huh,” Rhodey smirked as Happy began looking around for the cookies.

“There is also bread made with bananas,” Sigyn announced happily.

“And I’m sure there’s more where that came from if you heal up and come back east,” Tony informed Happy.

“I’m glad everyone’s okay,” Happy said.

“We’re glad you’re okay,” Steve said to the screen. “We were all really worried about you. Tony especially.”

“I knew he’d be okay,” Tony insisted. “Hap’s tough as nails.”

“In a minute,” Rhodey snorted, “I’ll tell you exactly how Tony reacted to all of this.”

“It’s good to see you awake,” Tony told Happy. “I’ll have Pepper call you when she gets off work later. I’m sure she wants to see you’re okay, too.”

“Don’t worry her on my behalf,” Happy insisted.

“And Hap,” Tony said. “You have good instincts, but the next time you plan on following around a potential terrorist threat, at least ask to borrow a suit.”

“Okay,” Happy smiled.

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Loki waited until Sigyn was fast asleep in their bed that evening before he locked himself in their bathroom. Bruce had been right when he had said that Loki had practiced hard every day with them
to harness his powers. What the other occupants of the Tower didn’t know was that he hadn’t been restricting himself to practicing with them in the Hulk containment area. When he found himself unable to sleep at night, Loki would sneak into the bathroom to practice on his own. He had started with a few bottles and glasses that Sigyn wouldn’t miss if he broke and work with them. Now that he had better control of his abilities, it would be time to begin weaving his ice magic as the Jotnar did, and that meant using his entire body as a conduit for such seiðr, something that deeply troubled Loki.

Up until now, the seiðr he could manifest didn’t change his outward Aesir appearance. Oh, certainly the tips of his fingers had turned blue a few times from casting spells on the various cups and containers he had been filling with ice, but Loki knew now that he was moving into constructs, more of his body would be displaying evidence of Jotnar seiðr, and that meant more of his body would be reverting to his natural form. And Loki’s natural form was the last thing he wanted to show off. Up until he had first turned blue, Loki’s only experience with Jotuns was stories of their monstrous nature. Among the other realms it was said there were only two ways to react of one saw a Frost Giant: either run away in terror or run toward them prepared to fight and possibly die. When he had made the deal to have them interrupt Thor’s coronation, the creatures he had dealt with had met him at a seedy tavern in a small village on Vanaheim, disguised as Aesir as well. He wasn’t even sure the men he had made a deal with were actually Frost Giants until Odin announced it, and even then, he hadn’t actually seen the creatures. It hadn’t been until he had followed Thor to Jotunheim that he had actually encountered Frost Giants in their true form.

Sometimes, Loki idly wondered if he had agreed to meet the Jotnar on their home territory rather than neutral ground like Vanaheim if all of this would have come to pass. No doubt they would have thought it stupid for a son of Odin to come to the land of his father’s greatest enemy. Yet the second they would have laid a hand on him, his own true nature would have been revealed. And if they had realized he was one of their own, would they have then realized his true identity? Surely they would have found it too much of a coincidence to find before them a dwarfed giant bearing the royal sigils and markings of their country, the clan and familial lines of their king who happened to be the right age and match the same description as their missing prince, a prince who had conveniently disappeared around the last time the Allfather had been in their realm.

That is not to say Loki believed he would have received a fairytale ending in this particular situation. Loki had no illusions about what the Jotuns were capable of, and he knew - in any realm - there would always be someone whose toes would be stepped on by a long-lost prince returning. Perhaps Laufey would have had him killed as soon as he recognized Loki as his son, not wanting there to be further evidence of his own failure. Perhaps Laufey would accept him, but keep him much like he had been on Asgard: a spare son kept waiting in the wings for an eventuality no one wanted. Perhaps he would have been brought back into Jotunheim’s royal fold just to be slain by a rival - another brother, uncle, or cousin. Even if he was accepted by Laufey, Loki didn’t think he would want to rule a frost-covered rock dominated by creatures he was always taught to think repulsive - even if he was one of their number.

These were the creatures of his childhood nightmares, of the terrifying stories his and Thor’s nannies had told both of them when they were a young age. It was only recently Loki realized that the Allmother had in fact never told him a frightening story about Jotuns. Hers had only been the fanciful origin tales from Jotnar history. The feats of Ymir, the first king of the Frost Giants, who was born of venom and snow, had actually been one of Thor’s favorite stories growing up because the king’s quests for greatness including harnessing the four winds and using his seiðr to fashion stars in the sky. Loki, however, had always been drawn to the romantic tale of Ymir and his wife, Zerona. As the first Frost Giant, Ymir was alone in the world and there were no others like him. He had searched far and wide across the realms for a bride to rid him of his loneliness, but could find none. Finally, he returned home and fashioned a woman out of snow and ice. He told her all his hopes and dreams, and then realizing she would never be real, he had cried over his creation. His tears caught
the attention of the Norns who took pity on Ymir and allowed the seiðr in Ymir’s tears to bring the woman to life. Having felt isolated and misunderstood as a child, Loki had always taken the story to heart to mean that some day he would find someone who understood and loved him.

And there she was sleeping in the next room as he psyched himself up to bring forth a newly discovered type of seiðr within himself, a type of seiðr that further cemented his status as a fearsome monster each time he used it. As his wife slept in the next room, Loki would begin practicing how to use this seiðr as a weapon, the same type of magical ice weapon that had injured Volstagg and Fandral, that had sent many warriors of other realms to their deaths. And worst of all, the blueness of his skin would be evidence of this power of his. Loki had never really hated a color before, but he now found himself experiencing a deep hatred for that particular shade of blue Jotnar seiðr rendered his skin. If anything, the blood red of his eyes in their Jotnar form came a close second in his hatred.

With a sigh and knowing that being alone with his thoughts again wouldn’t put him to sleep or help in the task ahead, Loki pushed all of his errant wonderings about his own true nature and the nature of the Frost Giants at large out of his head. Instead, he focused on seeing if he could get icicles to drip from his fingers, to see if he could make a point of ice protrude from his body the way he had seen the others do. Eyes closed, he felt a slight tingling and, after a moment, opened his eyes to see... nothing. He wondered if this Jotnar seiðr would be a bit easier if he had started learning it when he was younger. Again, Loki closed his eyes and focused, thinking about sending one spike of ice from just one finger. A deeper tingling this time and when his eyes opened again there was a small little icicle pointed out from his index finger. His entirely blue index finger.

His sense of pride and desire to be the best at any and all seiðr he could master took over from his fear of his true nature. Stripping himself of his clothes, Loki stood in the shower - or the indoor waterfall device as he and Sigyn called it - and proceeded to focus harder on creating a construct. Maybe not a bigger icicle per se but maybe at least one from all of the fingers on his left hand. Loki closed his eyes, thought hard and focused his mind on growing the ice, on seeing it protrude from his body as if he were a cat or other creature that could extend its nails in defense. When Loki opened his eyes he was proud to see he had managed rather sharp and pointed ice shards from each finger on his hands. His pride disappeared quickly when he realized his hand and arm up to his elbow had turned blue, his nails going to their natural Jotnar black and the native markings of his people appearing where his skin had turned.

Instantly, Loki’s right hand shot out, turning the shower on full blast as hot as the water would go. His left hand and arm stung slightly as the hot water hit them, the ice melting away. Yet his skin remained blue. He snorted to himself. As if merely turning on hot water would wash his blue skin away. The blue was what was underneath the white, not the other way around. Closing his eyes again, as steam built up in the shower, Loki thought about his left arm as it had been early, the color of his Aesir skin just as pale as his wife’s. Opening his eyes, his skin had returned to its typical color, all sign of his Jotnar heritage gone. That would be the trick, Loki decided. Not learning how to harness his ice powers but rather learning how to cover them up again once they had been unleashed. After all, one could never get all the liquid back into the bottle once the bottle had been spilled.

But he would think of that tomorrow, Loki decided as he toweled off and changed back into his clothes. Sigyn was still asleep in the other room and, despite everything they had both been taught about Jotunheim as children, she was proud of the fact he was learning about this new part of his life and how to manage his natural seiðr. Loki decided he might as well indulge in her pride and happiness while he could, for if the day came that she decided his true nature was more than she could handle Loki felt he would need what good memories he could scrape up to get him through the rest of his life.
The Brothers Iwaldasson

Chapter Summary

Or, in which Sigyn’s brothers visit and their blacksmithing technology befuddles and intrigues Tony

Tony had been trying to chase away his insomnia through some new creative engineering projects for Stark Industries when a rather large, purple-colored fireball appeared in his labs. Tony looked up from what he was working on - a 3-D printing program, not a suit thank-you-very-much - just in time to see two beings step out of the strange purple flames before the flames disappeared. Tony’s mouth gaped open as he watched the two men wiping soot and ash off of their medieval-style clothing. Well, they had to be men. Despite the fact they couldn’t be too much taller than four-foot, they both had very long and well manicured beards. He noticed their hands were also slightly hairy. As they began looking around his lab, Tony decided he was either dreaming or having a hallucination from the post-surgery pain pills he was taking.

“Oh hell,” Tony grumbled. “I’m seeing hobbits.”

“Wasser ‘obbit?” the slightly taller red-headed hobbit asked his fellow ginger friend.

“Pepper’s right,” Tony sighed. “I work too much. I need to start taking breaks. I am in no condition to be back in the lab after heart surgery. I’m seeing things.”

“Waz wrong with ‘im?” the shorter, ginger man asked the other hobbit.

“‘e’s seein’ ‘obbits, apparently,” the taller, red-headed hobbit replied.

“You,” Tony said to them, “you’re the hobbits!”

“We’re nay ‘obbits,” the shorter ginger man said, annoyed.

“Then what are you,” Tony snorted, “besides, figments of my imagination.”

“Dvergr,” the shorter, ginger man replied.

“What?” Tony frowned.

“Maybe the word ‘as changed?” the slightly-taller man suggested.

“Dvärg, then,” the shorter man suggested. Tony was just as confused and the man seemed to get more frustrated. “Dvergrur? Dvärg?”

“Kääpiö? Zwerg? Krasnolud? Ye know, the scions o’ Brimir an’ Bláinn,” the slightly-taller one continued, hoping that he would eventually hit on a term Tony was familiar with. “The workers o’ the Golden Forge, the miners o’ the Black Abyss, the children o’ Niðavellir.”

“Oh, yeah, Ni-whatsit,” Tony nodded, as if this complete hallucination was another run-of-the-mill
“That’s the place where Sigyn is originally from, right?” The two short men grinned brightly.

“Ye know our sister!” The slightly taller and more cheerful one said happily.

“We’ve come ta see ‘er,” the shorter one said more gravely, “on behalf a our father and on the order a the King a Niðavellir ta assure she’s safe ‘ere.”

“No problem,” Tony said, deciding he might as well just give in to going crazy. “She and the hubs are probably asleep upstairs, but I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“I’m Fjalar Iwaldasson,” the taller, more cheerful one introduced himself. “And this ‘ers me brother Galar.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tony said.

“Ye must take us ta Sigyn,” Galar ordered.

“Um, it’s like the middle of the night,” Tony pointed out.

“I told ye twasn’t just dark like at ‘ome,” Fjalar huffed at his brother.

“Regardless, we must see ‘er,” Galar pointed out.

“Um, yeah,” Tony agreed. “I can take you to her… so long as you guys aren’t planning anything nefarious…”

“We’re just ‘ere ta make sure she’s alright,” Fjalar said.

“There’s no telling what’s ‘appened ta ‘er now that ugly, gargantuan ‘usband o’ ‘ers gotter banished,” Galar snorted. “Shoulda married a nice smith at ‘ome. Or ‘el, even one o’ those so-called Asgardian smiths. But, nay. Our sisters ‘ave ta take up with big Asgardian oafs. It’s that Vanir blood o’ their mother’s, what it tis.”

“Galar,” his brother warned, “ye know ‘ow she gets when she thinks we aren’t getting along with ‘im.”

“Overgrown uppity wizard,” Galar muttered under his breath.

“I guess you guys aren’t big Loki fans, huh,” Stark snorted. The twin glares he received earned him his answer. “Sure, I’ll take you guys to them.”

Tony had to admit, being followed about by two men who maybe equaled his height standing on top of each other was not in the top ten of weirdest things that had ever happened to him, but it had a good chance of being the top ten weirdest things that had ever happened in the Tower. All he needed was for Barton to show up with his bow and they would be about halfway to recreating Lord of the Rings. Tony couldn’t help himself and whistled “Concerning Hobbits” during much of the journey. He made a mental note to check and see if Thor had the soundtrack for all three movies uploaded to his iPod yet. Once the trio arrived at their destination, it took several loud raps at the door before it was thrown open and a very angry looking Loki stood before them in his bathroom and sleep pants.

“Stark, it is very early in the small hours,” Loki said, annoyed. “Why are you here?”

“Get outta the way ye, overindulged sack a puff,” Galar grumbled. “We’re ‘ere ta see our sister.”

Loki looked down at his dwarvish brothers-in-law in a mixture of tiredness, annoyance and slight
disbelief.

“What in the name of…” Loki began.

“Certainly looks like ‘e could use his mouth gettin’ sewn shut again,” Fjalar said to his brother conspiratorially.

“Sigyn is asleep,” Loki glowered at them. “I think you would take care not to awaken her at such an unnatural hour.”

“I didna come ‘ere ta listen ta the likes a ye yammer,” Galar snorted, pushing past Loki and into the room. Fjalar followed behind him, leaving Loki to look up at Stark, fury evident across his face.

“Why did you bring them here?” Loki hissed.

“Because I just now realized they’re real and not figments of my overworked, overtired imagination,” Tony admitted.

“Stark, I love my wife very dearly, but dwarves are terrible houseguests,” Loki huffed. “When they become unbearable, I am sending them to your laboratories. After they’ve spent a week insulting your craftsmanship, perhaps you will learn that the next time they show up asking for Sigyn to lie and say she isn’t here.” With that, Loki slammed the door in Tony’s face.

For his part, Tony ambled back to the elevator and then took it to the penthouse. This was probably all some weird crazy dream. He might wake up in a pile of drool and screwdriver bits in the morning. At least, he hoped that would be the case.

“Sir,” JARVIS intoned after Tony had managed to get three hours of sleep in his own rooms with Pepper. “Mr. Barton would like to know why, and I quote, ‘the communal kitchen is turning into the opening scene from The Hobbit.’”

“What?” Pepper groaned. Tony sighed, having an inkling of what was going on.

“Ask Barton what his elf eyes see,” Tony asked.

“I cannot repeat his response,” JARVIS replied. “Though it referenced sticking arrows into certain parts of your nether regions if you did not explain what was going on.”

“What is going on?” Pepper asked.

“Sigyn’s brothers came to visit last night,” Tony said. “I honestly thought they were figments of my overworked imagination up until they accosted Loki.”

“What’s that got to do with hobbits... Pepper began.

“Oh, Pep,” Tony sighed. “I’ll make a nerd of you eventually.”

“Sir,” JARVIS intoned again, “the Messrs Iwaldason have begun taking apart the communal refrigerator to learn how it works.”

“Great. I’m on it,” Tony said. “Notify Sigyn, Loki and Thor while you’re at it. I’m not sure how to deal with dwarven houseguests.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS intoned.
Tony arrived in the communal kitchen to find Fjalar and Galar halfway to taking apart the fridge, Clint glowering at where the coffee machine had already been disassembled, and Bruce cleaning his glasses repeatedly to see if he was still seeing two dwarves in the kitchen each time he put them back on. When Loki had mentioned dwarves were bad houseguests, Tony had thought Loki was exaggerating. Or that he meant bad houseguests in the leaving their wet towels on the floor, eating all your food and using up all the hot water variety, not the taking apart all of your appliances variety. Tony was trying to figure out how to ask the brothers politely to stop when Sigyn appeared.

“Brothers! What have you done!” Sigyn asked, horrified.

“Sigyn!” both men said happily, Galar dropping the tray of eggs he had just removed onto the floor with a crash. They race over to their sister and hugged her, Sigyn leaning down to hug them as well. If both men didn’t have long beards, it might have looked like Sigyn was hugging a pair of children.

“It is nice to see you,” Sigyn said to them, “but it is not nice that you have taken apart Sir Stark’s kitchen.”

“We just wanted ta see ‘ow it kept tha things cold,” Galar shrugged.

“I’m sure if you had just asked Sir Stark that, he would have explained it to you,” Sigyn pointed out.

“We didna mean any ‘arm,” Fjalar said to Tony. “Tis just our nature ta take things apart ta learn ‘ow they work.”

“I get it,” Tony admitted. “I do that sometimes too. Though I’ve learned you have to ask first, because sometimes people don’t like their stuff getting messed with. I’ve got a ton of books about how a lot of this stuff works, though. And what you can’t find in those I’m sure you can find on the internet.”

“On tha whazzit?” Galar frowned.

“I shall repair this, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said to him before casting a bit of gold seiðr that returned the fridge to its former appearance and also fixed the coffee maker to the point there was a fresh, piping hot pot of it ready to drink.

“Hell yes,” Clint grinned, rushing forward to grab a cup.

“So, I take it you know these… gentlemen,” Bruce said to Sigyn.

“Yes,” Sigyn smiled. “These are my big brothers, Fjalar and Galar Iwaldason.”

“Big as in older, not as in taller,” Fjalar explained with a smirk.

“We ‘ad hoped Sigyn would be more our stature, but alas,” Galar grinned. “She an’ all our sisters get their abnormal ‘eight from that witch mother o’ theirs.”

“Please tell me Freyja is not coming for another visit,” Loki groaned, entering into the room.

“Not if we ‘ave a say,” Fjalar snorted.

“Though yer not much better than she,” Galar grimaced at Loki.

“The Iwaldasons!” Thor thundered as he entered the room, a bewildered Jane and Darcy behind him. “What great fortune to see you have come to visit Midgard!”

“Ah, there ‘e is,” Galar snorted. “The big bastard who cannae tell tin from silver!”
“Nor a new sword ‘ilt from a rusty one,” Fjalar laughed. “How’re ye, big lug?”

“Well! Well!” Thor grinned, shaking forearms with each of the small men. Loki rolled his eyes at this display. Thor had been the one to insult the dwarves initially, but Loki seemed to be the one to have earned their mistrust. Of course, part of that mistrust may have related to the clandestine and then highly unorthodox way he had courted Sigyn, but Loki decided not to bring up the old sore subject again.

“Sigyn’s brethren have come to see that she is well,” Loki said. “And now that they have seen she is well…”

“We ‘ave na seen nothin’,” Galar insisted. “Just ‘er in ‘er nightclothes and ye being an’ ass.”

“Galar!” Sigyn frowned. “That is a terrible thing to say about my husband!”

“Sorry,” Galar frowned before muttering something under his breath that made Loki roll his eyes.

“Father’s just worried ‘bout ye’s all,” Fjalar explained. “And ye know our cousin, the king. ‘e was nay happy ta hear ye’d come ‘ere.”

“It’s none of his business where I am,” Sigyn frowned. “Nor is it really Father’s. I am a grown and married woman, after all. I should be able to go where I like.”

“I think this is a conversation we should have after breakfast,” Tony interrupted, sensing Loki was getting annoyed by the further presence of his brothers-in-law.

“A good idea,” Sigyn agreed.

“Alright,” Fjalar said, “Father did say ta see if Midgard’s food ‘ad improved any in a thousand years.”

“You will be delighted, old friends!” Thor informed them. “I must introduce you to the height of Midgardian cuisine: the Pop Tart! It is cooked in a most ingenious device known as a toaster oven!”

“Machines makin’ food?” Galar said, suddenly very interested.

“This we’ll ‘ave ta see!” Fjalar agreed.

“So,” Tony asked Sigyn as Thor, Jane and Darcy kept Sigyn’s brothers entertained with demonstrations of various appliances, “Loki and your brothers… don’t get along?”

“Loki has had… an uphill battle to win my family over,” Sigyn explained.

“An uphill battle I’m losing,” Loki muttered.

“That isn’t true,” Sigyn insisted.

“What happened?” Bruce asked.

“My father may have found out we were courting… in not the most agreeable way,” Sigyn grimaced. Loki sighed.

“Thor, I and a group of others had been sent to escort Sigyn and her sisters on their yearly excursion to their father’s realm to visit with their family,” Loki explained. “Thor had gotten into an argument
with an armorer, haggling over the price of some vambraces. And Thor is not good at haggling. He thought the best way to bring the dwarven merchant down on his price was to insult his craftsmanship.”

“Not a good idea,” Bruce gathered.

“A terrible idea,” Sigyn nodded. “A dwarf’s pride and his entire reputation is staked on his craftsmanship. To insult it… is like insulting his manhood.”

“Naturally, if Thor got into trouble it would somehow be my fault,” Loki huffed, “so I tried to convince the merchant that Thor hadn’t meant what he had said and, when that didn’t work… we, uh, fled the marketplace.”

“Loki came to my father’s house to hide, and so I helped him hide…” Sigyn blushed. “And then my father came in, knowing fully well that Loki was one of the two Aesir men the angry mob was seeking out…”

“And Iwaldi may have found Sigyn and myself in a compromising position in his broom closet,” Loki admitted. “One of the reasons I had come to Niðavellir was to ask him for his blessing in my courtship of Sigyn, but once he saw that… there was no winning his favor.”

“He turned Loki over to the crowd,” Sigyn said, “and then Loki was brought before King Regin - who was still alive back then. King Regin is the first cousin of my grandmother. Their fathers were brothers, and so we did have some connection to him, but my father was not willing to stand on Thor and Loki’s behalf because of what he had just witnessed.”

“Naturally, they couldn’t do anything to Thor for fear that the Allfather would bring wrath down on them,” Loki huffed. “But someone had to be punished.”

“King Regin asked the merchant what he thought was a fair price for the insult to his livelihood, and he said Loki’s head,” Sigyn shivered. “And King Regin thought that was fair.”

“The guy was going to chop of your head?” Bruce said in disbelief.

“Only until Loki pointed out the merchant had only asked for his head and not his neck,” Sigyn said. “Cousin Regin was a bit of a bloodthirsty king, but he always did like a good joke. So, he decided instead of cutting of Loki’s head that Loki’s mouth would be sewn shut for three full moon cycles so that Loki would learn about trying to talk his way out of his problems.”

“That’s… like possibly worse than having your head cut off,” Tony frowned.

“It certainly felt like,” Loki grimaced. “They used an enchanted silver thread, too, which continued to burn as long as it touched my skin.”

“How did you eat?” Bruce gaped.

“One of the benefits to near immortality is that it takes much longer to starve to death,” Loki huffed.

“The Allfather wasn’t pleased,” Sigyn said, “but he didn’t want to be seen as subverting the rule of law in the other realms. After all, one of the covenants he had signed with the rulers of Vanaheim and Niðavellir meant that they were allowed to distribute justice in their own lands.”

“Though I doubt it would have been seen as ‘justice’ if Thor had been subjected to it,” Loki huffed.

“Thor wasn’t happy about it,” Sigyn pointed out. “He even swore off purchasing any goods from
Niðavellir until you told him it was fine. After Loki was punished, we cut our visit to Niðavellir short and took him to Vanaheim. My uncle Freyr came for us in his boat and we took care of Loki at the palace there until the spell on his lips was undone and the threads fell from his lips. The Allmother came to us there. She was furious, and when she heard about Thor’s pledge to buy no further goods from Niðavellir she got an idea of her own. The Allmother let it be known that anyone who purchased goods from Niðavellir would risk her displeasure.”

“The Allfather didn’t have to lift a finger and it wasn’t an official trade embargo, but everyone knew better than to anger Frigga,” Loki nodded. “The dwarves eventually sent an official apology and insisted the entire thing had been a terrible miscommunication. Terrible good that did me, though. All I got was a half a year of relearning how to use my mouth and a slap on the back from the Allfather because Niðavellir lowered its tariffs for Asgardians as an act of apology. As if the entire thing had been some sort of conspiracy we had been working on all along.”

“At least Thor now knows better than to haggle with dwarves. And the fact that you endured the punishment made many of my father’s people feel that Loki was braver and truer than most of the Asgardians they had ever dealt with. Others would have shown fear, but Loki was brave and only laughed at them. Things have also changed much since Regin died and his son Hreiðmarr became king, Loki has enjoyed more popularity than ever there,” Sigyn pointed out.

“They do like wordplay and good puns,” Loki admitted. “And it’s easier for them to find fun in things when their king is a man who enjoys a good feast and a new song from a skald, not a bloodthirsty old coot who got hit on the head by falling rocks one too many times. It’s a much more cheerful place now all around.”

“Most of Niðavellir has forgotten the incident - or at least pretends to out of fear of angering Asgard. But my father still hasn’t forgiven Loki for… despoiling me in his house,” Sigyn blushed, “and my brothers tend to do whatever my father tells them.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to get on a guy’s good side once he’s seen you and his little girl,” Tony nodded. “I have personal experience with that, believe me.”

“Move ye ol’ fopdoodle,” Galar huffed as he and Fjalar pushed Loki off of his stool and their way onto it. Loki found himself pushed off, mainly because he was so insulted and taken aback by the name he had just been called. His mouth was wide in disbelief and, once it seemed to dawn on him the insult had been made in his direction, Loki screwed up his face in anger before stomping off to get himself another cup of coffee.

“Surprised ta see the skamelar ‘asn’t overstayed his welcome,” Fjalar huffed in agreement.

“What did you just call him?” Tony asked, confused. Sigyn was also annoyed.

“I would appreciate if you did not insult my husband,” Sigyn said to her brothers crossly. “Loki has taken great care of me, and it was not his doing that sent me here. I volunteered myself to accompany him. I will not have you treat him ill for a decision I made.”

“Fine, fine,” Fjalar sighed.

“We’re just tryin’ ta look out fer ya’s all,” Galar huffed.

“I appreciate you care for me, but not the way you’re going about it,” Sigyn informed him.

“So,” Galar said, changing the subject to focus on Tony. “I understand ye’ve been given charge o’ the scobberlotcher I call brother-in-law.”
“Galar!” Sigyn said furiously. “We just talked about this!”

“I meant it affectionately,” Galar rolled his eyes. “Sigyn says yer a smith?”

“I build things,” Tony shrugged. “Used to be weapons. Now I’m more focused on armor. And stuff that can make the world a better place, you know. Medical devices and such…”

“Weapons?” Fjalar said, intrigued.

“Armor?” Galar added. “What kind?”

“Sir Stark has made many metal suits,” Sigyn said to her brothers. “Though… he recently destroyed them…”

“Ah, not a total loss,” Galar shrugged. “Midgard always ‘as ‘ad inferior metals and equipment. Ye’d think if the Allfather cared for them so much ‘e’d at least teach them a bit o’ fire magic.”

“An Asgardian forge isna as good as a dwarven one,” Fjalar agreed, “but it certainly gets the job done better than mere fire alone.”

“You obviously haven’t seen one of our forges in a long time,” Tony said.

“Caution Stark,” Loki hissed in his ear. “You take those two down to your workshop and you may not come out alive.”

“You guys come down to my workshop,” Tony announced, causing Loki to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I’ll show you what you’ve been missing.”

For three days, Sigyn’s brothers had been in the Tower, eating Tony out of house and home, questioning everything he did in his workshop and calling Loki insulting words that hadn’t been in use in a thousand years save for in a small collection of islands in the very far north of Scotland. The only plus size was that Tony had a few new insults of his own. Of course, Loki still hadn’t forgiven him from how hard Tony and Clint had laughed when Fjalar and Galar described Loki as rumbumptious, word that Loki insisted more accurately described Thor. While Tony found Sigyn’s brothers’ handle on ye olde insults hilarious, he didn’t like the way they nitpicked everything in his workshop.

Everything in their homeworld was apparently superior to whatever technology Tony had, and the two dwarven men seemed disappointed at how little Midgard had improved its smithing ability in the thousand years since dwarf-kind had last visited. Even photos of the Stark Industries’ industrial forge only merited the comment that it was smaller than the largest of the royal forges in Niðavellir. Tony had nearly thrown a hammer at Galar when he mentioned Tony was a decent smith for someone who had “only been at it a few years.” Sigyn calmed Tony down by reminding him her brothers were older than Thor when working their father’s forge since they could stand unaided.

Of course, Tony’s inner rage riled up again when Fjalar suggested a lighter weight alloy for a series of bulletproof armor Tony was developing just as Galar finished reassembling an Iron Man gauntlet destroyed in Tony’s giant Christmas display without any schematics or even knowing what it was. Then the brothers designed him a new glove that didn’t need plates to move because the metal alloy they used managed to be both flexible enough to move with one’s hand and but still hard enough to make bullets bounce off of it. Even more frustrating was when the brothers explained the alloy was made from two metals not found on earth.
After breakfast on the third day since Sigyn’s brothers had arrived unannounced, Tony headed down to his workshop. The brothers Iwaldason and their sister weren’t far behind - mainly because Sigyn had taken to acting as a foil for her brothers in Tony’s presence. Loki had retreated to their chambers, glad for any time he could get away from his brothers-in-law. Thor was out with Jane, Bruce was doing yoga, and Clint, Darcy, and Natasha had headed out for a day of “none of your business.” Tony was spending the morning tinkering around with his 3-D printer - one of the few pieces of Midgardian technologies the dwarves seemed to actually be interested in - when he heard whispers coming from the other side of the workshop.

“’e’s certainly short enough,” Galar muttered.

“’ave ye asked ‘im?” Fjalar asked Sigyn.

“No, I have not,” Sigyn huffed. “It might be rude!”

“I’ll ask ‘im,” Galar said.

“Galar,” Sigyn warned.

“Ask me what?” Tony sighed, knowing the three were gossiping about him.

“Ye sure ye ‘aven’t got any dwarven ancestry?” Galar asked. “Yer certainly short enough.”

“And ye like ta smith,” Fjalar added, sending his brother a pointed look.

All Tony could do was open and close his mouth repeatedly like a fish. Sure, he wasn’t the tallest of the Avengers. He had an inch and a half on Banner - Tony insisted Banner’s height as the Hulk didn’t count - and a good three inches on Natasha. But still, he wasn’t a short man. And no, Rhodey, he did not make the suite so big to compensate for anything. And those platform shoes had been part of a Halloween costume, dammit. Tony just huffed in response, not wanting to dignify what Galar and Fjalar were insinuating.

“’e may na know it,” Fjalar suggested. “Could be pretty far back.”

“’ow tall was yer father?” Galar asked.

“Please,” Sigyn begged her brother, “he is my host.”

“Where’s yer family from?” Fjalar asked, hoping to find a more indirect way getting his answer.

“Poland, I think,” Tony said. “Dad’s side anyway. Mom’s are Italian.”

“Ah, Poland,” Fjalar nodded. “Tis a distinct possibility.” Tony threw down the wrench he had been working with.

“Are your brothers saying I’m short?” Tony asked Sigyn, annoyed. Galar and Fjalar’s faces instantly changed from mischievous curiosity into sincere contrition.

“We meant nay insult,” Fjalar backtracked, holding his hands up to indicate no offense was intended.

“We just noticed ye ‘ave a talent fer the craft,” Galar nodded. “One not typically found on Midgard.”

“Look, my father was a man of normal height and so am I,” Tony insisted. “Just because you’ve been around all these Hulks, super soldiers, and giant space alien princes doesn’t mean that this is the average height of every man on earth! The average male height in the U.S. is five foot nine!”
“Ow would ye know that if ye weren’t concerned about yer ‘eight?” Galar pointed out. Tony just let out an unholy screech of annoyance.

“Apologize to Sir Stark,” Sigyn ordered her brothers.

“We didna mean insult!” Fjalar pointed out.

“Then you shouldn’t have insulted him!” Sigyn hissed. “The two of you are being terribly unkind to the man who has taken me in!”

“We’re sorry,” Galar said, seeming to actually mean it.

“Galar’s just got a big mouth,” Fjalar nodded. “All we meant ta say was yer good at what ye do.”

“An’ it’s nice ta see the ol’ craft hasn’t gone from Midgard completely,” Galar nodded.

“Ye’d be welcome in Niðavellir any time,” Fjalar insisted.

“Our father’d probably even ‘ost a feast fer ya,” Galar agreed.

“Ye’d be the ‘it o’ the realm!” Fjalar nodded.

“Just so long as ye didn’t bring the fairy-footed clodhopper with ye,” Galar said.

“Would you two cease in insulting my husband!” Sigyn hissed. “Sinun julma puhe loukata sydämeni.”

“Anteeksi, pikkusisko,” Fjalar said, Galar nodding and both looking embarrassed.

“I feel as though you have both overstayed your welcome,” Sigyn said.

“Aye,” Galar nodded. “We ‘ave seen yer well. An’ in good company.”

“We shall tell father an’ all who ask o’ yer ‘appiness ‘ere,” Fjalar said.

“Well, they shouldn’t have to go immediately,” Tony said, feeling a little bad for the guys. “Maybe we can give them a send off tonight at dinner? A proper farewell?”

“I suppose,” Sigyn said airily.

“Thank ye, Sir Stark,” Fjalar nodded. “Yer kindness is most appreciated.”

With Sigyn’s brothers on their best behavior, the farewell dinner for the Tower’s temporary dwarven houseguests was actually a hit. Sigyn helped Bruce and Darcy make up true dwarven feast to send off her brothers - a rather German meal in Tony’s opinion full of cheese, beer, sausages, and potatoes. The brothers then also told embarrassing stories about baby Sigyn at their father’s forge, including her penchant for biting, how she made up songs to sing before she could even talk, and how the first manifestation of her seiðr had been making the wig of a particularly bossy customers disappear off of the old woman’s bald head. Sigyn had also memorized the names and shapes of all of her father’s tools by the time she was around the Midgardian age of two, and liked to terrorize her father’s many sisters - who had helped raise her - by hiding from them whenever there was a task she didn’t want to partake in, such as a bath or being punished for biting one of her sisters. Apparently, baby Sigyn had been a bit of a terror and it hadn’t really been until she found herself in the care of the Allmother she had grown out of it.
Fjalar delighted the group with his memories of the one time he had been to Midgard before. Fjalar had come as a young apprentice to aid his father’s forge as the dwarves and Asgardians aided their allies in present-day Norway. It was hard to believe Fjalar had been born back when the Roman Empire was still a thing and that the last time he had been on their planet the Visigoths were pretty much in charge of Europe. It had been the Allfather’s battle to be sure, but Asgard had paid the dwarves quite well to come to Midgard, repairing and creating weapons for the Asgardians. The dwarves had taken it upon themselves to pass down some smithing traditions to the Midgardians, who they found delightful and hilarious.

The wars had drawn their father from his family for a considerable time, however, leaving the children who remained behind in the care of Iwaldi’s six older sisters. The wars were also the reason for the nearly 100 year age gap between the twins Lofn and Sjofn and Nanna, same as the Asgardian war with Jotunheim had been responsible for the nearly 200 year gap between Var and Snotra. By the time Sigyn had come along, Iwaldi found himself in charge of ten children under the Midgardian age of 13 and a mistress who did not care to involve herself in the lives of the eight children she had helped create. He had done his best, but when Idunn eloped with Bragi and the remainder of Iwaldi’s children had been discovered, it had been decided that a male dwarf - even one with numerous family members to help him - should not be raising so many small girls.

The meal winding down and dessert being served, Fjalar and Galar had progressed to discussing how Stark’s 3-D printer was similar to a dwarven technology that seemed to magically create metal but instead only arranged the atoms needed to create the metal element. Jane was on the other side of the table basically freaking out over the fact that the dwarves had a machine capable of not just creating entire elements but also producing synthetic ores and entire sheets of metal. Tony was intrigued as well but trying to keep his excitement to a minimum. Fjalar explained the dwarves preferred just to make pure ore rather than finished products as they had a whole culture surrounded by pride of craftsmanship and aesthetic. Galar was talking about some of the tools the dwarves employed when Tony spoke up.

“That sounds similar to my laser cutter,” Tony said. “Lokes used it when he made Sigyn’s ring.”

“When ‘e did what now?” Galar said as Fjalar spat out his mead.

“Yes,” Sigyn said happily, taking off the ring to show her brothers. “Loki made this for me in Sir Stark’s laboratory for my Name Day.” Galar swiped the ring and soon he and Fjalar began looking at its craftsmanship.

“It’s…” Galar began with a frown.


“Yes, well,” Loki said, unused to gaining praise from Sigyn’s brothers.

“Ye did well with the gem settin’,” Galar admitted.

“Ye did this by yerself?” Fjalar asked, handing the ring back to Sigyn.

“Sir Stark helped somewhat,” Loki shrugged.

“I supervised,” Tony shook his head, “and maybe pushed him out of the way once before he burned himself. But it’s all Loki. Designed it himself and everything.”

“Well, now,” Galar said. “That’s something.”

“Father’ll be impressed,” Fjalar nodded.
“I did it for Sigyn, not to impress anyone,” Loki insisted.

“It’s fine work,” Fjalar said. “Ye should be proud o’ it.”

“Ye,” Galar nodded. “Bout time one o’ our sisters found ‘er a husband who can do somethin’ useful. I mean, sittin’ around spoutin’ poetry all day? I’ve ‘ad farts that rhyme better!”

“I’m telling Idunn you said that,” Sigyn huffed.

“An’ she’ll be mad at us ‘til yer ‘usband sends the wee ‘un a box o’ sweeties,” Fjalar rolled his eyes, causing Loki to snort.

“Well, if I didn’t Idis wouldn’t know food had a flavor other than bland,” Loki said.

“Don’t know where Idunn gets it from,” Galar agreed. “She always had a second ‘elpin’ o’ dessert growin’ up. And tis not right to deny a wee ‘un somethin’ nice ‘ere and now.”

“Exactly,” Loki agreed.

Once dessert was finished and the coffee taken away, it was time for Sigyn to bid her brothers farewell. Fjalar and Galar did the weird forearm shaking thing with Tony, Thor and even Loki before hugging their sister. Sigyn had asked them to bring letters and Midgardian gifts to various family members. Then, the brothers stepped back away from those who were seeing them off. Fjalar pulled a small dagger from his pocket, a dagger whose blade seemed not to be made of metal but the swirling of galaxies. With it, he cut the shape of a door and a keyhole through the air. Galar then produced from his pocket a key that also seemed to be made of the same swirling material, save for its bejeweled bow. The key opened a door into what seemed like nothingness. The two brothers waved as they stepped through the door. When they closed it behind them, it disappeared.

“What was that?” Tony demanded to know.

“A door,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“To where?” Tony asked.

“Niðavellir,” Thor responded, confused by Tony’s confusion. “Where else?”

“How did they make that?” Tony asked.

“Did you not see the dagger?” Sigyn replied.

“But I don’t understand,” Tony moaned.

“Not all things are meant for you to understand them,” Loki said. “Now, I should head back to our chambers to see if Sigyn’s brothers have left any… gifts for me behind.”
Bedside Manners

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Loki loses his patience with Sigyn waiting on patients and Thor learns about sexual harassment

Two days after Sigyn’s brothers returned to Niðavellir, Happy and Rhodey returned to the Tower. While Happy was officially back at Stark, he was also officially on bed rest until Tony, Pepper and his doctors gave him leave to return to work. He still had a broken arm and a cast on his leg, but that didn’t stop him from using JARVIS and all the StarkPads at his disposal to try and monitor the goings-on in the Tower. Rhodey was also still on leave as the government sifted through the mountains of paperwork required following an assassination attempt on a sitting president and the even further paperwork needed to address one of the plotters in said assassination attempt to be the sitting vice president. Tony had spent a better part of a week joking that Fox News had interviewed Dick Cheney about the scandal only because they didn’t think the reanimated corpse of Aaron Burr would scare their viewers enough.

With a patient around, Sigyn had gone into full on healer mode. Tony had initially hired an in-home nurse to make sure Happy was healing okay, but the nurse informed him after two days that all of her tasks were already done by someone else before she could complete them. Sigyn was changing Happy’s bandages, using her seiðr to help accelerate his natural healing process, and cooking for him anything he requested as well as making him eat foods she said would boost his health. Rhodey, who had volunteered to hang around in Happy’s on-site room and watch TV with him while he convalesced, got whatever food was left. Tony had gotten the feeling that Rhodes was hanging around Happy’s makeshift hospital room more for the meals Sigyn brought in than to actually help in Happy’s healing process.

Unfortunately for Rhodey and Happy’s sake, wherever Sigyn went Loki was soon to follow. The absolute second his ice magic training was over, Loki was creeping around behind his wife. As long as Sigyn was in the room, Loki was perfectly well-behaved and docile. At her command, Loki would be handing her gauze and wound dressings from the special mixture of herbs and healing ointments Sigyn had then soaking in or assisting in carrying in the various hearty meals she thought Happy need to consume to regain his strength. The second his wife was out of the room however, Loki would sneer at both Happy and Rhodey, glaring at Happy because Sigyn had to touch him to help in his healing and scowl at Rhodey any time he attempted to talk to Sigyn about anything. When Loki stepped out of the room to help bring in lunch for the two men, Rhodey used the opportunity to contact Tony via JARVIS.

“Dude,” Rhodey sighed, “come get your weird little mythological friend. He’s creeping us out.”

“What did he do now?” Tony sighed back from his workshop.

“He’s been glowering at us for the past thirty minutes,” Rhodey explained. “And then, right before he went to help Sigyn make lunch, he asked me if the Air Force had ever taught me the easiest way to dismember a body and bury it.”
“He’s an okay kid, Rhodes. I promise,” Tony insisted. “He just doesn’t like when his wife pays more attention to someone else. As long as she’s around he’ll be on good behavior.”

“Yeah, well I’m not worried about when she’s around,” Rhodey snorted. “I’m worried about him sneaking into my room with a knife at night.”

“Maybe he needs a new job,” Happy suggested. “I mean, you said he did well over Thanksgiving. Maybe retail is good for him.”

“He did well over Thanksgiving because that sneer is natural crowd control,” Rhodey pointed out. “You said he got fired or quit every other job you gave him. Didn’t he physically assault a co-worker?”

“A co-worker who was being racist,” Tony pointed out. “And to be fair, they were kind of exploiting him at the coffee shop.”

“I know troublemakers when I see them,” Rhodey said, “and this guy didn’t even have to walk in the room the first time before I knew he was a troublemaker. If he were one of my recruits, I’d be making sure he stayed occupied so he couldn’t get up to anything.”

“He’s doing charity stuff Tuesday and Thursday afternoons with Steve and Clint,” Tony pointed out. “And he’s spending his morning down here with us. I think you guys can handle spending lunch time and a couple afternoons a week with him.”

“He spent all Monday afternoon sharpening knives in here,” Rhodey said. “Just staring at us and sharpening knives.”

“I’d volunteer him for security duty if I wasn’t concerned he might actually kill someone,” Happy agreed.

“I honestly think the creepy staring is safer for you two,” Tony pointed out. “I mean, if he’s there, at least he will know nothing untoward is going on. You cut him out of the picture completely, and he’ll be making up all kind of assumptions about how you’re trying to sneak his wife away from him. He nearly stabbed Barton for making a flower crown that spelled out marital infidelity.”

“Tony, I know that you’re trying to help this guy and, in light of Pepper’s recent kidnapping, you’re on his side about protecting loved ones from outside forces,” Rhodey said, “but if this kid comes after me, I might have to kill him. And I don’t think that would do well for intergalactic relations, do you?”

“Okay, okay,” Tony sighed. “I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, however, I’d bring up your concerns to Sigyn. She might be able to get him to back off better than I can.”

“Well, give us five minutes to talk to her with our Skulky McSkulkerson around and maybe that’ll happen,” Rhodey rolled his eyes.

“I fail to see what you require, Stark,” Loki huffed.

He had been summoned down to the Hulk containment cell, this time with Widow, Clint, and Bruce all made to join Tony there as well. None of them were exactly sure what Tony had summoned them down there in the afternoon, though Natasha and Clint had an idea after Tony suggested they erect some of the practice targets from the training rooms up on the wall. Loki himself wasn’t sure he liked the direction things seemed to be taking when he came into the room and noticed what the pair were
doing. Loki had a feeling whatever Tony was planning was going to take up time - time Loki thought would be better spent helping his wife. And perhaps keeping an eye on the colonel.

“What is this?” Bruce asked before Loki had to.

“Okay, Lokes,” Tony said, “so, you’ve been working on constructs and you’re good with freezing right? But I just had this cool idea. I was thinking about some new designs for another suit… maybe if I can get it Pepper approved… and while flame cannons are always a welcome addition to anything, I also started thinking about ice missiles. And that got me thinking about you.”

“Ice missiles,” Loki said, unimpressed.

“You’re doing well with creating constructs attached to yourself, but we also know you can freeze stuff without having to actually touch it,” Tony said. “So, I thought we might try to see if you can use ice like a weapon - the same way you use those throwing knives of yours.”

“And this sudden revelation couldn’t wait until the allotted practice time tomorrow morning?” Loki pointed out with a raise brow.

“Yes,” Natasha agreed, “I have reports to finish.”

“And this is totally cutting into my afternoon nap,” Clint nodded.

“Look, I know you’ve been on a creative roll before,” Tony insisted. “You know what it’s like to have an idea and suddenly have to drop everything to see it come to fruition. Just humor me here, guys.”

Tony’s response was a groan from everyone else in the room.

“I think this could have waited,” Bruce said.

“Is there anything any of you are doing that takes precedence?” Tony asked. “Clint can nap anywhere, any time. Lokes, you haven’t done anything in the past three days but read and mope around. Natalie, you’re probably just using those reports as an excuse to not have to answer all of Cap’s questions about Vietnam - like we all are - and Bruce, what is it you’re even working on?”

“A solar-powered cook stove-slash-generator for third world countries,” Bruce replied.

“That can totally wait,” Tony snorted, causing Bruce to groan. “Look, let’s just test this theory and then you guys can all go back to being lame.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed. “If this is so imperative to whatever nonsense you must accomplish, let us do it quickly.”

Natasha, Clint and Tony left the main chamber into the observation room as Loki rolled his eyes. Certainly his progress with constructs was going well enough - he was able to make and maintain large ice shards connected to his body for long periods of time even if he wasn’t able to guide the shape of these shards - but Loki still didn’t like the fact that whatever portion of his body he used for these constructs started to turn blue and take on his inner Jotun appearance. Even as he got more confident in his abilities, Loki still refused to allow Sigyn or Thor to watch him for fear they would see his Jotun form. He also refused to let anyone leave the observation room until his skin was back to its Aesir appearance.

“What is this really about?” Natasha whispered to Tony as the door to the observation room closed behind her.
“I had an idea and…” Tony began.

“What is this really about?” Natasha repeated, colder and with a harder glare this time.

“Rhodey and Happy needed him out of their hair,” Tony whispered back. “Loki’s attempts to help Sigyn are apparently creepy and weird, and they needed someone to distract him so they could talk with her about how best to deal with his overall creepiness.”

“Well,” Natasha sighed, “so long as this doesn’t end with anyone getting murdered.”

“Stark!” Loki called, annoyed, from the other side of the observation room glass, “do you actually want me to attempt something or have you just called me down here to be gawked at through the glass like one of the bestial exhibits at your Midgardian menageries?”

“What did he just ask?” Clint frowned.

“I think that was Asgardian for ‘hurry it up,’” Bruce replied.

“Fine, fine,” Tony said. “Let’er rip, Frosty.” Loki let out an annoyed snort before getting himself into the same stance he used when practicing with his knives.

“What exactly are you expecting to happen here, Tony?” Bruce asked as Loki got himself mentally ready to start casting ice spells.

“Look, you know how you sometimes need to go to a calm place so your big buddy doesn’t show up?” Tony asked.

“Yes?” Bruce replied as Loki appeared to crack his knuckles.

“Well,” Tony said, “Rhodey and Happy needed Loki to go to a calm place so he wouldn’t be shooting them murder stares.”

“Why was Loki shooting them murder stares?” Bruce asked.

“Apparently, he doesn’t like it when his wife makes healing teas and scones for other men,” Tony shrugged.

Summoning what power he could, Loki attempted to shoot shards of ice toward the targets set up on the other side of the cell. He was disappointed to, instead, send a series of snowballs flying, which hit first the targets and then the floor with disappointing and sad little splats. Tony really wanted to make a joke about Loki being on his side for the next Avengers snowball fight, but the warning look from Natasha made him rethink it. Loki looked furious on the other side of the glass, both because he hadn’t easily accomplished the task set before him and because it was a bit humiliating to shoot out splattering snowballs instead of frightening ice knives.

“Maybe try bringing the temperature up a bit and putting less pressure into it,” Bruce suggested over the intercom. Loki threw Bruce an annoyed look, as if to suggest he had thought up that solution on his own already.

“I think he figured that out on his own, Brucey Bear,” Tony pointed out as Loki readjusted his stance on the other side of the glass.

“Do you really think it’s smart to be teaching him how to weaponize his newfound abilities already?” Bruce asked.
“He could probably already freeze us to death anyway, and better we know what he’s capable of than have him figure it out all on his own,” Natasha pointed out. “Besides, we might need something like this down the road.”

“Always ten steps ahead, Romanoff,” Tony rolled his eyes.

Loki let forth a burst of ice - a mixture of icicles and shards - toward the targets on the other side of the room. All of them hit the target and most toward the center, but only a single shard actually pierced the paper. Loki did not seem pleased by this. The fact that Loki’s arm was starting to turn blue didn’t help matters. Tony and Bruce had both discovered that when Loki’s arms started to change colors during his practices, the space prince became less focused and more agitated. Both had proposed that perhaps Loki could wear some type of glove if that would help, but the annoyance he expressed at his blueness being mentioned as well as the fact that casting with a glove seemed to be more difficult did not ease the situation at all.

“I don’t know if this was a good idea today, Tone,” Bruce said. “I think Loki’s stressed enough as it is right now.”

“It’ll be fine,” Tony assured Bruce before turning to the intercom to talk to Loki. “You’re doing great, Snow Miser.” Loki rolled his eyes at Tony and again adjusted himself into a knife throwing stance.

“He’s actually got decent form,” Clint admitted, as Loki readied to send forth his magic again.

“He has had a thousand or so years of practice,” Natasha pointed out.

“Not with the ice part,” Clint mentioned as Loki set some more shards flying. More went through the target this time, but several still only hit it and bounced off. Loki did not seem pleased with this progress whatsoever.

“This is useless!” Loki stormed angrily.

“You’re doing great!” Tony assured him.

“You’re improving each time,” Bruce agreed. “And considering this is only the third attempt you’ve made, you’re doing much better than most would be.”

Instead of responding, Loki angrily let forth another spray of ice shards. This time, all but one went through the target rather than sliding off though few actually hit the bullseye. Even though he was more successful this go round, Loki seemed increasingly frustrated that his accuracy was now off. Clint, Natasha and Bruce all turned to glare at Tony, wanting to know how long he was going to keep up the whole charade.

“For what it’s worth, he gets more deadly when he’s angry,” Tony shrugged.

“Shut this down,” Natasha informed him.

“Ugh,” Tony groaned before turning to the intercom. “Alright, Lokes. That’s good for now. Maybe we can pick this back up during regular time tomorrow morning.”

“We most certainly shall not,” Loki fumed. He tucked his hand back into his shirt sleeve, indicating that it had started to change color.

“Maybe we should come back to this after a bit more experimentation with constructs,” Bruce suggested.
“Well, I’m getting out of here before Jack Frost gets mad and let’s it loose on us,” Clint said before twisting himself up into the rafters and disappearing.

“You get Loki out of here,” Natasha ordered Tony. “I’ll help Bruce clean up.”

“Fine, fine,” Tony sighed. “Come’re Frosty. We’ve got an elevator to catch.”

“Now,” Sigyn said, handing a teacup to Happy, “drink this quickly.”

“Thank you,” Happy said, taking the cup and downing the drink quickly as Sigyn had suggested. The mixture was terrible tasting, but Happy always felt stronger and his pains lessened after Sigyn brought him the cup three times daily.

“That stuff smells nasty,” Rhodey frowned.

“I admit it is not the most pleasing in flavor,” Sigyn explained, “but this tisane is full of many helpful herbs that aid in recovery. Unfortunately, the addition of anything such as honey or lemon might detract from the potential of some of the Asgardian and Vanir herbs in the mix. It may seem like primitive medicine, but without the aid of a Soulforge, it is the best I can do.”

“It certainly makes me feel better than anything the docs have prescribed,” Happy shrugged.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Colonel?” Sigyn asked.

“It’s very kind of you to offer,” Rhodey replied. “I don’t need you to bring me anything, but… but I would like to ask you a question.”

“Certainly, sir,” Sigyn nodded, smoothing out her skirt and then sitting into a wingback chair in the room with all the grace and poise of a fairy tale princess. It took Rhodey a moment to remind himself the woman sitting before him was flesh and blood and not some animated character. Happy, who had seen Sigyn basically float around for months, just returned to eating the raspberry scone and smoothie she had made him.

“Is your husband always so… prickly when it comes to your patients?” Rhodey asked.

“Why do you ask, sir?” Sigyn asked worriedly.

“It’s just…” Rhodey said, trying to think of a way to phrase things that wouldn’t upset a space alien princess.

“He’s been a little intense,” Happy explained. “I don’t think he likes all the attention I’m getting for being sick. And definitely not the attention Rhodey is getting for being nice enough to hang out with me while I’m still on bedrest. Seriously, man, I owe you for sitting with me so Tony wouldn’t build me that automated wheelchair that also turns into a bed thing.”

“You’re welcome,” Rhodey said, “though I have to admit I did it more for mankind than just for you.”

“What, exactly, has my husband done?” Sigyn asked curiously.

“It’s not… I mean, it’s not that bad,” Rhodey said. “He just… stares a lot.”

“He glares a lot,” Happy nodded. “I’m pretty sure if he was able to cause both of us physical injury just by looking at us and thinking really hard, we’d both be in a lot worse shape.”
“I see,” Sigyn said flatly.

“Tony thought we should talk to you about it,” Rhodey said. “Get some ideas about how maybe we can resolve whatever is at issue here.”

“Oh,” Sigyn said, her voice still completely devoid of tone, “you two shouldn’t trouble yourself. I will handle this completely. Sir Happy, you just continue seeing to your convalescence, and Colonel, you enjoy this time off before they recall you back to the Midgardian military. I will handle Loki. Everything will be fine. You will see.” With that, Sigyn stood up in one motion and airily swept out of the room. Despite her insistence that everything would be fine, both men seriously doubted that.

“What was that?” Rhodey asked. “I’ve never seen less emotion in my life, and I was present for a meeting with Putin.”

“That is Sigyn when she’s angry,” Happy explained. “It’s like all the color and warmth drains out of the room and is replaced by a sense of primeval dread.”

“If he has to deal with that,” Rhodey asked, “why does Loki bother ever doing anything that is going to get him in trouble.”

“Beats me,” Happy shrugged.

The ride back up to the top of the tower had been deathly silent, so Tony was relieved when the doors opened up. Instead of someone else coming into the elevator however, Loki was pulled out of it by his shirt collar. As the door closed, Loki brushed himself off, readjusted his clothes and then looked up to see who had virtually kidnapped him. He was a bit surprised to see his wife standing before him. From the way her arms were crossed across her chest and how she was tapping her foot, Loki had a feeling she hadn’t jerked him out of the elevator for a quick session in the bedroom.

“Hello, dearest,” Loki began. “Sir Stark and I…”

“Loki! Have you been threatening my patients again?” Sigyn demanded.

“Not verbally,” Loki grumbled.

“Loki!” Sigyn said furiously. “You know better than this! How am I supposed to help Sir Happy heal if you are there compromising my efforts with negative energy!”

“He is doing fine,” Loki insisted. “The Midgardian healers said so at his last check up. Besides, I am only around to help you.”

“It does not help me for you to make my patients and their guests uneasy!” Sigyn pointed out.

“I cannot help that Sir Happy and the Colonel find me intimidating,” Loki shrugged.

“You can’t help sharpening knives in front of them or telling them about all of the animals you have learned to dismember and fillet while on hunting trips,” Sigyn replied accusingly. “Nor should you invite Thor up to verify your tales!”

“If Thor was going to make us suffer his annoying presence in the room, he should at least endeavor to be useful,” Loki huffed. “And it was either that or Thor telling them that story about how he slayed the Troll King for the millionth time this month.”
“If you wanted Thor to be useful, you could have him allowed to talk with Sir Happy instead of using Thor as a way to compromise his recovery,” Sigyn said. “As it is, you spend most of your day threatening one person Sir Happy has offering him companionship.”

“If the Colonel is so ‘badass’ as Sir Stark says, he should hardly feel threatened by a seiðrless demigod,” Loki pointed out.

“I am starting to understand why Eir never wants you around the infirmary,” Sigyn seethed.

“Oh, yes, that would be a smart move,” Loki snorted. “Banning the one person in this realm who can provide you any amount of assistance in your herb grinding and delivering incantations over tisanes.” Sigyn suddenly got a very haughty look on her face and Loki, to his own horror, realized what seed of knowledge he had just planted in his wife’s brain.

“Very well, husband,” Sigyn announced, “I am henceforth banning you from Sir Happy’s rooms until further notice. And you are not permitted to sit outside of it and stare through the open door either.”

“This is ridiculous Sigyn!” Loki said as his wife pushed past him toward the elevator.

“Banned!” Sigyn called back as the elevator door closed in front of her. “Until further notice!”

“Sir,” JARVIS intoned in Tony’s lab, “Prince Loki is seeking entrance to the labs.”

“Ugh, what for?” Tony groaned.

“Sir, Prince Loki is no longer seeking entrance to the labs,” JARVIS began.

“Oh, good,” Tony sighed, relieved.

“... he has already breached them by banging on the door so hard it shattered when I refused to let him in,” JARVIS finished.

“WHAT?” Tony hissed, rushing past Bruce who was completely oblivious to what was going on around him, his headphones tuned up to some relaxing classical music as he worked. As Tony entered into the hallway outside the lab where he and Bruce were working, Darcy nearly skidded into him.

“Hey, Loki breached Jane’s lab,” Darcy informed him. “He’s apparently looking for you.”

“Oh, no. What now?” Tony groaned. “Do you think I have enough time to hide?”

“STARK!” A voice bellowed from down the hall.

“Not anymore,” Darcy shrugged.

“What did he want?” Tony asked worriedly.

“JARVIS took too long to let him in,” Darcy explained. “He broke the glass of the lab door, walked through, called Thor an oaf and then demanded to see you. And being distracted by space stuff, Jane may have pointed him in the right direction.”

“STARK!” Loki bellowed again, charging down the hallway.
“So, if he jettisons me across the room like he did Jane’s solar alignment scope do I get hazard pay?” Darcy asked.

“Go get Thor just in case I need someone to hold Reindeer Games down,” Tony ordered. “JARV, tell security the breach was an accident and get some staff up here to clean up the glass and replace the window.”

“STARK!” Loki howled again as Darcy sped off to do her assigned tasks.

“What’s up?” Tony asked, playing it casually.

“My wife has banned me from assisting in her healing endeavors,” Loki fumed.


“What happened is your little chum, the Colonel,” Loki spat with disgust, “is endeavoring to seduce my wife away from me.”

“Um… what?” Tony said.

“He thinks by having a kindly appearance and showing his dedication to Sir Happy’s recovery he can charm Sigyn, but I know better,” Loki said. “That is why I have been watching him.”

“Okay, first of all, I have known Rhodey since forever and he is not the type of guy to poach another man’s girl,” Tony said. “Second of all, he’s totally got this on-again, off-again thing with his childhood sweetheart from Philly. Glenda’s totally awesome. It’s the long distance thing I think. And Glenda’s ex is kind of a jerk, too. And third of all, just because someone is nice to your wife doesn’t mean they’re trying to take her from you.”

“On Asgard…” Loki began.

“We’re not on Asgard,” Tony pointed out. “But seriously, is that all it takes on Asgard to seduce a woman? Be polite to her? Nevermind… and even if we were, you really think that wife of yours would really pull something like that on you.”

“Then why does your friend Rhodes conspire against me so? Why has he gotten me banned from Sir Happy’s quarters?” Loki hissed. “Why does he tell Sigyn I am threatening him?”

“Because you were?” Tony pointed out.

“Brother!” Thor said, thundering down the hallway. “What has happened?”

“Oh, Sigyn just banned Loki from hanging around Happy’s sick room because Loki thinks Rhodey is trying to steal Sigyn from him, so your baby bro’s natural reaction to that is to act as threatening and demonic as possible,” Tony shrugged.

“Loki,” Thor chastised, “The Colonel is an honorable man, and would not do such a thing.”

“Just as the members of the einherjar and your precious rjóðrhaukar never would,” Loki hissed. “Yet they are always attempting to dally with women who do not seek their advances.”

“The soldiers of Asgard…” Thor began.

“Wait,” Tony interjected, “you just let members of your military hit on your sister-in-law and don’t do anything about it? That’s harassment, Thunderstruck, and if I caught any of my guys doing it, they’d be fired.”
“It has been ages since any…” Thor began.

“Fifty years,” Loki hissed back, “since Sigyn told me that Kveld and Ulrich Hjaltasson cornered her in the alcove outside the infirmary. And when she came to me and then the Allfather, he insisted it was hearsay, nothing Sigyn could prove. Then he told her to pay them no mind. They were just soldiers being crass and she should ignore them. And you stood by his side. Sigyn was too fearful to walk the palace halls alone for months.”

“I did not know,” Thor frowned.

“Because you blind yourself to your precious foot soldiers and what they really are,” Loki shot back. “You do not care what they do so long as they worship you as their hero. It is bad enough how they have made Sigyn feel. Think of what it must be like for the other female denizens of the palace who do not have the title of princess or a male figure to protect them.”

“Not cool, Thor,” Tony agreed.

“I shall handle this when I return to Asgard,” Thor insisted. “I promise, I have not seen such things myself. I would have acted had it been so.”

“Of course they do not act thusly in your presence,” Loki huffed. “Especially since the Lady Sif is constantly around you. She would not tolerate such behavior. In fact, it was only after Sigyn confided the incident that Sif helped her handle things.”

“Is that why the Hjaltassons came down with that virus only curable from a plant found in the swamps of Alfheim?” Thor said.

“Was it bad?” Tony asked curiously.

“They vomited up slugs for nearly two moon cycles,” Thor explained, “and that was one of the signs their condition was improving.”

“Okay, well, Loki, I promise Rhodey is not trying to steal your girl,” Tony said. “And I think he’s a bit better behaved than what goes for gentlemanly in Asgard’s special forces. Also, I think an apology to him and Happy might get you back on the wife’s good side. Even if you don’t mean it.”

“I will hold you to your promise of The Colonel’s honor,” Loki informed Tony, “but should his honor falter, I shall hold you just as responsible.”

“Cool,” Tony nodded, “and Thor, I have some sexual harassment DVDs and course material I think you might be able to use back in Asgard. I’ll have Pep set up a meeting between you and our HR folks so you can get out the message back home that women are people too.”

“Thank you, Stark,” Thor nodded. “And Loki, I shall endeavor to do better in the future.”

“Yes,” Loki spat, “I haven’t heard that before.”

“Now,” Sigyn said, setting a nice dinner before both Happy and Rhodey. “Here is some pumpkin soup in bread bowls. I have a nice apple cake for dessert if you are still hungry.”

“I think this will be plenty,” Rhodey replied.

“Speak for yourself,” Happy snorted. “I’ve had that apple cake before.”
“Shall I fetch you the canned cream for it as well?” Sigyn smiled.

“That would be lovely, thanks,” Happy smiled.

Sigyn was barely three paces out of the room when she nearly ran into her husband, holding a bouquet of pink Gerbera daisies in one hand and the can of whipped cream Happy had just mentioned. Instead of being impressed, Sigyn crossed her arms over her chest, as if daring Loki to make nice with her. Loki was not completely unprepared for this and thrust the bouquet of flowers Stark had ordered for him from the Duane Reade nearby. Sigyn looked at them skeptically before tentatively taking the bouquet.

“I am here to apologize to Sir Happy and the Colonel for my misbehavior,” Loki announced.

“What is your game, husband?” Sigyn asked suspiciously.

“Just as I have said,” Loki insisted. “I have behaved atrociously and in an unmerited manner, and therefore must set things to right.”

“You best have no ulterior motive to this, husband,” Sigyn informed him. “I will ward the room to prevent your entrance if necessary in the future.”

“I shall bring Sir Happy his canned cream,” Loki replied with a smile.

Naturally, Happy and Rhodey were even more suspicious than Sigyn when Loki walked into the room. Sigyn had informed them she had banned her husband from being in their presence and - while it wasn’t exactly how either man had hoped the situation would be settled - both Happy and Rhodey felt a bit of relief knowing that Loki wasn’t about to just barge in and start a detailed lecture on the best way to skin various Asgardian animals. Instead, Loki sat the can of whipped cream on the tray Happy had across his lap in the hospital bed. Then, the trickster god stepped back, legs spread and hands behind his back.

“I have come to apologize for my behavior as of late,” Loki informed the two men before either could open their mouths. “My anger was misdirected, and I unfortunately took my emotions out on both of you. It was an unkind thing to do, and I promise to do my best to avoid such boorish behavior in the future. I should not have threatened either of you in the manner which I did. To be fair, I was not aware such behavior was frowned upon in Midgardian culture.”

“It’s perfectly natural to threaten to murder people on your home planet?” Rhodey scoffed.

“When one’s spouse is involved, yes,” Loki nodded.

“To be fair, a good amount of people here feel the same way,” Happy pointed out. “Weren’t you at that yacht party where Tony hit on that guy’s trophy wife.”

“You’re asking if I was at that party?” Rhodey huffed. “I was the one who fished Tony out of the water afterwards.”

“At any rate, my faults are many and egregious,” Loki continued, “but if you could find it in your kind hearts to forgive me, I would be much obliged.”

“Does forgiving you mean you’ll stop harassing us and bringing knives to sharpen in front of us?” Rhodey asked.

“Yes,” Loki sighed. “I may chose to never darken this doorway ever again.”
“Well, I’ll believe that when I see it,” Rhodey said, “but for now, we accept your apology and we’ll tell your wife you made nice. Just stay out of here, okay?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, spinning on his heel and heading back toward the kitchen area of Happy’s rooms. A disconcerted Sigyn was standing behind the island counter, waiting on a kettle to brew on the stove behind her.

“Have you made your amends?” Sigyn asked.

“Yes,” Loki nodded.

“And you promise not to bother my patient any more?” Sigyn said.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “And… I am sorry that I attempted to compromise your healing endeavors because of my own misplaced frustrations.”

“Good,” Sigyn nodded. “Now, I have made some tea and some scones. You may have a cup and one scone if you promise to do so without bothering my patient and leave once you are finished.”

“Alright,” Loki agreed with a smile. Sigyn picked out a tea bag, poured the steaming hot water over it and then mixed it just the way Loki liked before sliding him the tea cup and a plate with a scone using her seiðr. Loki picked them both up with a smile.
In Your Shadow

Chapter Summary

Or, in which, Loki learns something unexpected about his brother.

So long as Rhodey was still off active duty on his birthday, Tony had decided to throw his BFF a big party in Stark Tower. Rhodey had protested, insisting that taking a train to Philly to see his parents and siblings that afternoon would be fine, but Tony thought Rhodey would get more out of spending the Saturday of his birthday with family and the Friday night before partying it up with whomever Tony could corral onto his party deck for the special occasion. Steve and Natasha, regrettably, had to return to D.C. now that Tony was - for the most part - back and in control of things. However, they were also a brief train or helicarrier ride away if anything came up. Clint was now working with Bruce and Tony to oversee Loki’s morning training sessions, though the snarky combination of Tony, Clint, and Loki was enough to make Bruce go pretty green around the gills sometimes.

Thor, it seemed, was still waiting on some kind of gilt engraved invitation to return back to Asgard and was taking every second he could to spend with Jane. Tony’s nearly unlimited funds and the brand new research equipment it brought also meant Jane was progressing with her work in leaps and bounds. She was hoping to get at least three new papers out for publication before the end of the year and possibly a book. Jane wanted to credit Sigyn for all of her important input into the work, but couldn’t exactly figure out how to source her newfound friend. Darcy’s suggestion of listing Sigyn’s qualifications as “alien space princess” probably wouldn’t go over well with the academic community. Jane’s devotion to her work was how Tony Stark found himself in her lab on a Wednesday night trying to convince half of his employees/housemates to come to Rhodes’ party.

“Will there be costumes?” Sigyn inquired from where she and Darcy were sitting on a lab table, sharing a package of Red Vines and watching internet cat videos.

“No,” Tony shook his head. “Rhodey has not permitted a costumed birthday party since ‘98.”

“Why would one wear costumes?” Thor asked, confused. “I was not aware Midgardians celebrated birthdays with masques.”

“Typically, they don’t,” Tony said.

“Sigyn was referring to the grand masque of the Old Holy Evening fête Stark held near Vetrnætr,” Loki said, dramatically draped across the only other empty lab table in the room. “You were not invited.”

“We carved winter squash into lanterns!” Sigyn said excitedly. Thor scrunched up his face, though Tony couldn’t tell whether it was in confusion about the idea of squash lanterns or sadness he wasn’t invited to the party.

“But you guys are coming to Rhodes’ bash,” Tony said, hoping to refocus the group.

“I don’t know,” Jane frowned. “I have some work.”
“Why don’t you invite Bruce?” Darcy suggested.

“Because the Bruce hates social situations,” Tony pointed out. “And because there’s a good shot some of Rhodey’s military buddies might still want to hand him over to some kind of tribunal over what happened back in ‘08. So, come on Foster. Help me liven this joint up.”

“It’s supposed to be a clear night for viewing,” Jane frowned. “And the data could be helpful.”

“You have already collected more data than Enron shredded in 2001,” Tony pointed out. “What could you possibly need more for?”

“Everything has to be especially exact and correct. More data always helps,” Jane said, challengingly. “And unlike some people, my findings have to be testable and repeatable, scrutinized by my peers the world over. I can’t just hold a press conference and suddenly people want to buy whatever I’m spewing.”

“Though we do appreciate all the new Stark Tech we got for Christmas,” Darcy added.

“Well, Thor, I’m sure you can still hang out with us,” Tony said.

“I have promised by Lady Jane and the Lady Darcy to act as a ‘pack mule’ for the evening,” Thor beamed. “It is because of my marvelous strength.”

“And the fact you are marvelously useless at anything else,” Loki huffed.

“What about you, Lestat?” Tony asked. “You and the wife ready to par-tay?”

“No one has said par-tay since 2005,” Darcy pointed out.

“Well, maybe I’m bringing it back,” Tony snorted.

“I was not aware that part of my imprisonment in your Tower was command performances at all of your galas,” Loki said. “And I had so been longing for a quiet night in.”

“You have had a quiet night in every night since Thanksgiving,” Tony pointed out. “In fact, when exactly was the last time you left this Tower?”

“Sigyn!” Loki whined.

“It may do you some good to socialize and meet the Colonel’s peers,” Sigyn mused.

“On second thought, Lokes you’re disinvited,” Tony said. “The last thing I need is you debating Machiavelli with people who might be tricked into giving out nuclear launch codes.”

“What is a Machiavelli?” Loki asked curiously.

“JARV, put Loki’s internet on safe search mode again,” Tony announced.

“Quite, sir,” JARVIS agreed.

“There are these things called libraries, you know,” Loki huffed.

“Why are you so desperate for us to come, anyway?” Darcy asked curiously. “I thought you invited Rhodey’s friends.”

“Yes, and Rhodey’s friends hate me,” Tony said. “He’s got a bunch of military buds who think I’m
lame because I never served in the armed forces, some politician friends who are always trying to get me to give to their campaigns, and his college friends who are always lecturing me about the privileges afforded by colonialism.”

“I thought you and Rhodey went to school together,” Jane pointed out, adjusting some instrument.

“Yes, but we had maybe a handful of friends in common,” Tony pointed out. “Most of the time, Rhodey’s friends hung out with me because they felt sorry for the one 14-year-old on campus whose parents told him to stay in Massachusetts for winter break because Dad’s too busy in D.C. wining and dining Reagan in the hopes of getting defense contracts. I didn’t hurt that I had my own credit card, either.”

“Wait, are you trying to guilt us into coming to this party by telling us stories about your sad childhood?” Darcy asked.

“Would that work?” Tony asked back.

“Dunno,” Darcy shrugged. “What kind of hors d’oeuvres will this shindig have?”

“Will there be meatballs on sticks and the puffs of cheese and macaroni?” Thor inquired excitedly.

“Bacon-wrapped shrimp, too,” Tony said. “And chocolate cake.”

“Jane!” Thor said happily.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jane said, waving Thor off from where she was adjusting more equipment. “We’ll go and stuff our faces.”

“Loki and I shall also put in an appearance,” Sigyn announced, “if only to collect drinks and food for our consumption later.”

“I appreciate that,” Tony nodded.

“Must we go to whatever pathetic event Stark has cooked up for this evening?” Loki moaned from where he had draped himself across the divan in their living chambers. Sigyn rolled her eyes and sighed from the cauldron atop the stove she was using to brew up some replacements for some of the empty vials in her healing supplies.

Sigyn had to admit her husband was often times a contradiction in terms, a complex being that few understood. He loved to be the center of attention but despised large crowds. He outwardly ridiculed and jeered at the same people he was secretly desperate to approve of him. Loki put on an air of not caring what anyone thought of him, yet sometimes obsessed and agitated himself over whispers of rumors, devising ways to make those who may or may not have belittled him pay. He often chided Thor for being lazy and not willing to put forth an effort lest he be humiliated, yet Loki himself often threw a temper tantrum when he found himself not to immediately excel at a new task or skill. And while Loki had spent the better part of the last millennia maintaining seiðr ability was a better test of might than physical prowess, Sigyn knew that Loki had spent much of his youth secretly honing his skills with daggers, glaives and other weapons in the hope that Thor might praise him for his skill.

Frigga had always maintained that her younger son was a “sensitive soul,” though there were others at court who preferred the term “hypocrite.” Sigyn herself felt it was somewhere in between. Loki could be a bit overdramatic at times, but he could have a heart on occasion. He just didn’t open up very well to those who he thought might ridicule said openness, which unfortunately included about
99 percent of Asgard. And because he had such a hard time getting along with most of Asgard, he had developed a secret hatred for most social functions and outings. Certainly he enjoyed getting to schmooze and politic with foreign dignitaries, to finesse and finagle the various luminaries, doyens and envoys that Asgard’s court gathered. Bending people to his will was one of Loki’s most favorite pastimes, perhaps second only to unhinging the haughty and dignified with his bits of mischief. Her husband liked order in his own way. After all, there could be no chaos if there was no order for it to interrupt.

“It will be good for you to get out of our chambers and among some new faces,” Sigyn finally said to her husband. “You might even find someone enjoyable to converse with.”

“I am certain I could spend the remainder of my life on Midgard and not find someone enjoyable to converse with,” Loki huffed. “Especially if I am looking for them at a soiree thrown by Stark.”

“You would think after more than two hundred years of marriage you would learn you cannot lie to me, Loki,” Sigyn shook her head.

“You honestly expect me to find one person I can converse with at this event?” Loki snorted.

“I do not think that is a bet you can afford to make,” Sigyn replied. “Unless your objective is for me to find you someone to converse with.”

“I have more important things to do than to make nice with some Midgardians I will hopefully never see again,” Loki frowned.

“Like what?” Sigyn asked.

“Like finish that letter to my mother,” Loki replied.

“You could be doing that right now instead of moping,” Sigyn pointed out. “Or have done it last evening instead of spending all of your time trying to best Thor at that strange Midgardian game.”

“Sir Stark says air hockey is an ancient and noble Midgardian tradition,” Loki huffed. “Besides, I can now write to Mother that Thor and I managed to get along and play a game together. And nothing was broken.”

“No, nothing was broken. Even though Stark’s automatons had to clean up a great deal of spilled ale and food,” Sigyn said.

“Such things are to be expected,” Loki replied airily.

“I think your mother would be pleased to hear of how well you got along with Stark’s Midgardian guests as well,” Sigyn ventured. “Especially since Sir Stark said many of them are interested in politics and diplomacy. I think it would be a good relief to your mother to hear you are rekindling some old interests.”

“When are you sending your next batch of letters to Asgard?” Loki inquired.

“The day after tomorrow,” Sigyn said. “Thor is writing one of his own to your mother and felt he would have it complete by then.”

“A letter from Thor. How riveting,” Loki snorted. “No doubt it will take him two weeks to write and is largely comprised of a list of food he has consumed. After all, he hasn’t had any great battles to punch it up with tales of what creatures he has decapitated.”
“Be kind, Loki,” Sigyn cautioned.

“Oh? And the last letter you received from Thor was erudite, I’m sure,” Loki snorted. Sigyn rolled her eyes, even though she knew Loki wasn’t exactly lying. Thor wasn’t one for writing down his thoughts, and most letters usually did entail what he had eaten and what fights he had engaged in, usually on parchment stained with food, ale, and large inkblots.

“The last letter I received from Thor was when he was offworld following up leads on your disappearance,” Sigyn told her husband. “It was to tell me that the rumors you had been sighted on Majesdane were mostly likely false so I wouldn’t get my hopes up.” Loki was quiet for a long period.

“What made anyone think I was on Majesdane?” Loki asked.

“I was picking up something about it my scrying,” Sigyn admitted. “Very vague, but it was all I had.”

“He… he had a Majesdanian among his little collection of foundlings and lost souls,” Loki frowned. “Might be why.” Sigyn left her potion on the stove and came toward her husband, sitting beside him on the sofa and rubbing his back in a soothing manner. “I am glad to know you were looking for me, though I might not have been happy had you found me. That… that is a place where I never wish you to venture. It took everything in me to try and squirrel away any thoughts I had of you. I did not wish them to find you, to hurt you. I didn’t realize they only wanted that sort of information as a way of hurting me.”

“I have never doubted your desire to protect me,” Sigyn smiled sadly, “though I cannot say it makes me happy to think you had to hurt yourself to do so.”

“That is because,” Loki said, kissing the hand his wife currently wasn’t using to scratch down his back, “you are a far, far better woman than I deserve.”

“Loki,” Sigyn sighed. Loki gave her a smirk then a kiss.

“Now, you finish up your brew, I’ll finish up my correspondence,” Loki said, “and I suppose we shall put in an appearance at the Colonel’s Name Day festivities.”

“Thank you,” Sigyn said as Loki got up from his seat, “for telling me that. I know it isn’t easy to share about your time there, so it means much to me when you do.” Loki gave his wife a half-hearted mock salute and then headed off to the library to finish his letter to his mother.

So far, there were only three things Loki was enjoying about Stark’s fête for the Colonel. The first was witnessing Sigyn’s love of all miniaturized Midgardian foodstuffs and the second was her promise they wouldn’t remain at the event long. However, the third and by far most pleasurable for Loki was that Sigyn was wear a midriff bearing, backless Vanir summer dress made of sheer light pink fabric and gold embellishments. Loki hadn’t specifically requested for her to wear the ensemble, but after thirty minutes of her husband staring longingly and sighing at the particular garment as she went through her wardrobe, Sigyn decided to put the poor man out of his misery. The last time she had worn the gown had been several years ago when she and Loki had been sent as Asgard’s official representatives to some annual sailing regatta her grandfather sponsored. They had spent most of the three-day race enclosed in a private cabana where no one could see what they were up to.

As Sigyn hunted down various trays of food, Loki curled himself into a corner of the room to be left
alone. The memories of his wife and the last time she had worn that particular outfit were all the entertainment Loki felt he needed for the duration of Stark’s party. And unless Stark had a silken tent that would allow muffle some sensual cries and rushed pants, Loki didn’t think there was anything about the party to tempt him. Loki grinned to himself, thinking about how Sigyn would roll her eyes at his exhibitionist tendencies if he told her what he was thinking about. As if she had ever turned down his suggestion of a semi-public romp. Some might think in their short marriage he had managed to lead his wife astray, but Loki rather liked to think he had just given her a slight push in the right direction.

“Well met, brother,” Thor boomed from behind him, interrupting the beautiful imaginings Loki had been conjuring up. Loki rolled his eyes and sighed.

“How many times must I remind you that you are not to call me that,” Loki huffed. “We are in public.”

“I apologize,” Thor frowned.

“Besides,” Loki continued. “I’m not your brother.”

“Loki…” Thor began.

“Where is your lady Jane?” Loki asked, abruptly changing the conversation. Thor frowned, but realized he wasn’t going to coax Loki into a conversation he didn’t want to have at this juncture.

“She is conversing with some of the people who attended the great Hall of Learning For Technology in the state at the Great Hill,” Thor explained. “They are discussing matters related to the construction and implementation of the Bifrost. Or, I believe it is the Bifrost. I wouldn’t wish to tell them wrong.”

“You know how the Bifrost works,” Loki snorted. “We had the same tutors and took the same classes together. And despite the fact I let you cheat off my work all those years you still managed to pick up a few things.”

“It was all so boring,” Thor groaned. “What do I care about Troll Wars or translating ancient sigils or crafting seiðr orbs. When am I going to use any of that?”

“If you had remembered about the Troll Wars you wouldn’t have made that ridiculous faux pas that nearly got us killed in Trollveggen,” Loki groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“We won that battle,” Thor pointed out.

“And you can’t rely on someone to translate for you all the time,” Loki said. “What if someone purposefully mistranslated the message to cause strife?”

“They would never,” Thor said, only for Loki to look at him pointedly. Thor let out a sigh. “And I suppose now I am to be lectured about the practical applications of seiðr orbs?”

“Norns no,” Loki huffed. “You barely control the bit of lightning you can do. The last thing anyone needs is your half-baked attempt at casting spells and enchantments. Remember when you accidentally made Mother’s footstool come to life?”

“Yes,” Thor grinned. “It was quite comical once you got over the initial terror. Remember the way it raced down the hall, its fringe flying like some kind of unwieldy animal as the guards chased it?”

“And then the guards decided the best way to stop it was to kill it, which then made Mother furious
because it then had to be reupholstered,” Loki nodded. “Which is why she decided you we safer on
the training grounds than learning seiðr.”

“I was never good at seiðr like you are,” Thor admitted. “You always caught onto it so easily.
School work too. The only thing I was ever good at was training and fighting.”

“I’m sure you could have mastered it if you had applied yourself,” Loki huffed.

“But that was what was so frustrating,” Thor pointed out. “You had to put in no effort at all to learn
seiðr or to memorize the names of every dwarf king or recite speeches from memory or calculate the
amount of energy to send the Bifrost on a certain trajectory in your head. I could study for hours and
still would do no better than you could after putting in no time at all. The training grounds were the
one place I felt that I wasn’t in your shadow.”

“In my shadow,” Loki said, incredulously.

“Mother was always praising you for your abilities, for how well you did in the classroom,” Thor
shrugged. “And you always spent so much time from her, learning from her. It was hard not to be
jealous of that.”

“Mother only praised me so loudly because Odin was forever going on about your prowess with
weapons and how many opponents you had taken down in the field. It was as if anything I
accomplished didn’t matter to him,” Loki huffed. “Perhaps I was good at school work and seiðr, but
that wasn’t of any consequence to anyone. All Asgard cares about is how many heads you can bash
in and enemies you can conquer - so long as you use brute strength rather than wiles and seiðr that
is.”

“It was of great consequence to me,” Thor said. “And to Mother. I did not realize our admiration
meant so little.”

“Well, it’s hard to hear admiration over all the All-Mighty Allfather Odin’s fault-finding,” Loki
replied.

“You put too much stake in what Father says,” Thor shook his head. “He is not always right you
know.”

“I’m sorry,” Loki said, taking a dramatic step away from Thor, “did I just hear you say what I think I
just heard you say? You realize Heimdall is always listening, don’t you? And I for one will not stand
idly by while the Allfather descends down from his throne to pummel you into the ground for your
disobedience. Not this time. No, I have learned my lesson about trying to defend you from him.”

“You are being overly dramatic about this,” Thor rolled his eyes. “Father and I have disagreed many
times in the past. You should remember. You tend to get put in the middle when it happens. And
since I have begun spending time on Midgard… I have come to realize there are many things I
disagree with him about. And for a man of his years, he can be very short-sighted.”

“Why must you have this conversation when no one else is here to witness it,” Loki moaned. “Now
no one will believe me when I tell them that the almighty Thor thinks that there are cracks in the
facade of the illustrious Allfather.”

“I am being serious, Loki,” Thor frowned. “Father has said many things about Midgard in the past,
but now that I have been here and gotten to know Midgardians… I find much of what he has said
about this place and its people isn’t true. And I would assume that means he is not always right about
other things as well.”
"If you had been capable of that train of thought five hundred years ago, you wouldn’t have failed every logic assignment we were given,” Loki snorted.

“I think he told us many things that were not true because he wanted to protect us, shelter us,” Thor continued, “and to prevent us from making the same mistakes he felt he has made in his own life. But that was a mistake, too, and I for one do not want to close myself off to others and other realms because of the bad things that only might happen. Sometimes, a bit of risk is worth the reward, after all.”

“That is actually well said,” Loki admitted begrudgingly.

“I suppose I can be intelligent on occasion,” Thor smirked. Loki sighed, realizing it was probably his turn to give a little.

“You aren’t stupid, Thor,” Loki admitted. “You just aren’t… what is it Lady Darcy calls it… oh, yes, ‘book smart.’ You are what Midgardians call ‘street smart,’ I believe it is.”

“Street smart?” Thor frowned.

“I believe Lady Darcy explained it to Sigyn this way,” Loki said. “Lady Jane is very book smart. She knows much about the workings of the Bifrost and the interplay between the realms, but she is so engrossed in her acquisition of knowledge that sometimes she will walk into a street without looking to see if something is coming. Whereas those who are ‘street smart’ may not be as good at learning things written in tomes and memorizing dates of battles or massive equations, but they can navigate the inner workings of society. Book smart is theoretical and street smart is practicalities, as far as I have deduced.”

“I like that,” Thor nodded. “Street smart. I do have a superb sense of navigation.”

“So long as you aren’t in a cave,” Loki pointed out.

“Who is in a cave?” Sigyn asked, handing over a fresh drink and tray of food to her husband while balancing her own drink and tray of food in the other hand.

“Hopefully not Thor and his sense of direction,” Loki replied.

“I told you to take a map,” Sigyn huffed.

“I didn’t think I needed one,” Thor shrugged.

“Even my father needs a map to navigate some of those catacombs,” Sigyn replied. Thor muttered a reply causing Sigyn to arch an eyebrow at him. “Well, at least the two of you are getting along.”

“Listen to this, Sigyn,” Loki crowed, “Thor thinks the infallible Allfather might be wrong about things.”

“Not necessarily, wrong,” Thor backtracked, “but rather… misguided. Not all of his decisions have come out for the better and his plan of isolation against other realms cannot work if these other realms no longer wish to isolate themselves as well. And I do not like his low opinion of Midgard and Midgardians. He once found value in them, and now he treats them as if they were nothing. And he expects me to one day do the same.”

“What did he say to you?” Sigyn asked. Thor sighed and shuffled his feet around as he sometimes did when he was nervous or upset.
“Before I came here this most recent time, I told him I wished to spend more time on Midgard. To learn more about it. And with Jane, of course,” Thor admitted. “We had… an argument. He told me that he once, too, thought highly of Midgard in his youth and visited it often. But then he realized how petty and foolish Midgardians are and decided to wash his hands of them. And he seems to think my own enchantment with them is just that… a phase when I am older and wiser to their true nature. Yet he always spoke of his time on Midgard so fondly. And it was he who banished me here to teach me a lesson. How can he be angry that I have learned so much and wish to learn more?”

“Well, that is typical Allfather, is it not?” Loki snorted. “‘Do as I say and not as I do.’”

“Yes, just do not point it out to him,” Thor said. “He became very incensed indeed. And then he said he hoped I learned how foolish mortals are, and not to come begging to him when I learned the error of my ways. So I said I didn’t care to return to Asgard if it meant abandoning my Midgardian comrades in arms as well as the very lessons he sent me to Midgard to learn. And so he has not asked for me to return, and I honestly do not feel like doing so either.”

“You and your father are much alike,” Sigyn admitted. “You both can be stubborn, both have a temper, and neither likes to be the first to propose a compromise. It’s a wonder any argument between you two is ever resolved.”

“Loki usually brokers the compromise,” Thor admitted. “Or Mother. They are both much better at it than Father or I.”

“Yes, one of must always intervene so neither you nor his Eminency has to admit to being wrong. That way things can go back to normal and both of you can brag about winning the disagreement without giving an inch,” Loki rolled his eyes. “I wonder if Mother and I decide not to intervene this time what will happen.”

“I for one would like you to remain out of it,” Thor said. “I do not wish for you to anger him more so than you have already. Besides, I believe Father will come around eventually. He had to have learned something himself from his own time in Midgard. He has just grown set in his ways. He has to realize times have changed and while isolating Asgard worked in the past, it cannot remain that way forever.”

“Yes, because the Allfather is notorious for changing his mind about things,” Loki snorted. “Even when he changes his mind he has to make it seem as though that was his goal all along and he was trying to teach us all some grand lesson with his previous ideology.”

“Well, I am sorry you and the Allfather had a disagreement, but I am not sorry you are here with us,” Sigyn said to Thor. “Perhaps some time away is what you both need.”

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Sigyn was a bit concerned when she and Loki returned to their rooms about how cheerful her husband was. Loki being this happy usually meant he was waiting for the consequences of some prank he had played to reveal themselves or that he had just witnessed the results of said machinations. It wasn’t that Sigyn didn’t like for her husband to be in a good mood; she was just wary when he seemed to be in a good mood for no particular reason she could discern. While Sigyn knew she could never control her husband’s mischievous nature, she preferred to know what exactly he was up to so she wouldn’t be taken by surprise.

“Did you have a good time at the Colonel’s Name Day celebrations?” Sigyn inquired. “You seem to have thoroughly enjoyed yourself.”
“I have, though it has not a wit to do with the Colonel’s aging,” Loki smirked happily. “Do you know what Thor said to me?”

“That he and the Allfather fought?” Sigyn frowned.

“Before that! Oh, if only someone else had been there to hear such a confession,” Loki laughed, flopping himself down on their marital bed and Sigyn proceeded to take off her jewelry. “Did you know, Sigyn, that in our childhood Thor actually envied me? Me?”

“Yes?” Sigyn asked, not sure why her husband seemed to think this was brand new information. “Thor always was envious of how well you did in the school room. Do you not remember that? He was always so jealous of the way our tutors always praised you and scolded him. He was your older brother yet he was always behind you academically. Sometimes he skipped our lessons to go to the training yards just to take out his frustrations on the fact he couldn’t catch up in the classroom.”

“Why do I remember none of this?” Loki said.

“My love, you are frightfully observant about everything but yourself,” Sigyn sighed. “You were always so busy focusing on how Thor bested you in training and combat, so you never noticed how out sorts he felt in the classroom. Likewise, I think Thor was so focused on how much better you were at him with your academics and seiðr that he never realized you felt the same way about him.”

“And you never pointed this out before because?” Loki said, getting up from the bed.

“Because you wouldn’t have listened to me had I tried,” Sigyn replied. “Norns know your mother was telling you both this constantly. And she still does. The two of you just don’t listen. And, while you might not like to hear it, you can sometimes be twice as stubborn as Thor and the Allfather combined.”

“I hardly think so,” Loki huffed, cozying up behind his wife as she removed the various ornaments from her hair and put them away.

“You just proved my point,” Sigyn grinned. Loki began unbraiding her hair slowly with his fingers.

“Well,” Loki smirked, grinding his hips against her backside, “maybe you can let me prove another point to you?”
Blood Brothers

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, Thor and Loki decide family is what you make it.*

Something had changed in Loki after finding out there were parts of him that even Thor envied. Sigyn had noticed the way her husband looked at his brother seemed different, more thoughtful and introspective. He and Thor still bantered about, but the things Loki said to his brother were less cutting and more in the style of the mischievous teasing way he had in their youth. All of the bridges hadn’t been mended yet and Sigyn knew they would never return to their old selves completely, but she was hopeful for what was to come. She was confident they would find a way back to each other, even if two days after Rhodey’s party and Thor’s revelation the pair had a massive fight in the communal dining area over supper.

“You always take everything!” Loki huffed, the two having tumbled around and then been pulled apart - first Thor by Cap and Loki by a combination of Clint, Natasha, and Tony, and then both by a burst of Sigyn’s seiðr.

“I was hungry!” Thor roared back.

“So you cannot control your hunger?” Loki huffed. “Like some animal?”

“Seriously, we can make more rolls,” Tony groaned. “The two of you don’t need to be destroying my living room over who ate the last one!”

“It will take half an hour for them to heat!” Loki replied. “And this isn’t about the roll. This is about principles! Of which he has none!”

“Oh, I have no principles,” Thor shouted back. “You ate the last slice of meatloaf as you knew I preferred it! And I did not complain or attack you for it!”

“You had already consumed three pieces of meatloaf! That was only my second!” Loki snarled back. “Everyone else only had two and you had three!”

“I knew we should have made another pan of meatloaf,” Darcy sighed.

“Both of you cease!” Sigyn said furiously. “This argument is foolish and petty. I will not have the two of you embarrassing me in such a manner! Both of you should be ashamed of yourselves. Now, since the two of you are behaving like children I am going to separate you like children.”

“Sigyn…” Thor protested at the same time Loki let out a loud groan of frustration.

“Thor, you will remain here and help clean up the mess you have made,” Sigyn ordered. “Loki, you will go with Sir Stark and Sir Banner to help clean up the labs they still have to finish cleaning this evening. That way, both of you are contributing but not working together.”

“I didn’t even cause the mess in…” Loki began as Thor said, “But Loki caused most of this mess…” before a glare from Sigyn silenced both.
“Fine,” Loki huffed.

“You mean I have to clean up my lab? Me? Clean my own lab? Tonight?” Tony groaned. Sigyn then glared at him, causing Tony to put his hands up and slowly back out of the room, Bruce guiding Loki out in front of him.

“You know, you guys might want to start actually cleaning up around here before Sigyn comes down and demands to know what we’ve been doing,” Bruce mentioned, reorganizing and stacking the papers he had been working with earlier.

So far, Tony had sunk into a swiveling bar stool he liked to sit in while working and Loki had draped himself across the only bare table in the room. Both had been complaining, Tony about being made to clean up after himself and Loki about how annoying Thor was. Bruce was the only one of the three of them who had done any actual work toward cleaning up the lab, and most of the mess was Tony’s anyway. Bruce was a very tidy, organized worker while Tony was all over the place, yet somehow their shared interests and exuberance for science made their partnership and sharing a lab work.

“Thor is always ruining everything,” Loki huffed.

“Seeing you guys makes me glad I don’t have siblings,” Tony agreed.

“He’s always been like this,” Loki said. “I should have realized there was no way we could have been related by blood much sooner. There is no way I could be connected in any form to that… that oaf!”

“So, how come you didn’t realize you were adopted?” Tony asked curiously. “I mean, you’re a smart guy. Your mom’s a blue-eyed blonde, your dad’s a blue-eyed blond, your brother’s a blue-eyed blonde and you have black hair and green eyes. It doesn’t take a Punnett square to figure something doesn’t add up in that equation.”

“It isn’t as obvious as it seems,” Loki replied.

“Then walk me through it,” Tony said.

Loki could understand why, from the outside at least, it seemed obvious he was adopted. He certainly didn’t resemble his alleged parents or brother in any physical sense, and the more he thought about it now that he knew the truth, the more the adoption narrative made sense. However, in his childhood, there had always been an explanation for why he was, well, different.

Loki’s kinship with magic was seen as something he had inherited from his mother. Vanir men were more accepting of their magical natures and considering Odin and even Thor wielded their own amount of - albeit societally categorized as masculine - seiðr, the fact that Loki was a wielder didn’t seem far-fetched. Many found his sense of humor in line with his maternal grandfather, Jörð, who himself had been a bit of a mischief maker in the Vanir court.

However, it was his paternal grandmother who most believed Loki had inherited the bulk of his physical features and talents from, explaining away his differences. Loki only barely remembered Odin’s mother Bestla. She had died when he and Thor were quite small. What he did remember was a tall woman with a kind face who laughed a lot and encouraged his childish discovery of his seiðr. She was a wielder in her own right and used to entertain him and Thor by making her stories come alive with her seiðr. He remembered sitting on the woman’s lap as he tried to levitate toys and treats
toward himself, her boisterous laughter encouraging his small bits of mischief. Odin’s relationship with Bestla was not unlike Thor and Loki’s relationship with Frigga. The Queen Mother was one of the few people who could boss Odin around and everyone in the palace allowed her to do whatever she wanted. According to later stories from Frigga, Bestla had always been a force to be reckoned with.

She was also reputedly one of the most beautiful women in Asgard. And while being the only raven-haired, green-eyed child in a family of blue-eyed blondes may have seemed like a red flag that Loki wasn’t biologically Frigga and Odin’s child, Loki had spent his entire childhood being told fondly by matrons of the court how much he resembled his grandmother, the late dear Allmother Bestla. A beloved queen and then beloved queen mother, Bestla was a tall, statuesque raven-haired beauty who had been known for ensnaring Bor with her emerald eyes. She had been the daughter of a mine owner and the granddaughter of a gem merchant - not a noble as might befit a king or Allfather for a wife - but Bor had loved Bestla so dearly and would have no one else. There was a tapestry depicting the tall woman in the same gallery that bore images of all Asgard’s former rulers and their consorts. In his female form, Loki and the young Bestla of the tapestry could nearly pass for twins. Even in his male form, the likeness betwixt the two was stunning. Odin himself had even commented on the likeness offhandedly from time to time, even though he knew the truth about Loki’s origins.

Even as Odin was fair-complexioned with blonde hair, he was the only one of his four brothers to be so. Bestla had born the former Allfather Bor four sons, two blondes and two brunettes, two with green eyes and two with blue. In lieu of Bestla, Loki sometimes found himself compared Odin’s younger brother Ve, the third of Bor and Bestla’s sons. Ve was said to resemble his late mother the most with his dark brown hair and green eyes. A dabbler in seiðr in his own right and the long-standing Asgardian ambassador to Alfheim, Uncle Ve had himself been considered quite the outcast at court until he stepped into his diplomatic role and found his own way to shine - far away from the long shadow cast by his royal eldest brother. Perhaps it was why Ve had taken such an interest in Loki at a young age and educated him in the ways of diplomacy via correspondence for much of his life. After all, Ve and Odin did not get along much so it was a rare thing for him to be in Asgard.

“My grandmother… the Allfather’s mother… looked like me. And she had powerful seiðr as well. She died when I was very young, but everyone always said we were so much alike,” Loki explained. “Black hair. Green eyes. Everyone thought I resembled her.”

“Black hair isn’t exactly a recessive trait,” Tony said.

“Perhaps not to your species,” Loki said. “Asgardians are different animals, if you recall.”

“True,” Tony shrugged. “I mean, that brother of yours has arm muscles that probably weigh more than I do. There’s gotta be something weird going on there. Physiologically speaking, of course.”

“Of course,” Loki snorted.

“Yeah, but being adopted doesn’t mean you’re not family,” Bruce pointed out. “Hell, there are a lot of people out there who are more connected to people they aren’t biologically related to than the people they do come from. And didn’t your biological parents give you up?”

“That is the story Odin likes to tell,” Loki said. “Though all of his tales have a purpose that serves him in the end.”

“Still,” Bruce said. “You guys grew up together, right? Thor’s family.”

“Family,” Loki snorted. “That sort of thing seems to matter much to you Midgardians.”
“We have a saying here on Earth… Midgard… wherever this is,” Tony said. “Blood is thicker than water. It means family first, I guess.”

“It’s actually a misquotation,” Bruce said. “The real phrase is ‘blood is thicker than milk,’ meaning the people you choose as family are more important than those who you were born into, that you shouldn’t populate your life with people who don’t really care for you. It’s an old Arab proverb that people changed around.”

“Really?” Tony frowned.

“Well, maybe I don’t want to choose Thor to be a part of my family,” Loki huffed.

“Just you and Sigyn then?” Tony asked curiously. “Maybe your Mom?” Loki eyed up Tony for a moment. Both men had bonded somewhat over the fact they were close to their mothers and had difficult relationships with the fathers, relationships that often put their mothers in the middle. Still, Loki didn’t like Frigga being dragged into this conversation.

“I can’t honestly be the one here lectured over family,” Loki pointed out. “After all, how many of your avenging associates can say they have rather large, extended familial networks?”

“Okay, so Natasha was raised by a bunch of secret Stalinist assassins and Clint literally grew up in the system then the circus,” Tony said, “and all of Cap’s relatives are long dead, if you truly believe…”

“He is not related to the Storms,” Bruce groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “At least not closely if at all. Just because some tabloid noticed a resemblance and ran with a story about Johnny Storm being Steve’s long lost grandchild doesn’t mean you can keep bringing this up.”

“Oh, I’m well over the love child story,” Tony said. “I’ve moved on to the internet conspiracy theory that Storm’s dad somehow got a hold of a vial of Steve’s baby gravy the Army procured for secret reasons and then turkey-basted it into his wife.”

“I am writing Sir Tim Berners-Lee and telling him exactly what you’re using his creation for,” Bruce threatened.

“You’re lame, Bruce. Lame,” Tony pronounced.

“Back on track,” Bruce continued. “Tony’s got family.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony snorted. “Stark relatives who I barely exchange Christmas cards with because they think I’m a stuck up prick.”

“Well, if the glove fits,” Loki shrugged.

“That’s rich coming from you kettle,” Tony snorted. “Nah, Dad didn’t want his unphotogenic, unpolished family getting in the way of his success. Was afraid they’d drag him back down with them. So he burned most of those bridges. Never met my grandparents. I met my Uncle Eddie once. Came to dad for a loan. Dad named me after his big brother but was so skin tight he couldn’t even write off a coupla bucks for the guy.”

“What about your mother’s family?” Loki inquired.

“Those that aren’t six feet under are probably in witness protection somewhere,” Tony shrugged. “My grandad changed the name to Collins because he was trying to run a legit business, but the rest of the Carbonellis were caught up in the Italian mob. The ones that didn’t go down in the sixties
went down in the eighties. Course, the restaurants they used as fronts were always really good spots. Seriously, you have not lived until you’ve had a seven veils cake made by an old Sicilian lady whose son bought her a restaurant to front his drug ring.”

“Your childhood explains a lot about you,” Bruce sighed.

“What about you Bruce?” Tony said. “I know you were an only child. So, any insights into family?”

“Yeah, well, losing your parents young can do that,” Bruce said. “I know what it’s like to have a family you don’t get along with. And one you do. My cousin Jen became like a sister to me after my folks died. A lot of times, I kind of wished I was her brother, you know? Be my aunt and uncle’s kid instead of my parents.

“Why haven’t I met this cousin?” Tony asked. “Is she hot? Where’s she from?”

“L.A. She’s an environmental lawyer,” Bruce replied. “And would eat you for breakfast.”

“But is she hot?” Tony prompted.

“She was like a sister, Tone,” Bruce said, “and I know you’re an only child too, but one doesn’t typically rate the attractiveness of their siblings.”

“I know I am much more attractive than Thor,” Loki offered.

“Who’re you trying to convince here, Joffrey?” Tony snorted.

“Look, we know Thor isn’t your favorite person,” Bruce reasoned, “but he’s given you a lot of second chances and all. Maybe you owe him one.”

“You have no idea how many second chances I have afforded Thor,” Loki harrumphed.

“Okay, sure,” Bruce said. “But the thing about family is we try to forgive them and help them out. Even if maybe they don’t always deserve it.”

“Is this the part where I decide to be the better person in all of this?” Loki scoffed.

“You? Be the better person?” Tony snorted. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“I judge that was meant sarcastically,” Loki replied.

“I don’t hear cleaning!” Sigyn’s voice echoed from the hallway outside the lab. Suddenly, both Tony and Loki jumped up to start messily arranging things to make it look like they had been doing actual work. Bruce smirked to himself.

“I told you guys.”

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Sigyn, Darcy, and Jane worked to keep the two brothers separated for the better part of the next day in the hopes they would both calm down enough to behave civilly toward each other. Thor had at least expressed regret so far in his role for his and Loki’s latest fight, though neither Jane nor Darcy allowed him to visit with Loki on Sigyn’s orders. Loki, by contrast, didn’t seem the least bit sorry for his involvement in anything nor eager to reconcile with his brother. Of course, Loki was never one to admit fault or even complicity when he felt in was in the right. Which was typically always.

Unfortunately for Loki’s obdurate nature, he was married to and desperately in love with a woman
who was not only willing to call him out on his bullheaded behavior but also not allow him to continue in it if she felt he was doing himself a disservice. She knew exactly how to prod, poke, and jibe to get him to give some way, to admit some wrong and to even half-heartedly attempt to make up for his own doings - even if he wasn’t fully ready himself to admit he had made a mistake. For a while, Loki had thought his wife had acquired this ability from his mother. Between her husband and sons, Frigga certainly had a lot of experience getting stubborn, often self-serving men to admit their wrongs and make amends. However, over the years Loki had noticed Sigyn had her own brand of prodding and twisting she had developed specifically to deal with Loki. Certainly, Sigyn could somewhat manipulate Thor and even the Allfather in some respects, but she had the ability to play Loki like a finely tuned instrument. It was a skill he found as distractingly alluring as he found it annoying.

“I know you hate always being the one to broker peace and seek forgiveness,” Sigyn said, continuing on the lecture he had been receiving for the better part of the afternoon. “The problem is you are so much better at it than anyone else. Anyone else I’ve ever seen really. I mean, why would they send you on so many diplomatic missions if you weren’t? You’ve always been the diplomat. Not Thor. Barely even the Allfather. You get it from Frigga, I think.”

“If you will recall,” Loki gritted out, “I have inherited nothing from the Allmother.”

“Biologically, perhaps not,” Sigyn said. “But we aren’t always whose blood we are born into. A lot of who we are comes from how we were raised.”

“Bollocks,” Loki snorted, causing Sigyn to whip around with a sneer.

“Are you saying that I am cursed to be like my mother because I am her progeny?” Sigyn asked. “Are you saying you think I will eventually turn into her? That I will betray you the way she does her husband? Her family?”

“No, Sigyn,” Loki said, raising his hands up defensively, “I just meant…”

“How are we any different?” Sigyn said. “My mother may have birthed me, but she never raised me. That was left to my father and your mother. And truth be told, I am perhaps better for it. Just because Frigga did not bear you herself does make her any less of your mother. It doesn’t mean she has suffered less heartbreak or had less pride in you than Thor. It doesn’t mean the lessons she taught you, the ways she helped you become who you are today matter less. And she would be the first to tell you that.”

“What do you want me to do? You want me to go apologize to Thor yet again?” Loki huffed.

“I want you to make an effort,” Sigyn said, “to mend what is broken between the two of you. One cannot fix a fence if someone is constantly tearing it back down. And regardless of what was hidden from you about your origins or your childhood, Thor still thinks of you has his brother. Even knowing what he knows about your origins, he has put aside his prejudices and still thinks of you as his brother. It may not be something he can put away overnight - just like the lies you have been told your entire life are something I expect you to overcome instantly - but he is trying. And when someone is trying to love you and support you it is, in my personal experience, best to at least try back.”

“I don’t know if I can do what you are asking me to,” Loki shook his head.

“Please, try,” Sigyn said. “I love you. I worry for you. And I know that - even if he can be a pompous ass - Thor does the same. You don’t deserve to have everything ripped away from you because of a lie the Allfather told a millennia ago. And Thor knows that. He has been terrible in the
past about being an advocate for you, for backing you, but I think he knows that now too and wants to make amends. You are not the only one who has changed in the past few years. It would be easy for Thor to wash his hands of you, to say you are not his brother and he no longer cares for anything you do. But he hasn’t. Despite all that he faces, despite all those telling him to do the opposite, he has tried to help for you, to intercede on your behalf. Maybe you don’t owe him forgiveness, but you at least should give him the opportunity to be heard. To tell you what is in his heart.”

Loki let out a groan, a sigh, another groan and then got up and began pacing back and forth across the bedroom. Sigyn continued to sit back on the bed, as if waiting to see what resulted from her husband’s inner debate.

“Fine,” Loki pronounced.

“And?” Sigyn prompted.

“T’ll do it right now,” Loki huffed.

“I’m very proud of you, my love,” Sigyn smiled at him.

“I may need a reminder of that when I return,” Loki snorted.

Dragging his feet, Loki made his way out of his own chambers, out into the hall and then down to Thor’s door. He paused for a few moments, shifting back and forth on his feet a few times before gaining the courage to knock on the door. Thor opened it instantly, perhaps having heard Loki standing outside. Thor had always been a decent tracker, not as good as Loki but good enough with his senses that he could hear someone standing outside his chamber door. Thor invited Loki in with a gesture and the two brothers found themselves sitting in opposite arm chairs in Thor’s living space. Loki didn’t feel Thor’s place was as tastefully decorate as his own chambers. Thor’s rooms were a mix of Ikea furniture handpicked by Jane and a few knickknacks Thor had remembered to bring from Asgard or required on Midgard. However, Loki stopped his visual critique of Thor’s decor when he felt the other man’s eyes on him.

“What is it you have to say to me, brother?” Thor asked.

“I am not your brother,” Loki hissed.

“I thought we had moved on from this,” Thor sighed.

“Oh, you think it is so simple to move on from?” Loki huffed. “Being lied to your entire life about who you are? What you are?”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Thor pointed out. “In fact, the Allfather lied to me as much as he lied to you.”

“Yes, and I’m so certain you wouldn’t have treated me any differently had you known what… what I really am,” Loki snorted. “Instead of just being your awkward younger brother who always embarrassed you in front of your friends, I would have been an evil little Frost Giant spawn to pick on. Not that a few insults about my heritage being thrown in with the ones about how weak and pathetic I am would changed much.”

“Loki,” Thor sighed, “I didn’t think… I never thought you felt we were picking on you. I have always teased my friends thusly and they me. If I had even once thought you felt we were laughing at you rather than with you…”

“Well, your sympathy and wishful thinking does no good now,” Loki said. “Even if I found it in my little cold black heart to forgive you for such things it wouldn’t erase the millennia of pain and
suffering it caused. There are things that cannot be undone, Thor.”

“You are still my brother,” Thor insisted. “I will always think of you as my brother. And you cannot change that.”

“It doesn’t mean I have to feel the same,” Loki retorted.

“Fine then,” Thor said, pulling a dagger from his belt, “if you do not believe you are my brother now, then I will make you my brother again.”

“What in the Nine are you…” Loki began as Thor moved to slit open his palm.

“We will be blood brothers,” Thor said.

“That’s not even how you do it!” Loki huffed just before Thor pierced his own skin.

“What do you mean?” Thor frowned.

“You’ve honestly never read about blood oaths?” Loki snorted.

“No…” Thor admitted, a bit embarrassed.

“You need weapons, wine and dirt,” Loki said. “To make a blood oath, you each gather a sprinkling of soil from the ground and put it into a cup. Then you raise the cup over your weapons and let the blood into the cup. Then you mix wine into the cup and both drink from it.”

“That sounds…” Thor frowned.

“It’s how Örvar and Hjalmar did it in their saga,” Loki pointed out.

“I don’t remember that part,” Thor frowned.

“Usually because you were asleep by that part,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Is there another way?” Thor asked, a little worriedly.

“Unless you marry one of my sisters,” Loki shrugged. “And I don’t think one of Sigyn’s sisters would count. Perhaps we can stop by Jotunheim and see if Laufey left any female bastards lying about…”

“Allright, alright,” Thor nodded. “I am sure friend Stark has wine for us and Sigyn might let us use dirt from her garden.”

“I will need…” Loki began.

“One of your daggers,” Thor interrupted. “They won’t give you back the scepter.”

“I was about to say that,” Loki snorted. “I do not think the scepter was ever technically mine anyway. You are quick to judge. Maybe I don’t want to be blood brothers with you.”

“Fine,” Thor huffed. “We’ll do it your way.”

“Fine,” Loki said.

“Fine,” Thor replied.

“Fine.”
Sigyn had been roped into some weird shenanigans over the years by her husband and his brother. Usually she had fun on these adventures and there were very few she regretted. However, she wasn’t usually being asked to help them re-enact a blood bonding ceremony the two of them had heard about in a saga read to them as a childhood bedtime story. Sigyn honestly thought the entire thing was a little silly, but it seemed to mean a lot to both Thor and Loki - even if her husband was trying to remain as nonchalant as possible.

“Wine,” Sigyn pronounced to them, setting a bottle on the kitchen counter, “and dirt.” She sat a small pinch of dirt down in a cup. She had taken it out of a plant she had been repotting. “And I believe you both have your daggers?” Thor nodded, placing his dagger on the table. Loki pulled his dagger own out of his waistband, which caused Thor to raise his eyebrows.

It was the twin to the one Thor had intended to use, a reinforced magical gold blade with a white nephrite handle encrusted with jewels, a matching gold scabbard with similar gems adorning it. They had been part of Frigga’s inheritance from her mother, a twinned set of daggers given to her as a girl in the Vanir tradition. Having no daughters of her own to give them two, she had given one to Thor and another to Loki. She had expressed hope that they might have daughters of their own to give the daggers to one day but had been content knowing her sons each had a piece of her family.

“I didn’t know if you still had yours,” Thor admitted to Loki as Loki sat the dagger down.

“Just because I don’t wear it on my belt and use it to cut open boxes or spear pieces of meat doesn’t mean I got rid of it,” Loki snorted. “Unlike some people, I keep treasured gifts from my mother in safe spaces so they won’t be lost or damaged.”

“I suppose that is fair,” Thor shrugged. “I just carry it around because it makes me feel connected to Mother wherever I am.”

“At least get yourself a new loop to attach it to your belt,” Loki pointed out. “That one is going to break eventually, and I am not utilizing my scrying skills to help you find any more lost weapons. Not after what happened with Jarnbjorn that last time.”

“I didn’t leave it in the manticore’s nest,” Thor insisted. “The creature must of dragged it there himself.”

“Are the two of you going to continue discussing old adventures or are you going to do whatever this little ritual is?” Sigyn asked tiredly.

“She’s just upset because I let her help scry for the manticore but not actually come to help kill it,” Loki stage whispered to Thor.

“Didn’t let me come? You magically sealed me up in a cupboard!” Sigyn protested.

“For your own protection!” Loki replied.

“It was a rather fierce manticore,” Thor pointed out. “I would have preferred being sealed in a cupboard to fighting it. Besides, you fixed us up afterwards.”

“Yes,” Sigyn gritted out, “once I had to magically destroy one of my favorite cupboards to get out of it.”
“Alright,” Loki said, “we’ll get on with it.”

Each brother took a bit of the dirt from Sigyn’s garden - which was supposed to be symbolic of their homelands and roots - and then sprinkled it in the ritual goblet Sigyn had fished out of her and Loki’s various apothecary equipment. Next came the bits of blood from each of them, slicing open their palms and then bleeding into the cup. Sigyn quickly healed up their wounds as soon as they were finished, though she was a bit more sensual in her dealing with Loki’s hand than Thor personally would have liked to witness. Sigyn then poured in the red wine and mixed the entire thing together with a bit of seiðr, hoping that would dissolve anything distasteful about the potion. Thor and Loki then had to both take the goblet in hand and drink from it at the same time. There was bit of jostling with it for control and Thor definitely drank more than his fair share.

“That was awful,” Loki groaned once the goblet was drained. “Why did we agree to do this again?”

“So we would be brothers for real!” Thor insisted. “Now no one can doubt our bond, not even you!”

“I am regretting this already,” Loki sighed.

“I am proud of you,” Sigyn said, coming around the kitchen counter to hug her husband. “I know this won’t mean you and Thor will always agree on everything or that you will never argue, but I am proud you took this step toward reconciliation.”

“No one is to know about this,” Loki threatened Thor. “I don’t want Fandral, Sif, and Volstagg teasing me about drinking your blood.”

“Neither do I,” Thor nodded. He reached his hand out and grasped Loki’s by the forearm. “But thank you… brother.” Loki nodded himself, shaking his brother’s arm and then allowing Thor to stride from the room and back into his own. Sigyn gave Loki a squeeze as soon as Thor closed the door behind him.

“You are a good man, Loki,” Sigyn said to him.

“Yes, well,” Loki shrugged. “Don’t spread that rumor too far. I do have a reputation to uphold, after all.”
Thor’s Day

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, Loki actually does something nice for his brother.*

As part of his whole attempt to turn over a new leaf and mend his relationship with Thor, Loki decided to tell the Avengers Thor’s Name Day was coming up. It wasn’t a particularly important Name Day - turning 1241 wasn’t exactly a major milestone on Asgard - but Loki knew the Midgardians would like to celebrate it. The fleeting nature of their lives made aging more important to them, after all. Thor usually celebrated his Name Days by having a nice lunch with their mother and then going out to drink with his friends. Being Asgard’s crown prince, he usually received various gifts on the day but the only ones of meaning were those presented to him by those closest to him. Loki knew Frigga and probably the Warriors Three and Sif would be sending gifts for Thor’s Name Day, and he and Sigyn had already picked out their own present for Thor. Loki decided the Avengers themselves would probably be upset if they weren’t given time to prepare for the event, so he decided to once again be the better person and help them out.

It was difficult to explain Asgard’s lunar calendar to the Midgardians - save maybe Jane. They didn’t seem to get the concept that one’s Name Day didn’t necessarily fall on the same day every year but rather during the same night of the moon cycle each year. For Thor, that meant the first full moon in the Midgardian month of January, which Sigyn and Loki had helped Jane narrow down to the 26th. This, of course, meant there were only a few days to plan and acquire gifts for the event. It had been Darcy’s idea to throw a surprise party and, thanks to Thor being not always particularly observant, the planning for the event had been pretty easy to hide from him.

“So, what kind of things would Thor like for his birthday?” Tony asked as everyone - sans Jane and Thor - sat around the communal living room to plan the event. Jane and Thor had gone out for date night, allowing everyone else to start planning.

“He likes goats,” Loki shrugged.

“Though the Allfather insists there are no room in the palace stables for him to keep any,” Sigyn reminded her husband.

“Thor also enjoys ales, roasted meats, and hitting things,” Loki continued.

“We’re brainstorming gifts here, Lokester,” Tony pointed out. “Now, does your brother have any hobbies other than bashing people’s’ heads in?”

“Sharpening and polishing his weapons,” Loki shrugged.

“His actual weapons right? Not the metaphorical one?” Tony said.

“I refuse to dignify that with comment,” Loki snorted.

“This is really not helping narrow down present ideas for Thor,” Bruce pointed out.

“Just get him some of your garden variety Midgardian knickknacks and gewgaws,” Loki shrugged. “That will entertain him more than anything else I could suggest you give him.”
“He does seem to think essential oil diffusers are toys,” Darcy agreed. “And when he found the ball in the cup game we had in New Mexico, he played with it for like an entire day straight.”

“I would advise against potted plants, however,” Sigyn offered. “He either overwaters or forgets to water them, and then he is disappointed in himself when they do not survive.”

“You would think after a millennia watching our mother he would have picked up some useful skills in that regard,” Loki nodded. “Though gardening does require patience, and Thor does not always have that in abundance.”

“I’m sure we can figure some things out gift wise,” Tony said.

“A part of me feels this entire consultation was completely useless,” Loki sighed.

“Don’t work, Lokes,” Tony assured him, “I’m sure I can work up some more even more pointless tasks for you in the future.”

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“Ugh,” Loki groaned as Sigyn forced him to finish up wrapping presents and work on the decor for Thor’s party. “Why am I doing this again?”

“Because you are a good brother,” Sigyn replied, “and you have a talent for gift wrapping and decorating. Besides, you should at least wrap the gift you picked out.”

“Well, if he asks, this was all your idea,” Loki said, neatly tying a ribbon.

“And you think he’ll believe that?” Sigyn questioned. Loki rolled his eyes. “Fine, fine. But I cannot help if my pride in you radiates to the point he figures it out.”

“Your radiating pride?” Loki snorted. “I am terribly sorry, my dear. It seems my sense of verbal repartee has rubbed off on you.”

“Are you saying I’m not capable of my own rhetorical riposte from time to time?” Sigyn replied. Loki smirked, taking her hand and kissing the back of it.

“You know your wit is one of the things I love most about you, lykyng,” Loki replied he leaned up to kiss her lips only to be interrupted by a loud pounding on the door.

“Brother! Brother!” Thor said happily from the other side, continuing to pound on the door.

“Ugh,” Loki groaned.

“I’ll take care of this mess,” Sigyn said, waving her seiðr around to hide the various presents and party preparations they had been working on, “you take care of your brother.”

“Fine,” Loki said, getting up to answer the door. “But he should realize I’m working very hard on being kind to him, and therefore interrupting my intimate time with my wife is a bit counterproductive to that aim.”

“Brother!” Thor continued pounding on the door. Loki threw open the door to find Thor standing there in flipflops, board shorts, an oversized knit poncho and holding a giant pot of Iceland poppies under one arm.

“What are you doing?” Loki asked, annoyed.
“I brought these for Sigyn!” Thor said happily, thrusting them out toward his brother. Loki frowned, looking down at the plant pot as it spilled out a little dirt. Sigyn instead rushed out from behind him, grabbed the plant out of Thor’s hand before the larger man realized it, and then rushed toward her conservatory with it.

“I believe she is thankful for your gift,” Loki smirked as the conservatory door closed behind his wife.

“I hope I haven’t interrupted anything,” Thor admitted, seeming to realize for the first time that he might have barged in.

“Just a rather pleasant seduction of my wife,” Loki huffed, allowing Thor to walk into the room.

“You’re always seducing your wife,” Thor rolled his eyes. “If I waited until you finished with such tasks, I’d never have a moment to speak with you.”

“Is that what you need? To speak with me?” Loki asked curiously. “Did you bring that plant as a clever distraction for my wife?”

“No,” Thor insisted. “I saw it and thought Sigyn would like it. Though I did wish to speak with you.”

“About what?” Loki asked, sinking onto a divan as Thor took a chair nearby.

“I think something is afoot in the Tower,” Thor said. “Instead of their usual experiments, Lady Jane and Lady Darcy had me assist Sir Stark and Sir Banner today. And then they disappeared for an hour. When I saw them next for the noontime meal, the ladies began questioning me about my plans for the next several days.”

“They are definitely plotting something,” Loki agreed, thinking about how to best not show his hand. “Perhaps Lady Jane is simply planning some sort of romantic rendezvous for the two of you. I understand on Midgard it is not very uncommon for women to take the initiative on such things. Asgardian women might be more interesting if they opened themselves to such possibilities. Sigyn does and I certainly appreciate it…”

“I did not… seek this conversation to take such a turn,” Thor admitted, embarrassed.

“Well, what did you think would happen with the conversation turned to paramours?” Loki pointed out.

“Not… this,” Thor frowned.

“Does Jane know how prudish you can be?” Loki asked. Thor rolled his eyes as Sigyn came racing out of the conservatory.

“Thank you for my plant!” Sigyn said happily, hugging Thor as he sat in the chair. Thor patted her arm, a smile across his own face.

“I thought of it and thought of you, my sister,” Thor said. “I am glad you enjoy it.”

“Do you wish to stay for tea?” Sigyn asked, heading over toward the kitchen and her tea set.

“I wouldn’t want to impose…” Thor began. Sigyn looked at her husband hopefully and Loki sighed.

“Stay,” Loki said. “Sigyn has been experimenting with this new Midgardian recipe for scones that
calls for lemon and raspberry. They are truly delicious.”

“Well, if you insist,” Thor said, licking his lips as Sigyn produced and then magically heated up the scones. She heated the tea kettle with her seiðr and then magically levitated it all over to the coffee table to pour out and distribute.

“I received a letter from your mother, the queen, this morning,” Sigyn said to Thor as she handed him off a plate of scones and some tea. Thor wasn’t exactly fond of the drink, but he always drank it when given to him by his mother or Sigyn. “Loki also received one, so I assumed you have as well.”

“Yes,” Thor nodded as Sigyn made up a plate and some tea for her husband. “I am glad to hear she is doing well, though her patience with Father seems to be wearing thin.”

“Well, usually she has both you and Loki to draw some of the focus,” Sigyn smirked. “After all, if the Allfather has the two of you to deal with - not to mention all of the machinations the two of you always seem to set in motion both together and separately - he’s mainly out of her hair.”

“Do you hear that, Thor? You might be getting a summons back to Asgard,” Loki smirked.

“I’ll gladly go if Mother needs me,” Thor replied, “though I doubt even she will be able to coax Father around. Not this time.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate her ability to do anything,” Loki disagreed. “She might wait until the next time the Allfather skips town for a few days and then use her power as his regent to summon you back. Like what happened after that time you got drunk, rode Sleipnir into that tavern and then attacked that elvish prince.”

“He wasn’t a prince,” Thor snorted. “He was the son of one of those hereditary princes. You know, the ones that have titles but no lands or money because elves are all about etiquette and heritage. Alfheim’s lousy with people who think they deserve the utmost respect because their great-grandfather got knighted for holding someone’s sword five billion years ago or something.”

“The point is,” Loki continued, “that Mother waited until Odin had to take his once-a-decade visit to Niðavellir and then called you home from exile in Vanaheim.”

“I wish she’d let me stay in Vanaheim,” Thor muttered. “All I did all day was fish and hunt and train. It was nice. Fjölnir and I caught a fish so big...”

“If that fish is as big as you and my cousin always claim, it could swallow all of Asgard whole,” Sigyn snorted.

“Yet it still manages to grow each time the tale is told,” Loki snorted. “And I am the one they call a liar.”

“You were not there, brother,” Thor insisted. “It was a very large fish.”

“I’d be more inclined to believe you had the fish been mounted instead of eaten,” Loki pointed out.

“We will all have to take a trip to Vanaheim soon,” Thor said. “Perhaps late in the summer... once the Allfather ends your sentence.”

“If he ends my sentence,” Loki snorted.

“I’m confident he will,” Thor insisted. “Though I wouldn’t venture so far as to say he would turn down a request from you and Sigyn to have an extended stay in Vanaheim. And I could go with
“To monitor me?” Loki smirked.

“Well, maybe,” Thor grinned. “And if monitoring you happens to involve taking a boat out, casting out a few lines and nets… well…”

“Just so long as we don’t have to spend time with my mother,” Sigyn frowned.

“Agreed,” Loki nodded.

“No one is proposing a visit to Freyja,” Thor snorted. “No one is that foolish.”

“Hear, hear,” Loki agreed.

“Well,” Thor said, gently handing his finished tea cup and plate of scones back to his sister-in-law, “I shall resume my search for Lady Jane and Lady Darcy.”

“I am very proud of both of you,” Sigyn said, once Thor had closed the door behind him. “That was a very pleasant interaction. Your mother will be so happy!”

“Yes, well, Thor and I have always gotten along when we’re both furious at Odin,” Loki shrugged. “By the way, we should probably alert Lady Jane and Lady Darcy that Thor suspects something is up. Though it might be funny for him to ruin his own Name Day surprise again.”

“I’ll tell them,” Sigyn rolled her eyes. “You just finish the rest of these scones.”

“Darling,” Loki grinned, picking up the plate of remaining treats, “I thought you’d never ask.”

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It was Loki who had, unintentionally, given the idea for the theme of Thor’s surprise party. While inquiring about Asgardian Name Day traditions and Thor’s various interests from a combination of Jane, Darcy, and Tony, Loki had furiously just asserted that they might as well throw him a Midgardian-style party as that would no doubt delight him more than any replication of Asgardian tradition. All three of their faces had lit up and Loki groaned, realizing he might have accidentally created another monster. So, Tony dubbed the event “Thor’s First Birthday on Earth” and the three set to work trying to cram as many earth birthday traditions into it as they could. Loki had to admit the idea intrigued him, though he would never sink so low as to have any of these traditions incorporated into his own life celebrations.

Jane and Darcy had gone out and purchased several colorful pinatas in all shapes and sizes for the event, which Darcy, Bruce, Tony, and Sigyn had then helped put up. Darcy and Jane figured the mix of super strength in the Tower would mean that pinatas could easily be burst open so instead had purchased individual pinatas for all of Thor’s guests and a few extra for anyone else who might show up. Sigyn delighted in the colorful displays of donkeys, stars, hats, tropic fish, and even one that was shaped like Thor’s face until she learned the paper creations would be smashed apart for the treats inside. Loki had a suspicion Sigyn’s own pinata would make it back to Asgard as some sort cultural decor, a sort of showpiece to start conversations about their time in Midgard.

Loki was much more intrigued in some of the more cruel Midgardian Name Day traditions, like throwing flour in the face of the birthday boy, rubbing his nose with butter, or pulling on the person’s ears for how many years they had been alive. Of course, with Thor being over a thousand that could take a while. There were also some games planned like running a race while balancing an egg in a cup and a Norwegian game Darcy had read about where party guests fished for frozen ice cream
treats out of a bucket of ice. With the help of Sigyn and several local delivery places, Tony had compiled a feast of birthday foods from around the world including various cakes, pies, fairy bread, noodles, fruit, Ghanese sweet potato patties, sesame sticks, curry, chutney, rice pudding, pancakes, taartjes, jollof rice, sandwiches de miga, brigadeiro, South Korean seaweed soup, as well as a huge stack of pizzas from Tony’s favorite place.

The night of the fête in question, the party deck was done up in colorful streamers, balloons, and decorations. Garlands and flowers seemed to be popular decor for birthday celebrations around the world as well. Sigyn felt the entire thing was beautifully spectacular while the decor just made Loki feel nauseous. Sigyn stomped on his foot and gave him a glare after Loki muttered to himself how the room looked like the Bifrost had thrown up all over it. Loki inwardly cursed himself that he had annoyed Sigyn so early on and that she would be on watch at Thor’s party all night for inappropriate comments and undeserved snark. Of course, the thought that he might later purchase his own pinata with Thor’s face on it made Loki feel a bit better about things. He just hoped he could have the thing delivered at a time when Sigyn was not in their chambers.

It had been Jane’s responsibility to get Thor out of the building while the decorations were being put up and then bring him back at the appointed time. Steve and Natasha cut it close, landing the quinjet on the roof and bringing down their gifts for the party a mere five minutes before Jane was due back at the Tower with Thor. He had only briefly admitted to Jane early that morning it was in fact his birthday, so Jane had switched her plan from asking Thor to go see a movie just as a date to seeing a movie as a treat for his birthday. Thor had chosen some movie about witch hunting and Jane noticed that one of the main characters had a striking resemblance to Clint. When the pair returned, Jane dragged Thor up to the darkened party deck in time for the lights to turn on and every to yell surprise. Well, everyone save for Loki who refused to hide in the darkened room and instead strolled out of the bathroom, washing his hands and acting as if he wasn’t in on the whole thing.

“Jane! You put this together so quickly!” Thor said, surprised.

“Actually, your brother let us know it was your birthday,” Jane admitted. “We’ve been planning this for a few days now.”

“Brother!” Thor said, picking Loki up in a giant bear hug.

“Put me down! Put me down! PUT ME DOWN!” Loki hissed until Thor did in fact sit him down. “I am NEVER doing anything nice for you ever again.”

“Loki,” Sigyn cautioned.

“Remind me to never do nice things ever again,” Loki said to his wife, brushing himself off.

“Apparently, he has to be drunk for you to haul him around like that,” Sigyn said to Thor, causing the Name Day boy to laugh and then hug his sister-in-law.

“I am sure some of this is your doing as well!” Thor smiled.

“I helped a bit,” Sigyn admitted, “but it is our Midgardian friends who were the true inspiration. They wanted you to experience what it is like to experience a Name Day on Midgard and pulled together many traditions.”

“Alright, Pikachu,” Tony said to Thor. “Presents first or games?”

Thor, naturally, chose games. He had a great time smashing his own face apart and was delighted to find candy within. As Loki had suspecting, Sigyn hid her tropical fish pinata to be used at a later date
and she grew misty eyed each time one of the paper donkeys or other creatures were opened. Bruce, with his mixture of calm and patience, won the egg cup race. Clint was out after momentarily getting distracted and dumping his egg on the floor just as the race started. Tony hadn’t wanted to give eggs to Loki and Thor after what had happened last time, but the brothers had proven they learned their lesson. Thor broke his egg by dropping it on his return, causing him to laugh heartily. Loki finished last but without any damage to his egg. He then bemoaned how easy the task would have been with seiðr.

The fishing for ice cream game was definitely the most popular of the events, despite it being January, and Darcy declared she would have one at her next birthday. Bruce traded an ice cream sandwich for Steve’s firecracker ice pop after Tony’s thirty-fourth joke at Steve’s expense. Sigyn and Thor decided the secrets of the choco taco had to be brought back to Asgard, and Loki ignored Jane and Bruce’s questioning of how he was able to so easily and quickly down an entire box of frozen fudge bars with no brain freeze. The fact that Darcy reminded them of his unearthly sno cone consumption didn’t help matters, and thankfully, Sigyn changed the subject to Thor unwrapping his Name Day gifts.

Thor reacted to the thought of presents much like a small child and eagerly clapped his hands when Sigyn produced the gifts that had arrived that morning from Asgard. Frigga had sent her eldest son a new, finely woven blanket depicting a group of valkyries in flight. Best the Midgardians could tell by Thor’s excited comments and Sigyn’s attempt at explanation, Thor had idolized the battle-hardened women as a child in the same way Midgardian children now idolized Thor. He had been very upset when he learned being female was a prerequisite for joining the elite fighting force, though as they technically served Sigyn’s mother, Thor decided perhaps being a valkyrie wasn’t as fun as his mother’s stories always made it seem. Odin had sent his son a drinking horn also depicting a valkyrie story, but this was one about a warrior woman who had fell in love with the wrong person and then been forced to give up her immortality. Thor nearly crushed the thoughtless gift in his hand before Sigyn secreted it away into a pocket dimension.

“I’m guessing they don’t give out gift receipts in Asgard,” Tony muttered.

“Let’s open some of your other presents,” Jane urged Thor.

“Here,” Sigyn said, hoping to distract her brother-in-law, “Lady Sif and the Warriors Three have sent you gifts as well. They wanted to come themselves, but the Allfather has them stationed on Vanaheim for the time being.”

The Warriors Three had sent Thor a collection of furs from animals they had hunted as well as a nice letter - written in Hogun’s steady hand - about how much fun he was missing. Sif had sent a fur hat and a letter warning Thor that the Allfather was still pretty upset about the fight the two of them had before Thor’s departure to Midgard. Via the Warriors Three and Sif, the royal house of Vanaheim had sent Thor a few casks of nice ale to celebrate his birthday with. Tony was especially excited to roll these out. Additionally, Sigyn’s Uncle Freyr and cousins had sent Thor a gift of some new fishing hooks and what appeared to be a whaling spear, encouraging him to come fishing with his sometime. Loki muttered something under his breath about Thor’s incompetence with spears in the past.

“Now our gift!” Sigyn said happily, elbowing Loki until he sighed and produced the present from behind him. “It was Loki’s idea but I asked my brothers to make it!” Thor opened the gift wrap and then inside found a wooden box typical of dwarven deliveries. What he saw inside made him gasp and then laugh.

“What is it?” Jane asked, peering into the box. Thor pulled out what appeared to be an exact replica
of Mjolnir, save this hammer was halfway crushed into a block of stone.

“It’s a bookend,” Loki explained quietly. “Or perhaps better in your case a door stop. I thought…”

“This is a most ingenious and hilarious gift brother!” Thor said excitedly. “One could barely tell it from the original! Oh, I shall have much fun with this. Especially on Asgard!”

“I’m actually a bit embarrassed I didn’t think of such a prank before,” Loki admitted.

“Really? We all have to go after the giant joke hammer?” Tony grumbled.

“Would lifting it make you feel better?” Thor asked cheekily, extending the fake hammer to Tony.

“No,” Tony grimaced. “Though there could be a market for these things…”

“Perhaps I should have your brothers make another replica,” Loki pondered to his wife. “It might be interesting to see what happens if someone sees me walking around with Mjolnir…”

“You can pay for that yourself,” Sigyn snorted. “And after you’ve carried it around Asgard for a while, I’ll be sure to visit you in the prison cells.” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Okay, okay,” Tony said. “Earthbound presents now.”

“I got you three giant jars of cheese puffs and ten family packs of Pop Tarts,” Clint informed Thor, sliding over the food containers - only one of which had a sad little bow attached to it.

“Well, now that Thor’s saddest present has been given,” Tony snorted. “Here’s mine and Peps.”

Pepper had purchased a basket full of goat milk soaps, lotions and hand creams which Tony had accompanied with 24 bottles of various dark beers and ales from various parts of the globe Thor might enjoy. And in true Tony fashion, he had wrapped all of these gifts in paper that said “Happy First Birthday!” Natasha had bought Thor some vodka as it was the closest thing he said earth had to Asgardian spirits while Bruce had gotten him some CDs of traditional Scandinavian music. Steve had gone with some heavy weights for Thor’s personal use as well as a sweat-activated cool down towel. Darcy, as a personal joke, had gotten Thor a tornado in a jar toy and a plasma ball, both of which Thor found pleasantly delightful and endlessly entertaining. Coulson had sent, via Steve and Natasha, a few packages of Norse myth themed coffee for Thor to try out. Jane had gotten him a model of earth’s solar system not unlike the orrery he had gotten for her on Asgard, which made Thor smile greatly. Jane had gotten him a second, more private gift she had also promised for him later.

“Alright,” Pepper said. “I think it’s time to eat now.”

“We got birthday cuisine from all over the world, buddy,” Tony grinned.

“Hey, where are Loki and Sigyn?” Steve asked curiously.

“Oh,” Natasha said. “They disappeared to go make out in Tony’s library like twenty minutes ago.”

“Should I ask JARVIS to tell them to clothe themselves and come back?” Tony asked.

“No,” Thor smirked, “I couldn’t consider it a proper Name Day celebration for myself if Loki and Sigyn did not disappear midway through for some purpose. Early on, it was usually to create a bit of mischief though it eventually changed into an excuse for a liaison. I’m sure they will return once they smell the food being served.”
“Well, I’m not going to argue with a birthday tradition,” Tony shrugged.
Two days after Thor’s birthday, Tony rose uncommonly early and dressed in one of his best bespoke suits, joining the other early risers at the breakfast table. Thor and Clint had already held a sparring session that morning while Jane and Darcy had been up most of the previous night doing work. Bruce had gotten up early for yoga and had been joined by an eager-to-participate Sigyn, though she had retreated back into her own chambers afterwards rather than join the others in the communal dining room for breakfast. As Jane and Darcy tried to remain awake over their cereal and Bruce blew on a hot cup of green tea, it was oddly enough Thor who noticed Tony wasn’t in grease monkey mode.

“Is there a festive occasion, Friend Stark?” Thor asked. “You have donned your finest apparel this morn.”

“Business meeting,” Tony sighed. “The accountants are having an *en masse* conference to kick off the company’s tax filings for this year. From now until mid-April, tax season is upon us and the money men are in panic mode. Pepper is the one they really care about, but she still insists I make an appearance as the ‘face of the company’ and whatnot. And I guess seeing me awake, not hungover and wearing professional attire gives investors some confidence that we aren’t going bankrupt.”

“Tax season?” Thor asked, as if the concept confused him.

“I’m guessing royalty on Asgard doesn’t have to pay taxes or fees,” Bruce pointed out.

“Lucky,” Clint frowned. “I forgot two years in a row and then they showed up to audit me. Turned out the government owed me $6.57.”

“Doesn’t SHIELD have a plan or something to help you guys?” Tony asked, surprised.

“They might,” Clint shrugged. “I typically just delete SHIELD-wide emails unless they’re chain letters or cute kittens. Tash has offered to have her guy do my taxes, but I’d rather not get involved with someone who also works as a bookie for the Ukrainian mob.”

“I’m… sorry I asked,” Tony admitted.

“Culver had a program where accounting and business students did your taxes for free,” Darcy mentioned, “but since Jane and I technically don’t work for them anymore…”

“I’m sure SI will have someone who can do yours,” Tony offered. “If not, the guy who does mine and Pepper’s personal taxes always has room for one more customer.”

“Taxes… such as tithes to the king?” Thor said, seeming to get the concept from context clues.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “You figure out how much you’ve earned and spent. If the government has overtaxed you - or you have very creative people who can find you loopholes - you get money back from the government. If you owe money, you have to cough it up.”
“On Asgardian, no one receives funds from the government unless by decree of the Allfather,” Thor explained. “Such as when a group of soldiers slaughtered a sheep to eat, and the farmer who owned it asked for recompense. The Allfather gave him funds to purchase a new sheep.”

“Did the Allfather also pay for him to take the time and money to leave his farm and travel to the capitol to ask for his sheep back?” Darcy asked pointedly.

“Well, no,” Thor frowned.

“I’m guessing not much leaves Odin’s treasury once it’s gone in,” Tony said.

“No,” Thor shook his head. “And few are allowed inside.”

“So, I’m guessing Asgard has some sort of feudal, serf system with nobles paying taxes and the lower classes paying their way through work in exchange for room and board,” Bruce said.

“That sounds… correct?” Thor asked, confused as to why the Midgardians didn’t like this idea. “However, we do have a large merchant class who owns their own property and pays tithes and fees to the government as well.”

“But the Allfather is the largest landholder around,” Darcy pointed out.

“Well…” Thor shrugged.

“Who’s the second largest landholder?” Tony asked. The reddening of Thor’s face answered the question for him.

“I’m guessing your brother is the third biggest,” Darcy ventured.

“Loki actually owns no lands on Asgard… which I always thought was strange before…” Thor began. “At any rate, he does have some land in Vanaheim bequeathed to him by our mother and her people. And He and Sigyn together own several estates in Vanaheim as well as shares in a few mines in Niðavellir. And I think Loki has an estate in Alfheim, but it could also be a very elaborate joke of his. If it does exist, Sigyn is the only one who has seen it. My mother may be in on the joke as well. And I know Loki has several investments in various realms and places that no one but he knows about. He’s always getting fees and payments for various services rendered, rents and tithes from strange places he never explains to anyone. He never really discusses where much of his money comes from, and no on has ever really been rude enough to ask.”

“It’s good to know earth isn’t the only planet with offshore banking,” Tony said. “Well, I’m off. Unless anyone can conjure some sort of sea monster or twenty-story robot or evil giant bunny to get me out of this meeting?”

“’fraid not,” Clint said. Tony gave a mock salute and then headed out the door.

“So, does Asgard do an annual collection of tithes and fees or how does it work?” Bruce asked.

“Oh, most pay as they go,” Thor explained, “but there is a date once a year were all of the previous year’s business must be settled and accounts must be balanced.”

“When is that?” Jane asked.

“It’s…” Thor began before his face paled. Suddenly, Thor bolted up from the kitchen table and went rushing out of the room, yelling at the top of his lungs. “Loki! Loki! I have need of your aid!”
“You know,” Loki said to his brother, “if you kept your accounts whenever there was an exchange of goods or services you wouldn’t have to panic at the last minute and try to remember every transaction you had undertaken in the past year four moons before Disting.”

“I always resolve to, but I always forget,” Thor said mournfully. Loki pinched the bridge of his nose and then rubbed his forehead.

It never ceased to amaze Loki how, year after year, he always wound up sitting with Thor and Thor’s account books merely days before Disting. Both a celebration of winter coming to a close and one of finance, Disting was the annual Asgardian day where old accounts were settled, one counted their wealth and made plans for the coming financial year. It was the day Asgard’s farmers began planning their planting for the coming year, bought new equipment or facilities for their farms, or determined how many animals they could afford to raise. Merchants and nobles collected outstanding debts and paid them in return, allowing for them to make new investments, purchase new goods to sell, or make needed improvements to their homes and places of business.

It was also one of the few times of the year the Allfather brought select items out of his treasury to be gawked at by the masses, a sure sign their king and overlord was wealthy and in charge. The Allfather even forgave a few outstanding debts on behalf of the realm to show that Asgard was in such a good financial state it could deal with a few members of its populace being financially insolvent. The entire day was then celebrated in typical Asgardian fashion - eating and drinking oneself into oblivion. Loki never quite understood how a festival intended to focus its practitioners on tallying, quantifying and then planning past, present, and future investments ended up with everyone getting uproariously drunk, oftentimes spending all of the newfound coin they had collected that day.

Then again, Loki had always found himself more in common with Sigyn’s dwarven relatives who took the celebration of Disting very seriously. Every year, Loki received on average two letters from his father-in-law and one of those always came before Disting. In gruff tones, it would inform Loki there would be consequences if it were found out he wasn’t taking care of Sigyn’s financial future along with the results of the requests Loki had made into the state of his various dwarven accounts and holdings. Dwarves were very serious about finance and investments, and they had made a real science of accounting practices. This year, Loki had received his customary letter from Iwaldi more than a month in advance of its usual arrival. In the epistle, Iwaldi had informed his son-in-law that exile to Midgard was no excuse for not keeping up with financial planning and that Sigyn’s future, now more than ever, might rely on what Loki had not connected to the Asgardian throne. Along with Iwaldi’s stern lecturing came the usual copies of the records Loki requested annually from his investments and accounts in Niðavellir.

And just as Loki could always count on a terse letter from his father-in-law near Disting, he could always count on Thor appearing before him in a tizzy with his account books, begging help for his own financial sake. Every year without fail, Thor would realize he had not been keeping track of the money he had lent or borrowed, nor of the income or produce of his various estates granted to him by his title of crown prince, nor even the tithes collected and granted to him because of his same status. Then, a panicked Thor rushed not to one of the various ministers, merchants, and scholars retained by the Allfather to calculate his own wealth nor even used by the various nobility of the Asgardian court but to his younger brother. Loki didn’t profess to be a financial wiz at all. In fact, he usually made Sigyn double check his accounting because her dwarven childhood had prepared her for a lifetime of bureaucracy and financial accounting. Yet, Thor always sought Loki out for this task.
It wasn’t even that Thor was bad at sums and basic arithmetic; Thor could even do various advanced calculations needed for personal accounting on such a large scale. Thor’s problem was that he was too impatient to do all of the calculating needed for his accounting at once and too lazy or distracted to calculate and record transactions one-by-one when they occurred so as to make the calculations easier for himself down the road. As Thor paced and fretted and Loki grumbled and groaned, Sigyn was the only one in the room who seemed unaffected, working along with the magpies to make various tarts for consumption later in the day.

“Could you not have waited until I was awake to bring me this?” Loki asked Thor, grimacing as he leafed his way through Thor’s messy account books. Loki hadn’t even touched the seven-odd boxes of receipts, IOUs and other documentation Thor had brought in as well. “Thor, this is a mess.”

“How is it your account books are always so neat? And organized? And completed on time?” Thor moaned.

“Because Sigyn and I do our accounting weekly so we are not a few days before Disting and running around in a panic,” Loki pointed out.

“I am running out of time!” Thor fretted.

“I’m sure you had someone else do these last year,” Loki sighed. “Why couldn’t you have contacted them again?”

“I forgot last year,” Thor said. “I went to Mother on Disting Day and she was not very pleased. She helped me find an exchequer clerk to help me out, but I think he was rather inept. I was owed two whole cows and he didn’t notice!”

“Well, you did wait until the last minute,” Loki pointed out before a look of utter disgust crossed his face. “Nevermind… I’ve found the accounting from last year. It’s… atrocious…”

“I know I owe some coin to Hogun and Sif. Volstagg as well, though he often forgets to collect,” Thor admitted. “Fandral has borrowed some from me as well as some of the soldiers in my service and…”

“…and you have written none of it down and an instead are going on your memories, though they be few and far between,” Loki sighed. “I suppose one doesn’t think to write down financial transactions when the bulk of those loans occur while one is inebriated. Thank the Norns you have friends who like you Thor. Anyone else would easily rob you blind.”

“I also owe Sigyn…” Thor began.

“No,” Sigyn interjected. “You do not. I told you that you do not.”

“What does he owe you?” Loki questioned his wife, concerned.

Instead of answering her husband, Sigyn glared at her brother-in-law as if daring him to reveal the secret financial exchange betwixt the two. Sensing Thor was the weakest link in this chain, Loki then himself focused his glower on Thor, doing his best to intimidate his brother into giving up his secret. The focus of both glares on him and his already induced state of panic did not help Thor’s resolve. While perhaps Sigyn and her seiðr were the more immediate threat, Thor knew Sigyn was more forgiving in nature and didn’t like to harm people for petty reasons. Loki, on the other hand, could wallow and salivate in his vengeance for years before finally executing it, even over trite and ridiculous slights. With a sigh, Thor hedged his bets and gave in.

“Sigyn provided me with the funds to look for you across the realms whenever she had an inkling or
an idea where you might be,” Thor admitted. “I didn’t want to take it, but she insisted.”

“I couldn’t go myself without raising suspicion, but I wanted to help in any way I could,” Sigyn shook her head. “And I told Thor he was not to pay me back, even if he didn’t find you.”

“He didn’t find me, and I am surprised at you, Thor,” Loki huffed. “Taking precious funds from a poor widow when you yourself are among the wealthiest men in the nine realms. Would you have allowed Sigyn to keep paying you until she had nothing to live on?”

“Loki…” Sigyn cautioned.

“I didn’t actually spend any of the money she gave me!” Thor admitted. “I set it aside and spent my own!”

“Thor!” Sigyn said horrified. Thor cursed himself, now having given up two secrets in the span of only a few moments.

“I took the money,” Thor said, “because you wanted me to. But I didn’t spend it because I was worried you might need it.”

“Well, it will be easy for you to pay it back, then,” Loki said. “How much does he owe, you Sigyn? I will write it here in his account books.”

“I am not telling you,” Sigyn huffed.

“I’ll make up a sum if I have to,” Loki replied to his wife. “And if I have to make one up, you know it will be large.”

“Do you think they would send debt collectors to Midgard?” Thor asked suddenly.

“What?” Loki asked, wiping his head around to face this new crisis Thor had created.

“Well, after reading the Midgardian mythological tales about myself, I decided it would be quite delightful to have a goat cart of my own,” Thor admitted. “So, I had a specialty cart for myself commissioned and when I was last in Asgard took possession of it. However, since I haven’t been back I have not made the last payment on it. Do you think the merchant will be cross?”

“Most likely,” Loki said.

“Cross enough to come to Midgard?” Thor winced.

“He might hire a dwarven debt collector,” Sigyn suggested. “They’re the best.”

“A dwarven debt collector would definitely be able to find you. And with ease,” Loki agreed. “But hiring one can be very costly, and I doubt a mere merchant would want to spare the expense. More likely, the artisan will ask the Allfather to make good on your debt.”

“Which would be worse than a debt collector,” Sigyn said.

“I almost regret that I won’t be there to see the look on One-Eye’s face when he is asked to pay the remainder of a sum owed by his most worthy and proud son,” Loki smirked, “especially when he learns the debt is to cover the cost of a goat cart.”

“I am the Crown Prince of Asgard and should be able to use any means of conveyance I choose!” Thor thundered, as if he was really arguing with the Allfather. He then went quiet and more contrite. “I think the bill is in there. Hopefully, I can pay it in time that it won’t draw the Allfather’s
“Alright, Thor,” Loki sighed. “Come here and we will work over your financials together. I cannot keep doing this for you every year, and so it is best you start attempting to do at least some of the work yourself.” Thor morosely trudged over to the sofa and glanced at all of the documents and records Loki had spread out.

“I’ll make you scones!” Sigyn said happily.
“Yes, well, I come to you today not on my own behalf but rather on Thor’s,” Loki said. “There is an issue with which I think you can help Thor best.”

“And why hasn’t Thor come to me with this problem, then?” Pepper asked curiously.

“Perhaps it is because he is embarrassed,” Loki shrugged, “or perhaps because Thor only deals with problems after they have arisen, not always in anticipation of them occurring.”

“Okay,” Pepper said. “What does Thor need?”

“Please bear with me as I explain,” Loki said. “On Asgard, there is an annual festival called Disting, which - as best as I have had Lady Jane and Lady Darcy explain - is similar to your tax day. One pays their debts off and collects on what is owed. Accounts are balanced, etcetera.”

“Tony and I had a meeting with our staff accountants and finance department about taxes this morning,” Pepper mentioned. “Is that why this has come up?”

“Well, yes and no,” Loki said. “Disting is in two days, and while I have helped Thor balance himself to the point he won’t be in too much trouble financially when the day comes… to be honest, I am a bit tired of my brother always relying on me for his budgetary and financial concerns.”

“Hang on…” Pepper said, her eyes narrowing. “If you know how to do all this stuff to the point you not only do your own but also Thor’s books… why were you playing dumb with me about finance?”

“Well… I, uh,” Loki sighed. “Here’s the thing. I keep my finances and the Allfather as far apart as possible so if something happens, Sigyn is protected. I wouldn’t put it past him - whether on his own or pushed by the nobles of the court - to strip Sigyn of whatever protection she is offered by Asgard - both physical and financial - if something were to happen to me. And I am not paying the Allfather back for banishing me. Let him think I’m bankrupt. He pays off Stark. Sigyn keeps her nest egg. And everyone wins.”

“What about the money the Allfather will have to raise from the people of Asgard to cover the costs of paying for your stay here?” Pepper pointed out.

“Please,” Loki snorted. “The man’s bedroom is solid gold. The man practically sneezes silver and shits diamonds. Not to mention all of his solid gold statues of himself and the fact he requires his armies to wear gold plated armor. And he has the authority to cease any riches on any of the Nine Realms he wishes. He just doesn’t to maintain his facade of benevolence. He might want to consider his own wasteful spending before allowing anyone to argue paying for my stay here is unfair.”

“Okay then,” Pepper said, with a smirk. “But I reserve the right to ask you for a favor in exchange for keeping this secret. I’m not about to let this opportunity for an IOU pass me up.”

“No wonder Stark has you keep his keys and puts you in charge of his ventures,” Loki grinned. “You certainly know how to wheedle a deal.”

“Well, despite what some people think,” Pepper replied, “I didn’t get where I am today because of how I look. Now, what can I help you with?”

“I believe, given his inability to balance his own books or even remember where he has stashed his bills, receipts and so forth, Thor might derive more knowledge and in fact be more cordial toward you attempts at financial education,” Loki explained to Pepper. “I must warn you, however, Thor
isn’t always the most attentive student. He can be easily distracted when it comes to tasks that do not come easily to him.”

“So, why are you coming to me about this?” Pepper asked. “Why isn’t Thor doing this himself?”

“Partially I think he would be embarrassed,” Loki admitted. “Partially I didn’t suggest this to him because I knew he’d never follow through on it, and I’m at my wits end. And, to be honest, I think he might respond better to instruction coming from someone… other than me. I have been telling Thor how to get his house in order for centuries, but he just waves me off. Perhaps he might listen better to someone on the outside. After all, he doesn’t have the best track record for listening to the Allfather or Mother either.”

“Fair enough,” Pepper nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Pepper was even less impressed with Thor’s attention to financial business than Loki was, though it was fair to say Loki had long been adjusted to Thor’s less-than-stellar budgetary track record having known Thor for more than a millenia. Thor was a little chagrined that Loki had sought outside help on his behalf and a bit embarrassed it had come to this. He didn’t want his friends to think badly of him, after all. However, Pepper made it plain to him that asking one’s friends for help was nothing to be ashamed of, and that it was important to let friends use their strengths to help you improve your own areas of weakness. Thor’s fears alleviated, Pepper did her best to not be overly obvious that she couldn’t believe Thor had either never received or never retained any financial training.

The first suggestion Pepper made for Thor was for him to designate a single place to store anything financial related, whether it be receipts for purchases, IOUs or bills. Loki had made this suggestion numerous times to Thor over the years, but it was only after hearing it from Pepper that Thor took the entire thing seriously. Thor emptied out a wooden box he had been using to store various trinkets he had collected from different Midgardian capsule vending machines and crane machines for the purpose of housing financial documentation. It was Sigyn who suggested Thor might even get some Asgardian runes that dealt with financial protection and wealth carved into the box for added help. While Pepper wasn’t sure if that would help, she did suggest Thor storing his account books with the box.

Her next advice - also something Loki had suggested constantly before - was for Thor to set aside one time each week to go through his box of financial documents and recording them in his account books. Doing a small amount each week would be much easier than going through everything he had accrued in the past year and might even help him pay off things earlier. She then suggested Thor get a second box to store the financial documents he had recorded already but might still need. While Thor admitted to the task being daunting, Pepper assured him that the more he did it, the easier it would seem. Eventually, it would become a habit and he wouldn’t realize it hadn’t always been part of his routine. Before she left, Pepper showed Thor some of the financial planning video games she had Loki play. Entranced by the graphics and background music, Thor spent the rest of the afternoon on the games.

Not everyone was into Thor’s newfound zeal for financial responsibility. Jane went into a brief panic when made an offhanded comment about balancing her checkbook after dinner and Thor asked to help. Jane also had to stop Thor after Darcy explained to him what student loans were and Thor threatened to attack Darcy’s student loan officer with Mjolnir for committing “usury.” While Darcy was all on board with Thor using Mjolnir to destroy her student loans, Jane had a feeling it wouldn’t go at all like planned. For his part, Loki was annoyed that Thor had only learned the word “usury” that morning and was now bandying the word about as if he was some sort of expert in the subject.
Of course, Loki cheered up a few days later when he received a rather warm note from his mother. Thor had written to her asking questions about setting up banking accounts and investment funds. The Allmother had always hoped her eldest son would begin taking more responsibility for his personal finances since he would one day oversee all of Asgard’s, though she had never really held her breath that Thor would go out of his own way to do so. She sent a thankful letter to Loki, knowing his role in the entire thing and also let him in on some court gossip he had wanted to keep up with followed by some paragraphs reminding him how important he was to her and how much she missed him.

Pepper also received a grateful letter from Frigga along with two gifts for her help in Thor’s situation, a beautiful Asgardian necklace and what Pepper thought was a bracelet but Sigyn later explained was a decorative key ring. Thor and Loki had described Pepper as Tony’s key keeper several times, which Sigyn explained was a term in Asgard almost synonymous with wife but much more important than girlfriend or lover. In Asgardian culture, for a man to trust a woman with his keys was almost more important than asking her to marry him and a man who freely gave a woman keys to his possessions was held in high esteem in deed. Sigyn herself had been carrying around a set of Loki’s keys since before her disastrous and short-lived engagement to Theoric. Thor had never made a set of his own keys for anyone, though both Amora and Lorelai had tried with their enchantments.

“You’ve done a good thing,” Pepper said to Loki after supper as Thor watched the financial news and tried to coax a bored Tony into explaining earth’s commodities market to him.

“I’ve created a monster,” Loki disagreed. “You’ll see. This time next week he’ll have invested all of his funds in precious metals or schemes to create fruit juices that claim to make people invisible. He’s still very upset about that shrink ray he ordered from that comic book.”

“The important thing is he won’t be coming to you for financial advice any more,” Pepper pointed out.

“Yes,” Loki smirked as something slowly seemed to dawn across Pepper’s face. “From now on, he’ll be coming to you.”
The Frost Giant Cometh

Chapter Summary

Or, in which the Avengers have to face off against a horde of abominable snowmen and
Loki just blue himself.

It was like something out of Calvin and Hobbes, except adding a tiger to this scenario might make it
more dangerous and less hilarious.

Some guy with snow powers was attacking Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire with an army of
sentient snowmen he had created. At this point, SHIELD wasn’t sure if the guy was a mutant,
inhuman, or whatever the P.C. term for those who were mortal but displayed strange powers were
called at this juncture. With the X-Men conducting some human rights convention in India and the
Fantastic Four on some ski lodge retreat in Colorado, the Avengers had no choice but to take a break
from their own holidays to head out and face off against the guy who was attacking towns with an
army of snow people. Despite having destroyed all of his suits, Tony was in the midst of working on
a new one. He was taking only the best bits of his previous legion of armor, though he wasn’t keen
on joining the rest of the team after the hell his Christmas had been.

However, it was hard to avoid the meeting when Fury scheduled it in your tower. Tony walked into
his dining room to find Steve, Natasha, Clint, Banner, Thor, Loki, and Sigyn already assembled
there that morning. He made himself a cup of coffee as Fury pulled up a projection of the damage
being caused by the anthropomorphic snowmen and their leader, some clown calling himself the
Snow King. He really just looked like a dorky college student dressed in fancy white ski clothes with
hair he had dyed blue. With frosted tips, of course.

“So far, our research into this kid has turned up the usual bullshit,” Fury grimaced. “His name is Jack
Frost...”

“You’re joking,” Tony said, sitting down.

“It actually is,” Natasha said. “John Alexander Frost III. Goes by Jack. His grandfather is a state
senator from Vermont, and his folks own a chain of ski lodges.”

“Where did he get the snow powers?” Steve asked.

“We aren’t sure,” Fury said. “It’s possible he had the mutant gene and his family used their wealth
and influence to cover it up or just couldn’t admit it to themselves. He could also be Inhuman. No
one has gotten close enough since these powers manifested to tell.”

“What’s the deal with the snowmen?” Clint asked.

“Best we can tell, his powers limit him to manipulating snow,” Fury said. “He can launch massive
sized snowballs at people, turn snow into crashing waves, and bring snowmen to life. We believe
most of his... for lack of a better term... army are snowmen built by others that he has brought to
life. Especially since several of them seem crude and... fashioned by children. I have a feeling he
will be easy to bring down once he can be isolated from his... minions. This would have been easier
he only had a few, but they are now numbering in the hundreds.”

“Where has he been getting all these snowmen?” Bruce asked.

“He started out as a small local issue in Vermont,” Fury said. “He then began weaving back and
forth between the three states of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. It wasn’t until one of the
county sheriff’s departments reported the issue that it was even brought to federal attention. It was
then the incidents were collected together. We believe he’s been on the warpath for about three
weeks now. He collects new snowmen everywhere he goes, and we believe during some of his lulls
in activity he has been creating his own.”

“What does he want?” Steve asked. “Has he made any demands?”

“No,” Fury said. “He just seems to like causing chaos.”

“What’s his kill count?” Tony asked.

“No deaths reported yet, but several severe cases of frostbite, one non-fatal heart attack, and general
terror across the tri-state region,” Fury explained.

“Are you sure you can’t get Richards and his Farcical Four to do this?” Tony groaned. “I’m sure the
fiery one that looks like Steve’s illegitimate grandson could settle this real quick.”

“For the last time, I am not Johnny Storm’s grandfather or his father,” Steve grimaced. “We just…
look alike.”

“Freaky alike,” Clint pointed out.

“If I call them in, you’ll have to deal with Richards,” Fury warned Tony with a raised eyebrow.
“And I doubt he’ll be happy you interrupted his vacation.”

“Well, why can’t we just sit around until March and wait for global warming to do its job?” Tony
groaned,

“This kid has also single-handedly caused $21 million in property damage already, with possibly
more unaccounted for,” Fury replied. “He’s learning to cause more damage with every attack,
meaning that number could easily rise into the billions. Not to mention there’s potential for him to
leave his comfort zone and head south to the other New England states or north into Canada. I don’t
need an international incident. We’ve got three angry governors demanding something be done on
the federal level to stop him. We’ve got a debate in Congress over whether or not natural disaster
relief funds should be given to areas damaged by superhuman means. I have lawmakers and
legislators breathing down my neck, and am sick of turning on my TV to see Frosty’s misshapen
brethren toppling cars with their stick hands.”

“Weaknesses?” Thor asked.

“Nothing we’ve thrown at the snowmen seems to work,” Fury said. “One inspired cop created a
flamethrower with a lighter and an aerosol can, but he only managed to melt part of a snowman’s
head before he was overcome by the rest of the horde. Any other questions?”

“I think we can figure this out,” Steve said confidently. “I guess the six of us should suit up.”

“Eight of you,” Fury corrected.
“Pardon?” Banner asked.

“You’re also taking him,” Fury instructed, pointing at Loki.

“Him?” The Avengers said, startled, at the same time Loki said “Me?” in disgust.

“He could be useful,” Fury said, “what with his magic ice powers.”

“Magic ice powers I am technically not supposed to have or use,” Loki pointed out. “And how did you find out about them?” Natasha attempted to look nonchalant, even with the death glare Loki was sending her.

“If he comes, he’s staying on the ship,” Tony said.

“Fine by me,” Loki huffed.

“Mrs. Mischief might also be handy to take along,” Fury said.

“I would be willing to offer my assistance as a healer,” Sigyn said magnanimously.

“We might want to take a medic with us more often,” Tony nodded. “Maybe we could get her a nurse uniform? I know that would help my injuries heal up faster.”

“I was thinking more in terms of firepower,” Fury said. “You’ve demonstrated you can handle yourself pretty well.”

“She did blow up a couple of Chitauri,” Steve agreed. “And shut down the portal.”


“It’s not up to you,” Fury informed him.

“Sigyn, you are not doing this,” Loki said, turning to his wife, who was glowering at him.

“You dare to tell me what I can do?” Sigyn said furiously. “We have a chance to do some good here. I am not letting you squander my opportunity because of your misguided attempts to protect me or your belief that you are better than such work.”

“You tell him, Sig,” Tony grinned.

“Excuse me, but didn’t you just a second ago make a derogatory remark about women in my profession?” Sigyn glared at Tony. “I wonder if the appearance of your healer would matter if said healer was working to remove your head from within your posterior where it seems permanently lodged.” Tony opened and closed his mouth several times like a goldfish as the rest of the team snickered. Even Fury looked like he was biting back a laugh.

“I believe,” Loki said to Tony with a smirk, “Sigyn has, as you say, escorted you to the Hall of Learning.”

“What?” Tony asked. The rest of the group turned and glowered at Clint.

“The expression is ‘taken you to school,’” Clint corrected with a sigh. Loki still remained smug at his use of the slang term.

“Just get out there and wreck some kid’s snowmen,” Fury sighed before leaving the room.
“So, Natalie, Natasha, Nadine, Nancy, Whoever the Hell You Are,” Tony said as the group readied themselves to head out in the quinjet. “How is it our dear friend’s secret ice powers found their way into Fury’s knowledge? You know, the ice powers everyone - even Loki himself - agreed he isn’t ready to use yet?”

“Reporting to Fury is my job,” Natasha replied. “And Loki is a considerable threat. You’re lucky you aren’t in trouble for trying to hide the fact that he had regained some of his power.”

“He didn’t regain anything. He’s just learning how to use something he never tried to manifest before,” Tony pointed out. “And I’m not a tattletale.”

“No, technically the word for what you did is treason,” Natasha said. “You know, hiding the fact that a known enemy has a dangerous ability.”

“You would know all about treason, wouldn’t you?” Tony snorted.

“I do not like the thought of my brother being used this way,” Thor said. “It is unfair for Fury to thrust him into such a situation. And I am not pleased that my brother’s secret was not kept.”

“There isn’t much we can do about it now,” Steve pointed out.

“I don’t think this argument is going to help anyone,” Bruce pointed out.

“Besides, no one said Frosty had to use his powers,” Clint agreed.

“May I state the painfully obvious?” Loki replied from where they had all been ignoring him. “If the Lady Widow was undoubtedly as thorough in his reports as I believe, your Furious Master knows these powers are largely untested, especially under great stress. I can only postulate sending me on this mission has one of three goals. The first would be for any open display of my ability to be perceived outwardly as a threat, therefore giving him reason to expel me from Midgard saying I have violated the terms of my imprisonment. However, I cannot think your Furious One would wish such a thing. Keeping one’s enemies close, and all that. Second, he could feel the situation before us is desperate enough that he has no hope other than these untested powers. Yet, I seriously doubt he would let such a situation get so dire. So, my third and final supposition is that your Furious Ones intends this to be a test, to see the progress of my abilities, how or if I am able to control them, and thereby conjecture how I could be of use to him in the future.”

“That is… an uncanny assessment,” Tony said finally.

“Loki has centuries of experience with stratagem,” Thor said proudly.

“Besides, your Furious One has a plethora of secrets,” Loki smirked. “And no one can sniff out lies better than a liar.”

“Well, if we are all done strategizing,” Sigyn said, appearing out of the quinjet after having stocked it up with a strange array of Asgardian medicines, “I am ready to depart.”

“You should stay here,” Loki insisted to Sigyn again.

“Do you remember what happened the last time you forced me to stay home from a mission I was specifically invited to?” Sigyn asked Loki with a raised brow.

“She reorganized his entire library chronologically by date of publication rather than alphabetically,”
Thor stage whispered to the other Avengers. “It was a harrowing three months in the palace.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed at his wife. “But at the first sign of danger…”

“I will defend myself,” Sigyn snorted before turning and heading into the quinjet.

“Have I told you today how much I like your wife?” Natasha said to Loki before heading into the jet herself.

“Well, I guess we have to get to work,” Steve sighed, flipping up his shield and heading into the jet himself, Clint, Tony and a nervous Bruce following behind him.

“Brother,” Thor said, clapping a hand on Loki’s shoulder before the younger man headed into the jet. “You do not have to use your abilities or feel pressured into doing anything you do not want to do.” Loki paused for a moment.

“To be honest… I am more afraid…” Loki sighed. “When I use these powers… I… I don’t keep my glamour intact. Well, I try but it doesn’t always work out. And if Sigyn were to see me…”

“Sigyn will not be upset if you show your true nature,” Thor assured him.

“And you?” Loki snorted. “You will not turn and attempt to pound me into the ground? Isn’t that your first instinct upon seeing a Frost Giant?”

“You are my brother,” Thor assured him. “No matter what color your skin or if you manage to grow horns.”

“For the last time, the horns are from their helmets,” Loki huffed.

“Yes, yes,” Thor rolled his eyes.

“Now, do you have a good story cooked up for Asgard when they learn you saw a Frost Giant running around Midgard and did nothing to stop him?” Loki asked.

“You’re a shapeshifter,” Thor shrugged. “We can just say you shifted into one.”

“Oh, yes. That will go over well,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I’m not too concerned about it,” Thor admitted. “Making things up as we go usually works out.”

“This is why you should never be in charge of anything,” Loki grumbled, heading into the quinjet.

“You will thank me when this is over brother!” Thor proclaimed.

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By the time the group arrived in the area of the White Mountain National Forest SHIELD intelligence had narrowed down as the location of the so-called Snow King’s lair, it was evident they were dealing with more than some snobby rich kid testing out his newfound ice powers. In addition to some small towns, the kid had used his maniacal snowmen to bash in a few ski resorts and a fairy-tale themed amusement park. In the time it had taken Fury to explain to them what the guy was up to, Frost had apparently learned that giant snowmen did as much damage as hordes of smaller ones. He now had an army of seven-foot-tall snow creations guarding the former logging town he had set up shop in. Without the quinjet, it would have been a hard slog up a snowy, old logging road to the ghost town. As it was, it had been hard to land the quinjet in the thick cover of trees without making it obvious they were there.
Natasha, Steve and Clint took surveillance duty for a while as Thor, Loki, and Tony prepped the arsenal the group had brought. Various flamethrowers, Clint’s special brand of flaming and explosive arrows, and what was essentially a fireball cannon Tony had prototyped for a future suit. Sigyn and Bruce were prepping all of the medical supplies just in case they were needed. Sigyn had agreed to stay behind in the ship so long as Loki was still in the ship, which Loki had agreed to but Natasha had been disapproving of. Tony and Clint also thought the group would stand a better chance with Sigyn out front and Loki tucked away in the quinjet with Bruce, but neither Loki nor Bruce seemed to agree with that suggestion. Loki didn’t want his wife in harm’s way without being there to protect her and Bruce was worried that a stressed out Loki might set the Other Guy off.

“So, what are we looking at?” Tony asked when the surveillance group returned.

“He’s got about a dozen of those new seven-foot-tall guys guarding the perimeter,” Steve said. “We believe Frost is camped out in the old company store. There are several of the smaller snowmen around there as well.”

“Any inside?” Tony asked.

“Possibly,” Natasha said. “We also think this guy might be immune to the cold.”

“What gives you that impression?” Loki asked curiously.

“No electricity here for space heaters. He hasn’t started a fire, possibly because the smoke could give him away,” Clint replied. “And he didn’t seem to be covered in multiple layers in the house. Without something to heat him up, he should be experiencing frostbite by now, possibly even hypothermia. It’s too cold and wet out for him not to have come down with it unless he had some kind of protection.”

“Do you think heat will damage him like it did the snowmen?” Bruce asked curiously.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Clint said.

“We’re supposed to bring the kid in alive,” Steve shook his head. “We need to try to take him down without injuring him, if possible.”

“Well, what’s the plan then?” Tony asked.

Steve’s plan involved in taking out the large snowmen sentinels as quietly as possible before tackling the smaller snowmen. The problem, however, was that these creatures didn’t seem to stay down if they were hit with just anything. While Steve’s shield and Thor’s hammer could break up the snowmen, this wasn’t a permanent solution. Based on Fury’s intel, the best bet was melting the snowmen down into water with the theory that Frost couldn’t control just water. Therefore, Steve suggested the main force be Clint with his flaming arrows, Natasha with some flamethrowers and Tony wielding his fire cannon, though Steve was a little nervous about the fact Tony didn’t have a full suit rather just some gauntlets and protective coverings for his head and legs. Sigyn would be staying behind with Bruce and Loki for the time being, but would be called in if backup or a medic was needed.

It was only after about ten minutes of battle that a major crash shook the quinjet and led both Loki and Sigyn to peer out to see what was amiss. While melting the snow creatures was working, it appeared Frost had learned that he didn’t just have to make already built snowmen come to life. He could create the creatures of out of snow and then send them into battle like frosty golems with a few flicks of his wrist now. While he was starting to run out of snow to make his constructs, the amount and size of those he had already created were causing some heavy damage. Two of the old
outbuildings in the ghost town had been destroyed. Steve was trying to get to Clint, who was pinned down by a horde of snow creatures. And Tony had been picked up and tossed like a ragdoll up against the quinjet. He was now clutching his arm in pain and his fire cannon had fallen several feet away.

Instinct taking over, Sigyn rushed back in the quinjet, grabbed one of the healing packs she and Bruce had prepared in case of injury in the field, and then started to head out to where Tony was lying in the snow. Just as she hit the exit, she felt herself being pulled back. Grabbing his wife’s shoulder, Loki whorled her around to face him, concern etched across his face.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Sigyn hissed at her husband. “Sir Stark needs my help!”

“You are not going out there,” Loki insisted.

“What, so I’m supposed to send you?” Sigyn snorted. “Do you have any idea how to use any of these Midgardian healing devices?” Loki frowned but did not answer. “You could cause him further harm.”

“Sigyn…” Loki tried to protest.

“This is my sworn duty!” she said. “The longer you keep me here the worse things may get!”

“Fine,” Loki said. “But I’m covering you.”

“Guys, are you sure…?” Bruce began, only to be silenced by twin looks of annoyance from the two. Bruce sighed. “I’ll let them know to keep an eye out for you over the comms.”

Before Bruce could get in contact with the other Avengers, Sigyn had stormed out of the quinjet with Loki hot on her heels. The pair kept low to the ground and navigated their way around bushes, fallen trees, and debris to get to Tony, a task much easier for Sigyn than her tall husband. Stark seemed a bit surprised but relieved when they slowly began to approach him. Pulling his hand away, Tony revealed his arm hadn’t been hurt from the impact against the quinjet but rather a very long icicle that had been thrown into it. The icicle thankfully hadn’t gone through his arm but was sticking out and bleeding.

“What happened to staying on the jet?” Tony smirked.

“Don’t worry, Stark,” Loki replied, “I am sure Sigyn will attend to your arm wound before she dislodges your head from your posterior.”

“Melt it,” Sigyn instructed her husband when they reached Tony’s side. “Otherwise I’ll have to break it off to treat it.” Loki sighed but, thankful he had remembered to wear gloves, melted the icicle sticking out of Stark.

“Thanks, Frozone,” Tony nodded before wincing. “Why is it always the same arm, huh? Just once I’d like someone to shoot me in my right arm. Give it a chance to be out of commission for a change.”

“If you’d like, I’m sure I could find some time to break your right arm for you,” Loki volunteered as Sigyn began wrapping up Tony’s injured arm.

“You are not being helpful,” Sigyn informed her husband before turning to Tony. “I am sorry, Sir Stark, but you are out of the fight for now.”

“I figured as much,” Tony sighed. “I guess I should have waited until I had a full suit, not just
gauntlets a helmet and boots.”

“I must bring you back to the quinjet,” Sigyn informed him. “It is not good to have an open wound at temperatures this low.”

“And I suppose Frosty is going to cover us?” Tony snorted.

“Well, we could just leave you here,” Loki replied.

“Loki, get Sir Stark’s cannon,” Sigyn ordered.

“It won’t work for him,” Tony sighed. “It only responds to the handprints of those I’ve authorized to access it. And, full offense, the snobby prince who’s instructed an alien army to use my tower to destroy earth is not on that list.”

“And yet now said snobby prince is the only thing that stands between you and the two giant snow beings that just noticed us,” Loki hissed at Stark. Sigyn and Tony both looked up to see two looming snowmen making their way over.

“Shit,” Tony grumbled as Sigyn seemed to effortlessly toss him to his feet and then wrap his arm around her shoulder so she could escort him back to the quinjet. In fact, Tony was pretty surprised at how the diminutive woman could carry him as if he weighed no more than a feather.

“Cover us, Loki,” Sigyn ordered. Loki nodded and turned around just in time for one of the abominable snowmen to throw a massive snowball toward Sigyn and Tony. Fortunately, the creature’s aim was off. The snowball hit a tree a few inches to Sigyn’s left and then revealed the rather large rock the snow creature had gotten inside.

“No one,” Loki hissed at the creature, “attacks my wife and gets away with it.”

As Sigyn hustled him toward the quinjet, Tony looked over her shoulder to see Loki change from his already tall, six-foot-something Asgardian form into something blue. At least, he looked blue from the back. Daggers of ice were being flung at the completely confused snow beings. Just as he and Sigyn rushed out of view, Tony watched as Loki leapt up on one of the creatures, standing on its shoulders and physically ripping off its head. Looking up, Tony could have sworn Loki’s eyes had gone blood red, but he didn’t have enough time to make full-on eye contact. Tony was shuffled into the quinjet and Bruce helped Sigyn splay him across a table for examination.

Things were not going as well as expected. Despite bringing along a full two quiver of arrows, Clint was getting low on ammunition. Natasha’s flamethrower was running out of fuel and Tony had been taken down with no sign of where he had dropped his fire cannon. Even if Steve or Thor had been able to locate the weapon, Tony hadn’t exactly explained to anyone else out to use the thing. And any time anyone seemed to get close enough to Frost to take him down, another snow being seemed to appear. The one thing the group had going for them was that creating his own constructs instead of animating already built creatures was wearing on Frost and he was also struggling to rebuild and reanimate those of his constructs that had been taken down.

Hearing that Tony was safe on the quinjet and being treated by Bruce and Sigyn, the group could at least breathe somewhat of a sigh of relief. However, Bruce’s report that Loki had gone MIA on the Tony rescue mission was a bit disconcerting for everyone, save maybe Thor. Steve had ordered the group to begin closing ranks in the hope that they could taken down the remaining larger creatures with concentrated fire as they were running low on firepower. Frost laughed as the four of them
crowded toward in each other, seeming to think it was a sign he had won the day.

“You are no match for my creatures!” Frost laughed, though his cracking from the late stages of puberty.

“What is it you actually want?” Clint asked, annoyed, as he shot a fiery arrow into the eye of what appeared to be some kind of snow dragon. “Is there an endgame in this or do just like ruining people’s days?”

“They all laughed at me before, but no one is laughing now!” Frost laughed.

“I’m guessing no one has taught this kid about irony yet,” Clint muttered.

“If I had a dime for every time a super villain said that,” Steve sighed, letting his shield bounce off an old pine tree before decapitating two snowmen and landing back on his arm.

“Ten bucks says this is over a girl,” Clint said to Natasha.

“Nah, my money’s on daddy issues,” Natasha replied.

“Avengers! Are you listening to me?” Frost huffed, annoyed. “I’m explaining your imminent downfall!”

“Jeez, the villain monologue?” Clint groan. “This guy’s hitting every box on cheesy villain bingo!”

“Must we listen to him jabber?” Thor sighed.

“Hey!” Frost yelled angrily. He opened his mouth to continue his rant but was cut off by a series of shrieks followed by a series of thuds. “What the…?"

Two massive snow beings toppled over into piles of slush, one just in front and the other just behind Frost. Then, a shot of ice spikes shot up around the remaining Avengers, impaling the snowmen slowly closing in on them. Those that weren’t taken down by ice seemed to be hit by a whir of blue and daggers of ice being launched in each direction. While Clint and Natasha ducked down, Steve using his shield as a sort of makeshift umbrella over the rest of them, Thor stood cheering and clapping excitedly. With a final thud, the Avengers heard a shriek coming from Frost and stood up to find a blue creature standing over the boy.

“Shit, he’s got a garrote around Frost’s neck,” Widow realized, rushing forward.

“Don’t choke him to death!” Steve ordered the blue being. “We need him alive.”

Pulling back from Frost, the skin of the blue creature slowly began to fade and then turn white. It was then those other than Thor recognized the creature’s hair and clothing, realizing this was in fact Loki. Turning around to face the Avengers, Loki’s skin had receded mostly back to its Asgardian white though his eyes were still red. Breathing heavily in anger, Loki closed his eyes and then opened them to reveal his more recognizable green eyes. He then pulled his black gloves out of his pocket and put them on, covering up the blue that still hadn’t receded from his hands.

“Frost is unconscious,” Natasha sighed, bending down to check the boy’s pulse. “Best to shackle him up and get him to Fury before he wakes.”

“Loki…” Steve said, approaching the man nervously. “Are you okay?”

“They attacked Sigyn,” Loki said darkly.
“And you handled them well,” Steve said, surveying the remains of snow beings scattered around.

“Well done, brother!” Thor said jovially, clapping Loki on the back. “You certainly escorted them to the Hall of Learning!” A cry of frustration came from behind them. No one needed to look up to know it was Clint.

“Nat and I will get Frost back to the quinjet,” Steve said. “Thor, I think Loki might need someone to...uh... cool him down?”

“My brother is fine,” Thor said proudly. “He has decimated our enemies!”

“The two of you should head back to the jet,” Natasha suggested to Thor. “Check on Stark and make sure Sigyn and Banner are okay.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, trudging off in the general direction of the quinjet. Thor followed behind happily, already recounting the events of the battle.

“I guess Fury’s bet paid off,” Clint said offhandedly. “Loki did pretty well.”

“I don’t know if I’d call going into a murderous rage because someone attacked his wife ‘well,’” Natasha said. “Fury didn’t want to just see how Loki harnessed his powers but also how in control of them he is.”

“He only hurt the enemy, single-handedly brought down the target - albeit not exactly using protocol - and he was able to get himself back under control fairly quickly,” Steve pointed out.

“You realize Fury might try to make him go on more missions with us,” Natasha pointed out. “We’ve already got Tony, Clint, sometimes Hulk and occasionally you, Steve. I don’t know how many loose cannons this team needs, but it’s getting excessive.”

“Let’s just get Frost to Fury and then we can worry about Loki in the debrief,” Steve said.

While Nick Fury could hardly say the Jack Frost debrief was the strangest one he had attended in his life, it was easily the strangest one he had attended so far that week. Frost had woken up in specially designed cuffs and then broken down in tears about how some girl had dumped him and his dad was threatening to cut off his credit cards because he had maxed them out trying to win said girl back. The poor little rich boy act wasn’t convincing any SHIELD agents to sympathize for Frost, and now Fury was dealing with the Frost family lawyers, who were already trying to claim that Jack was innocent of all the crimes he had been accused of. Fury was pretty sure these protestations weren’t because of any familial love or responsibility but rather because the Frosts wanted to protect their family fortune.

Already, several of the victims of Jack’s attacks as the Snow King as well as those victims’ insurance companies and several local government entities were trying to recoup their losses from the Frost family fortune. As daunting as all of the potential legal fees and associated court costs with mounting civil suits could be, it was most assured that the Frost family would still be pretty much bankrupt if they settled all of the suits out of court. The family fortune wasn’t the only thing looking bleak. There were already calls for Jack’s grandfather to resign from his state senate seat and boycotts of the family-owned resorts. And that was even before the state governments tried to get a piece of the pie for all of the destruction of roads, police and fire vehicles and other equipment.

Already annoyed by all of the snobby, legal maneuvering the Frost family was undertaking, Fury soon began to regret his decision to allow Tony Stark to sit in on the team debrief after being shot full
of morphine to deal with his arm. Tony spent the first five minutes of the debrief spinning around in his chair and screeching “whee!” at the top of his lungs. Fury finally ordered Tony into a stationary chair. After pouting for a few minutes, Tony had taken to saying “that’s what she said!” and then laughing hysterically after anyone in the room spoke. Even Loki, who had initially delighted in Stark’s pain-medicine-induced revelry, seemed to be growing annoyed with Tony’s antics.

“What’s the story on the kid?” Steve asked, after Fury finished his customary start of debrief rant.

“Mutant whose family was doing their best to use their wealth and influence to conceal his power until it became too much for the kid and he blew up like a soda bottle under pressure,” Fury sighed. “I now owe Hill ten bucks. Xavier is sending some of his folks to come over and pick the kid up, take him to their school.”

“Are his parents okay with that move?” Natasha asked.

“He’s almost nineteen, so they can’t exactly tell him he can’t go,” Fury shrugged. “He’ll be basically under house arrest until he can prove he’s used his powers. And so long as he doesn’t get slapped with federal charges. Of course, considering the fact that his family is trying to buy his way out of trouble it’s unlikely he’s going to end up charged with anything in the long run.”

“Why do you rich guys always get out of stuff, huh?” Clint asked Tony.


“Okay, which fool gave him permission to be in here while he’s hopped up on that shit?” Fury fumed.

“I believe that would be you, sir,” Steve replied with a raised brow. Fury sighed.

“Well, thorn in my side,” Fury addressed Loki. “You’d be happy to know that you scared the ever-loving shit out of Frost. He’s agreed to do anything we ask as long as we ‘keep that blue demon’ away from him. So good job.”

“I am not keen on doing this in the future,” Loki informed Fury. “Especially not until I feel I have better control.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Fury said, though Loki seriously doubted the one-eyed man would. Loki wasn’t sure if it was Fury’s general secretive nature or the various commonalities he had with Odin, but there was something about the SHIELD director Loki didn’t quite trust.

“My brother brought about our triumph!” Thor said proudly.

“Do be quiet, Thor,” Loki hissed, causing Fury to raise his brow.

“The Missus here also got a glowing report,” Fury continued. “Things could have gone bad for Stark if she hadn’t intervened when she did. I’d like to see her go out with you easily injured fools in the future, though I’m concerned that might make you idiots more likely to risk your necks.”

“Thank you, Furious One,” Sigyn said to him. “I hope to be of further use if needed.”

“See,” Fury said, gesturing to Sigyn. “That’s how you’re supposed to behave in a debrief. On a completely unrelated note, Stark isn’t allowed back out until he has a full suit, not just some arm bands and boots. Someone pass that along to him when he isn’t acting like a three-year-old hopped
up on sugar.” Tony was busy making a popping sound with his mouth because he found it entertaining.

“I believe Pepper Potts is waiting outside to have a conversation with you about just that, sir,” Natasha informed Fury, who sighed.

“Alright, unless there is anything else,” Fury said, “you’re all dismissed.”

The group began to head out of the room, Bruce escorting a drugged out Tony, as Pepper stormed into the room demanded to know why Fury had authorized Tony to go out on a dangerous mission without full armor, let alone was encouraging Tony to get back into said armor after what had happened over the holiday. Thor seemed to think a party was needed to celebrate their victory and while Clint agreed, Natasha and Steve were trying to talk Thor out of any heavy drinking until Tony’s injuries were mostly taken care of. Loki and Sigyn had stayed back to better slip off back to their own rooms after the day’s exercise.

“I wish I had been there to see your performance, especially since everyone has described it as so spectacular,” Sigyn said to her husband. Instead of preening as he usually would under such praise, Loki seemed to shrink back into himself.

“It wasn’t particularly remarkable,” Loki shrugged. “These friends of Thor’s have only seen me in action once before and then it was mainly with my seiðr, not knives or other weapons. Their astonishment is just because they aren’t used to me. I’m sure it will fade in time.”

“You say that and yet it was Thor who has heaped the most praise upon you for your actions,” Sigyn pointed out.

“He is just trying to show me positive encouragement as part of his efforts to rebuild our relationship,” Loki reasoned.

“You honestly don’t think he is proud of you?” Sigyn said in disbelief herself.

“I am not proud of what happened today,” Loki admitted. “I am glad I was able to protect you, but I am not proud of how uncontrolled and undisciplined I was with these newfound abilities. I am not sure I want to use them for quite some time.”

“Loki,” Sigyn shook her head. “You cannot stifle who you are. I know you are working to come to terms with your heritage, but I cannot see how abandoning your new powers just when you are beginning to harness them benefits anyone, least of all you.”

“They saw me,” Loki said gruffly. “Or at least some of me. In that state… looking like…”

“A Frost Giant? Which you are?” Sigyn pointed out. Loki was still fuming. “To be honest, I’m a little jealous. I am still hoping to see you that way myself.”

“This isn’t a game, Sigyn,” Loki huffed.

“I didn’t say it was one,” Sigyn replied. “You are my husband, and I love you. Every inch of you. And if those inches happen to be Jotun… it will not change my love for you. I promise.”

“I… I am not ready for that,” Loki conceded.

“But one day,” Sigyn said.

“Yes,” Loki sighed. “One day.”
The nightmare always began the same way.

He was leaving Odin in the throne room after being privately upbraided for something he had done - or perhaps not done - though it was never clear what. He strode from the room angrily, heading down the meandering palace hallways, though he never seemed to know exactly what destination he was heading for. After numerous strides, he started to feel a tingling sensation in one of his hands, only to look down and see it was slowly turning blue. Worriedly, he glanced around to ensure the palace guards had not noticed and then stuffed the hand into his pocket. He rounded the corner, hoping to return to his rooms and hide when he smacked into his brother, Lady Sif and the Warriors Three.

“Well met, brother!” Thor boomed. “Come with us! We are for the training grounds.”

“I...I cannot,” Loki stammered out. “I have something very important to attend to…”

“Ah, come now, Loki,” Fandral said, clapping him on the back, “what can be more important than my bladework besting your seiðr?”

Before he could respond, he felt the same tingling sensation in his opposite hand. Looking down, he noticed the tips of his fingers were starting to turn blue as well. The group gathered around him followed his gaze just as the blue started spreading near his fingernails.

“What is that?” Thor asked.

“A...spell...gone wrong… earlier,” Loki stuttered out.

“You might want to head to the infirmary,” Sif mentioned. “It looks rather serious.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded, as he rushed off. “Good day.”

As he walked he felt the sensation spreading throughout his body, starting at his toes and going up his extremities before meeting in his torso. He rushed toward his rooms, knocking over servants and running into various ladies and lords of the court. He stammered out his apologies as he continued running. The tingling sensation had now spread to his shoulders. He turned a corner and suddenly found himself in the main dining hall, a feast setup not unlike the one prepared for Thor’s coronation. Loki was utterly confused. Feasts weren’t held until evening and it was clearly midday. Not to mention he had been heading in the exact opposite direction of the dining hall toward his room in the royal suites.

Frigga and Odin were presiding over the festivities, despite Odin having been halfway across the palace only minutes earlier. Thor, Sif and the Warriors three were also sitting at their customary table,
indulging in the meal. Loki felt himself begin to sweat though his body felt freezing. His mother noticed him and beckoned him to come toward her on the dais. He froze in spot, only for his mother to get up and fetch him, bringing him toward the center of the room.

“What is wrong, my son?” Frigga asked worriedly. He felt the tingling sensation spreading up his neck and then across his face. His mother gasped in shock and he closed his eyes.

The sound of Frigga’s terror was soon followed by gasps and screams of terror coming from all over the room. When he opened his eyes, he saw members of the court backing away from him. Ladies were fainting and men had pulled out their weapons, stepping toward him in a challenging demeanor. He looked to his mother for comfort, but she too was slowly backing away. His brother and his friends were glaring at him menacingly, their weapons drawn. Whispered calls of “monster” echoed throughout the room. Loki felt trapped. He finally looked back to Odin, hoping for something… anything. All Odin did was wave his hand, a signal that those in the room might attack.

Using a blast of seiðr and smoke, Loki temporarily blinded his attackers enough to scamper off. He tore through the palace, ducking into rooms and turning down servants hallways to hide from the mob chasing after him. They were yelling at each other to find and kill this monster that had invaded Asgard, to rip its flesh from its body and grind its bones into dust. He managed to catch a glimpse of himself reflecting in an old shield hanging on one of the walls. His eyes were blood red and strange markings covered his now blue body. His teeth were sharpened like a rabid dog’s. He was exposed in his true form and now all of Asgard was out for his blood.

Loki waited for a passing group looking for him to turn a corner before sliding out behind them, crossing onto a balcony and climbing up the parapet to a portion of the roof. There was one place he could be safe, one place he could stay until he could figure out how to reverse this. He just had to make it there. As stealthily as he could, he made his way across the rooftops until he found his rooms. He snuck in through a window and found himself in his bedroom. Looking around, he breathed a small sigh of relief when he noticed Sigyn at her vanity.

She was combing her long blonde hair, her back turned to him. Dressed in her nightclothes, she seemed to be humming an old Vanir song, one of the few things her mother had taught her. Loki didn’t think about how odd it was that she had not been at the strange feast earlier, nor that it had gone from day to night in a matter of seconds. He walked up behind Sigyn and placed a hand on her shoulder. With a gasp, she dropped her brush and then turned to face him. The look in her eyes caused Loki to take a step back.

If anyone, he had expected Sigyn to support him in this time of crisis, but he could tell by the look on her face that his hopes had been false. She looked absolutely terrified of him. In fact, he couldn’t even see the traces of love that were always in her eyes. She stood up and he took a half step toward her, only for Sigyn to take one back and tumble to the ground. She began crawling backward away from him as he walked toward her, desperate to provide her some comfort.

“Who are you?” Sigyn asked, terrified.

“Sigyn, lykyng,” he begged her, “it is me. Loki. Your husband!” Sigyn shook her head as tears began to spill from her eyes.

“You are not my husband,” she insisted.

“It is I,” he insisted. “I know not why I am in this form but…”

“No,” Sigyn screeched. “you are not my husband. You are a monster.”
Monster.

That word in Sigyn’s voice reverberated over and over again in his head. Somehow, it sounded infinitely worse coming from her sweet lips than it did the rough voices of Asgard’s warriors. She was utterly terrified of him, folding in upon herself as she backed into a corner. Loki heard a choked sob come and expected it had come from Sigyn. Only when he leaned forward to comfort her and saw her shiver did Loki realize the sob had come from himself. His realization was cut short by the sound of pounding on the door. Loki looked for anyway to escape, but Sigyn was now screaming “monster” at him over and over. The door burst open, Thor at the lead of the mob. They rushed forward and Loki found himself subdued in a black cloud of pain and suffering.

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It was always at that point in the dream he awoke. Sitting up in a panting sweat, he choked and sputtered. He saw Sigyn, his beautiful, elegant Sigyn, delicately tucked under the silk sheets and curling up against her pillow, completely unaware of her husband’s terror. After looking at her, he held his hands out in front of him to ensure they were in fact of their Aesir appearance. He leaned forward and grabbed his hair with his hands, pulling it at first then running his hands through it. Getting up out of the twisted mess of sheets, he marched into the bathroom and turned on the light. He then proceeded to investigate himself in the bathroom mirror for any signs of blue skin, raised Frost Giant markings or red eyes. Satisfied that the only thing on his body that seemed to remotely resemble a Frost Giant were the bluish-purple bags under his eyes, Loki turned on the faucet and poured himself a cup of water. He drank it slowly and then turned off the sink.

He then sat on the toilet as though it were a chair, his head in his hands. These dreams had begun when he was under Thanos’ control, continued while he had been brought back to Asgard, but had disappeared once his exile to Midgard began. Since then, Loki had experienced a few of these recurring night terrors off and on over the past few months. It had been so long since his last such dream he had nearly written them off. However, things had changed since he was forced into his Frost Giant form during the battle with the snow creatures. Now, they seemed to be coming almost nightly and Loki had no idea what to do about them.

As his wife lay peacefully in their bed, probably dreaming of flowers and bunnies, Loki was tortured by his own mind and the fears that one day his wife would realize the truth of who he was. While Loki did fear that all of those close to him would find his true form repugnant, Sigyn’s rejection was the only one he honestly felt he could never recover from. Fortunately, Sigyn’s dwarven ancestry made her a very heavy sleeper and occasionally a snorer - though she denied it. Loki had to find a way to deal with these dreams without alerting Sigyn, and though she slept through most of his terrors, he knew he was running out of luck. She would eventually catch him in one and then demand an explanation.

He couldn’t ask Sigyn to place him under a sleeping enchantment, for she would definitely find out about the dreams that way. Even had he known a sleeping potion off the top of his head, he would most definitely have to consult Sigyn on what Midgardian herbs and ingredients could be used as substitutes for it. She would be able to easily tell by the ingredients what he was making, and then would want to know why. He thought about sending some sort of message to Frigga or Eir asking about a sleeping draught, but that would do no good. Eir was close to Sigyn and would ultimately tell her. Frigga would be so worried she would probably come down to visit.

Hearing Sigyn stir, Loki returned into the bedroom to keep watch over her. She didn’t waken, instead turning over in her sleep. Loki wondered to himself how she remained with him, how she seemed to sleep so peacefully despite the fact she had been sharing her bed with a monster all these years. Loki leaned over, smoothing hair off of her face and kissing her forehead. His wife seemed to
smile slightly as he pulled his lips away. He hoped she was having pleasant dreams. With a sigh, Loki headed out of the bedroom and then out of the suite entirely. He knew that his captors probably wouldn’t appreciate him aimlessly roaming the halls, especially unsupervised and this late at night. But there was nothing else Loki could think to do.

He finally wandered several floors until he found a light on in a room. Heading toward it, he realized he had come to the lab where Stark and Banner usually worked. The two seemed hard at work on something inside it right then, despite the fact it was only a few hours until dawn. The two men seemed to be talking about some results over coffee. Loki decided to turn and head back to his rooms when Stark noticed him. Loki froze, wondering if he was about to be blasted back into the wall. Instead, Stark waved for him to come into the room. After a beat, Loki approached the lab door and opened it, stepping inside and then nervously ambling up to the two men.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Tony asked curiously.

“No,” Loki nodded.

“Know the feeling.” Tony nodded.

“Judging by your face,” Bruce said, gesturing under his own eyes, “you’ve not been sleeping well at all recently.”

“No,” Loki again admitted.

“Wanna talk about it?” Bruce asked.

“Not particularly,” Loki said.

“That’s fine,” Bruce said.

“It helps sometimes,” Tony mentioned. “Talking about things. Even if you don’t want to talk about it, it can help.”

“Tony, if he doesn’t want to talk…” Bruce began.

“I’m just saying,” Tony shrugged. “If there are two people in the universe that might understand whatever it is you’re going through, you might be looking right at them.”

Loki was quiet for a moment before he spoke, looking more toward Bruce than at Tony.

“How do you…?” Loki began before swallowing and starting again. “How do you know that you’re not a monster?” Both men balked slightly.

“Well, I kind of am one,” Bruce admitted. “I mean, I used to feel like a monster all the time. Even when I wasn’t the Other Guy. But now… It’s like the more I learned to control it, the less monstrous I felt.”

“I know I’m not a monster because Pepper tells me I’m not,” Tony said. Loki looked at him curiously. “I mean, I know you weren’t really asking me, but my company’s done some things… I’ve done some things that people would consider pretty monstrous. A lot of them do.”

“But you don’t feel monstrous,” Loki said.

“I think this is an appearance thing,” Bruce observed astutely.

“Yeah, but being a monster isn’t about how you look,” Tony argued. “I’ve known plenty of monsters that came in pretty packages and I know plenty of great people who don’t.”

“Yes,” Loki said, “but what if one both looks and behaves like a monster?” Bruce and Tony exchanged looks.

“I think we might need a little bit more information before we lay down any judgements on this scenario of yours,” Bruce said.

“I don’t…” Loki began.

“Dude, we fought off an army of snowmen together,” Tony rolled his eyes. “Sharing your feelings should be a piece of cake.”

With a deep breath, Loki found himself telling the two men about his nightmares, about the prejudices he had grown up with, and how his true nature and the culture he had been raised with were now at complete odds with one another. He was surprised at how easy the words flowed and how open he seemed to be with these two relative strangers. He didn’t exactly trust either of them, and he was having a hard time believing how easily he was confessing to these men when he had others he was closer to he could have confided in. But somehow, it seemed the right thing to do. Loki wasn’t always a big fan of doing the right thing, but once he had started talking he found he couldn’t stop. When he was done, there was a long silence. At first, Loki thought the men before him had decided there was indeed something wrong or monstrous about him. He started looking for a way to safely retreat from the room when Bruce spoke.

“That’s rough,” Bruce sighed. “Believe me, I’ve been there. I used to have nightmares about Harlem… over and over… I thought it was guilt or post-traumatic stress disorder or something…”

“Yeah, I’m not a psychologist,” Tony nodded, “but I think dreams like that are kind of normal considering everything you’ve gone through.”

“It is normal to not be able to sleep because every time I close my eyes I am tormented with cruel visions conjured in my own mind?” Loki snorted.

“Okay, well, when you put it like that…” Tony shrugged.

“A lot of dream interpretations is bunk, at least in my opinion,” Bruce began, “but I think you’re subconscious is really trying to help you work out some issues here. Mainly your fear of showing the people you care about how you really are.”

“I got that, Banner,” Tony rolled his eyes. “And I only passed my undergrad psych class by sleeping with the TA.” Bruce ignored him.

“And I really think a lot of this fear is about Sigyn,” Bruce continued. “You’ve told her about being a…”

“Frost Giant,” Loki offered.

“Yeah, about the fact that you’re a Frost Giant,” Bruce nodded. “How did she react?”

“She was worried about me,” Loki admitted. “How I was taking things. If I was angry at my mother and… Odin. She was worried I was upset.”
“Is that what you were expecting her to do?” Tony asked.

“I was expecting her to run from me in terror,” Loki snorted. “Do you know how many tales we were told as children about how cruel and vile Frost Giants are? That they drink the blood of innocent women and children? Everything growing up was about how Frost Giants would come for you if you were naughty. Clean your room or a Frost Giant will eat you. Eat your vegetables or Frost Giants will kidnap you. Be nice to your tutors or a Frost Giant will pull out all your teeth to make a necklace…”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded, “I can see why this news didn’t exactly thrill you.”

“But Sigyn didn’t mind,” Bruce pointed out.

“She didn’t mind being told,” Loki snorted. “She hasn’t seen what I look like… in that form. I could never show that to her.”

“Why not?” Bruce asked.

“Because I would lose her!” Loki huffed.

“What makes you say that?” Bruce asked.

“Because anyone with an ounce of common sense would run immediately upon seeing that,” Loki replied.

“No offense to your wife,” Tony said, “but she followed you down here from Asgard and then snuck off to battle the Chitauri on her own - even after they had stabbed her and left her for dead. And then she traded her own freedom and put her life on the line just so you wouldn’t receive death or banishment as a punishment. I’m not sure she has an abundance of common sense or at least a sense of self preservation.”

“You may be right about that,” Loki muttered.

“I think it would do you a world of good to face your fears and let Sigyn see you as you really are,” Bruce said. “It might make you feel more comfortable in your own skin and get the nightmares to stop.”

“That is ridiculous,” Loki huffed.

“Is it?” Bruce said.

“Yes,” Loki nodded.

“Just show her,” Tony rolled his eyes.

“No,” Loki hissed.

“Why not?” Tony snorted. “She said she doesn’t mind. You said so yourself.”

“It is one thing for me to tell her I am a monster and Sigyn to say it doesn’t upset her,” Loki retorted. “It is quite another for me to reveal myself in that hideous form to her and for her to think the same. How would you feel if Lady Pepper suddenly revealed herself to be the thing that frightened you most as a child?”

“Never suggest that Pepper moonlights as a clown,” Tony shot back. “Being a frost giant is one thing, but being a clown is terrifying and unnatural.”
“You are terrified of court jesters?” Loki asked bemused.

“He’s never seen ‘It,’ I take it,” Bruce smirked.

“Forget ‘It,’” Tony snorted. “I was talking about John Wayne Gacy. Or that guy Giggles my dad hired for my fourth birthday party. I think that was the first time I started to wonder if my father actually liked me. That guy was the stuff of nightmares.”

“Gacy or your birthday clown?” Bruce asked before shaking his head. “Nevermind.” He turned back to Loki. “I know it seems hard, but I know better than anyone else what you’re going through. I still haven’t come to terms with it completely, but when I’m the Other Guy I know that somewhere, deep down, I’m still me. At least when you change how you look you retain your personality and stay mentally in control. When I change, it’s like I become a different person.”

“Yeah, I mean, Sigyn couldn’t have fallen in love with you for your looks,” Tony nodded, earning a glare from Loki that could probably melt steel beams, “so I’m guessing it’s some facet of your personality she’s attracted to…maybe… Since that doesn’t change no matter how you look, I think you’ll be fine.”

“Sigyn doesn’t strike me as someone who cares about looks,” Bruce said, pointedly looking at Tony as if to say ‘that is how you should have phrased it’. He turned back to Loki. “She loves you for who you are, right?”

“She might be the only one,” Loki snorted.

“Then just show her,” Bruce said. “She’s stuck by you through worse, hasn’t she?”

“I don’t…” Loki began.

“You attempted to murder your brother and take over earth using an alien army,” Tony interjected. “If she can still love you after that, you’re probably not going to get rid of her.”

“Perhaps it isn’t Sigyn I am worried about,” Loki said after a beat. “Perhaps I am more concerned about how I will react to showing my true form to her.”

“Why?” Tony asked.

“I understand.” Bruce nodded, thinking back to Betty. “Because if she loves you despite how you look or what you turn into, how can you still hate yourself for it, right?”

“Something like that,” Loki muttered.

“Okay, man, real talk time,” Tony sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “Despite how we met and the fact that you tried to destroy my planet, my species and most importantly the giant Tower I had just completed, the time I’ve spent as your probation officer has shown me that, way deep down somewhere, you’re not exactly a bad guy. In fact, we have a little bit more in common than I think I’m comfortable with.”

“Likewise,” Loki agreed.

“And my dad was kind of a jerk. Maybe not as big of one as your old man, but he and I never really got along,” Tony said. “My mom and I were close, though. She reminds me a lot of yours. The two of them would have gotten along well. In fact, I think our dads would have had a good time complaining about their sons together…”

“You’re rambling, Tony,” Bruce pointed out.

“Right. Anyway, I always wondered why my mom stayed with a guy like my dad,” Tony said. “She was awesome and I always felt she could do so much better. Then, I sort of became a guy like my dad. Or who he kind of was in the early days. And I met Pepper. And she could see things in me that I didn’t even realize I had. She could see the good and she made me want to be good. And even though I can be an asshole, she sticks around because she knows that all I really need to let that good out is for someone to believe in me. She could do so much better, but there’s something about her that makes her want to be my champion. She has more faith in me than I have in myself. She can see me when I’m at my worst or most vulnerable and still see the good guy inside, still tell me I can be heroic.”

“Sigyn is that way,” Loki muttered.

“Sigyn is more that way than anyone I’ve ever seen,” Tony nodded. “That chick has stood by you through a lot. And I mean a lot. I seriously doubt that after everything you’ve done since the two of you being together the fact that your skin gets a little blue is going to be the final straw. She didn’t run screaming from you when you were ready to blast that old guy to bits in Germany. I seriously doubt something as minor as skin color is going to set her off.”

“Yeah,” Bruce nodded. “Not that I’d advocate you testing this theory, but I’m pretty sure there isn’t anything you can do that would make Sigyn mad enough to leave you. At least permanently.”

“Yes, but like you’ve said,” Loki pointed out. “I have put her through a lot. Maybe this will be that final thing to finally convince her she made a mistake in marrying me.”

“Nope,” Tony shook his head. “Brucey and I are not buying that horseshit.”

“She might…” Loki began.

“You’re just scared,” Tony challenged him. “That’s all it is.”

“I’m not scared,” Loki hissed.


“I really think you just need to talk to her,” Bruce nodded. “I bet she’s probably wondering why you haven’t shown her but she doesn’t want to upset you by asking.”

“Sigyn doesn’t hide things from you, does she?” Tony asked. “Like important relationship stuff?”

“No,” Loki grimaced. “Well, most of the time I know when she’s hiding something. It never lasts long.”

“Then why is it okay to hide stuff from her?” Bruce asked him pointedly.

“Yeah, man,” Tony nodded. “Keeping stuff from your girl is never a good idea. It’s a huge mistake. A huge mistake I still make from time to time, but I always realize afterwards it was a mistake.”

Loki was very quiet for a moment. Tony and Bruce both watched him, wondering what he was thinking. Hopefully, he wasn’t thinking he was going to destroy the lab in retaliation for advice he wasn’t happy to receive. Finally, Loki let out a sigh and his shoulders relaxed. It seemed like a good sign.

“Fine,” Loki said, annoyed. “I will talk with her.”
“Good man,” Bruce nodded.

“But if she has any sort of adverse reaction to this,” Loki warned them, “I will hold both of you personally responsible.”

“I’m fine with that,” Bruce smirked. Loki glared at him briefly.

“Hey, how about you practice on us” Tony said, motioning to Loki’s body. “We didn’t really get to see much during the battle. You were just kind of a blue blur until you returned to… whatever it is you have on now.”

“It’s called a glamour,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Very David Bowie,” Tony nodded. “Seriously, show us.”

“Tony,” Bruce warned. “It’s not a parlor trick. You wouldn’t ask me to…”

“Actually, if I was doing some major demolition work…” Tony began before Bruce glared at him. Tony turned back to Loki. “Come on, man. In the name of science!”

“You are ridiculous,” Loki rolled his eyes before seeing the pleading look on Tony’s face. Maybe this would be good practice for revealing himself to his wife. “Fine.”

Loki stood back and then slowly lifted the glamour covering his body. He was expected both men to jump back in horror or try to attack him. Perhaps Stark more so than Banner. However, when he looked at the two men they seemed to be studying him almost academically. Stark walked around him a circle as if he was more assessing Loki’s outfit than his Jotun form. Bruce seemed almost more at ease that he had ever appeared in Loki’s presence, as if they now shared some secret bond.

“I can see why people might find the eyes a little unsettling,” Bruce shrugged. “Especially in a place where it’s not a common color. But here we have contacts and makeup people use to get their eyes to look like that so…”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Tony piped up, having finished his circle around Loki, “what’s with all the scars?”

“Tony!” Bruce hissed, worried this might be a culturally insensitive question.

“They are ridges,” Loki explained. “Best I have read, they are similar to fingerprints in that no two Jotuns have the same. However, there is also a hereditary part to them as well. Particularly, the markings on the face indicate one’s social status and familial line or clan. Those with more prominent markings also tend to be of more powerful families, or at least families that were powerful in the beginning of Jotunheim.”

“The ones on your forehead look kind of like a crown,” Bruce noted.

“Because my birth father was the king of Jotunheim,” Loki replied. “All children of Jotun kings have this marking going back to Ymir. My understanding is the ruler is given some way of augmenting his markings.”

“And these are all naturally occurring?” Tony asked.

“I have fewer than most,” Loki admitted. “Jotun warriors are also known to practice some ritual scarification, augmenting certain lines on their arms and legs to denote certain accomplishments on the field of battle. There is also, to my understanding, a ritual scar usually placed on the back when
one reaches puberty. Women also undertake some special markings for each child they have.”

“Very Spartan,” Tony nodded. Loki looked confused. “The Spartans were an ancient warrior culture on earth. They believed that the only people worthy of tombstones marking their burial places were men who died in battle or women who died in childbirth.”

“I have to say, this is all pretty fascinating,” Banner said. “Sometimes I wish I’d taken more anthropology and sociology classes in undergrad.”

“You know, I have feeling Sigyn’s going to be less put off by this and more badgering you to death with questions,” Tony said. “She’s more curious about stuff than we are. And being curious is kind of our jobs.”

“Thank you for your efforts to cheer me,” Loki said. Tony was a little surprised he couldn’t hear any sarcasm in his voice.

“With your whole astral projection thing you could probably form you very own Blue Man Group,” Tony mentioned.

“Don’t,” Bruce groaned.

“What?” Tony asked.

“Have you shown your brother how you appear yet?” Bruce asked as Loki transitioned back into his Asgardian self.

“I have not shown my wife yet. Why would you think I have shown Thor?” Loki huffed, sliding back into his Aesir appearance.

“Half the U.S. military knew what the Other Guy looked like before my girlfriend did,” Bruce admitted. “Sometimes you can’t always control these things…”

“That’s what she said,” Tony coughed, earning a glare from Bruce.

“I suppose I should return to my wife,” Loki admitted with a sigh. “She shall be waking soon. I wouldn’t want her to worry.”

“Go get ‘em, Frosty” Tony grinned as Loki headed out of the room. Just as Loki started to disappear from his sight, Tony called out after him, “and please try not to freeze anything during the make-up sex!”

At first, Loki thought about waiting until Sigyn woke up on her own to have his chat with her. He decided better of it after a few minutes, deciding that if he put this off any longer he would lose what courage he had gained to broach the subject in the first place. Sigyn was a heavy sleeper, and so waking her might take some time in itself. After he jostled her and she muttered out something that sounded very similar to a recipe for scones, Sigyn’s eyes finally began to open slightly. She rubbed them and then turned over onto her back, looking up at her husband. Her eyes focused, unfocused and then unfocused again. Finally seeming fully conscious she locked eyes with him and then began to sit up, worry now etched on her face.

“What time is it?” Sigyn asked, looking over at the clock on the table near their bed. Realizing how early it was, she turned back to her husband, even more confused and worried than before. “Is everything alright?”
“Sigyn...I...” Loki said before taking in a deep breath. “I need to speak with you about something. It’s very important.”

“Alright,” Sigyn nodded. She sat up and took both of her husband’s hands in her own, squeezing them for comfort.

Loki had to smile in spite of himself thinking about how many times he and his wife had sat just like this: facing each other, legs crossed, holding hands and looking into each others’ eyes. Sometimes it was just how they caught up with each other after a busy day or a way to reconnect after one of them had been on a long trip. Other times Sigyn liked them to sit with this way while they played a game to see who would laugh first. She usually lost but never seemed to mind. But quite often they sat like this when one of them was hurt or needed reassurance from the other. It was their way of signaling the other had complete and undivided attention for whatever it was they needed to share.

Looking into his wife’s bright, trusting eyes, Loki felt a bit overcome by nerves. He wanted to back out, but Sigyn would know something was wrong. As if sensing his resolve was wavering, Sigyn leaned forward and gave her husband a kiss to distract and refocus him. Loki deepened the kiss just in case this was the last time his lips touched his wife’s. It seemed as though Sigyn could sense his worry when she pulled back from him, looking into his eyes with concern. Loki took a deep breath and decided it was now or never.

“I wasn’t sure if you had noticed,” Loki said, “but I haven’t been sleeping well as of late...”

“I didn’t want to say anything,” Sigyn informed him. “I knew you would come to me when you were ready. You always do.” Loki gave his wife a fond smile. He forgot that she usually knew him better than he knew himself.

“Sigyn, do you promise to love me?” Loki asked her finally. “No matter what?”

“I always have,” Sigyn said. Still seeing the concern on her husband’s face, she reached up to cup his cheek. “And I always will.”

“Alright,” Loki said, retracting his hands from her and standing up before the bed.

Sigyn continued sitting, waiting for her husband to make his move. Loki looked tempted to start pacing, but he knew he couldn’t drag this out much further. Sigyn had already promised not to hate him for this, and if he wanted to get a good night’s sleep any time soon, this might be the only way. Loki was slowly running out of reasons why he should call the whole thing off. He finally took off the shirt he was wearing and tossed it aside, causing Sigyn to look at him quizzically. She doubted very much her husband was going to so much trouble to seduce her. Loki closed his eyes, thinking it might be best if he didn’t see how Sigyn reacted to him in his natural state.

He thought of cold and winter, of ice and snow. It was strange how the thought was oddly calming as he felt the slight tingling through his body as the glamor removed itself. Once the sensation was gone, he didn’t feel any different but he knew that his appearance was unlike Sigyn had seen before. He heard a slight gasp from her and opened his eyes instinctively to prepare against any threat. At first, he was afraid that his true self frightened or disgusted her, but in her eyes he saw no trace of fear or hatred. Instead, Sigyn was sitting up straighter and leaning forward, inspecting him with a sense of curiosity and wonder on her face.

“This is how I am,” Loki said, finally with a sigh. He looked at Sigyn as she got off the bed and approached him slowly.

“You are still handsome,” Sigyn smiled at him. “You are still the same man I love.”
“You are not repulsed,” Loki said in surprise, more to himself than to Sigyn.

“You are not repulsive,” Sigyn snorted. She tilted her head to the side slightly. “The storybooks say Jotuns have horns. Though I suppose they aren’t a wealth of accuracy.”

“They wear horned helmets, apparently,” Loki said. Sigyn looked up at him with a slight smirk and he sighed in admission. “I have been reading up on my… heritage. Asgard has limited knowledge, though, and I have a feeling much of it is tainted with misunderstanding or just outright prejudice.”

“I could see if there is anything in the libraries of Vanaheim on the subject,” Sigyn offered, “though I doubt they would be much different. If there are any in my father’s realm they probably only have to do with weaponry.”

“Thank you for the offer,” Loki admitted, “but I wouldn’t want to cause undue alarm with your family…”

“Please,” Sigyn snorted. “My grandfather is the only one who ever uses the library, and they would just assume you are working on a bit of mischief.”

“Perhaps,” Loki frowned. Sigyn studied his face intently.

“Your ears do not resemble any Frost Giants I have ever seen in the illustrations,” Sigyn said curiously. “They are not sunken into your head. They’re… almost pointed… like… like an elf’s…”

“I noticed that as well,” Loki muttered.

“Perhaps you are not entirely Jotun,” Sigyn suggested.

“One can only hope,” Loki huffed. Sigyn reached up to caress him but he tensed and reared back. “Do not! I could hurt you!”

“Husband…” Sigyn began, “you would never hurt me.”

“A single touch of my skin in this state would freeze you alive!” Loki insisted.

“The dwarven fire within my veins could protect me,” Sigyn smirked. Loki, however, was in no mood for playful games with his wife.

“You saw what it did to Fandral and Volstagg,” Loki shook his head. “I will not harm you!”

“They were being attacked,” Sigyn insisted. “If you have done your readings, I am sure you have heard tales of Jotuns intermingling with Asgardians and Vanir long before the realms were at war. I doubt very much that would be possible if they had no means of controlling such power. Besides, Odin held you before you changed forms, did he not? If a babe with no control over his power did not harm him, I would think doing so requires some knowledge.”

Sigyn again reached out to touch him as Loki closed his eyes, focusing every molecule in his body on not harming his wife, on not losing control and hurting her. He felt a slight shock when her warm hand touched the side of his cheek and an even larger one when he opened his eyes to see Sigyn smiling at him, her hand just as it always was, resting against his skin. He moved his head slightly, kissing her hand before pulling her forward to kiss his lips. He then twirled her about the room. He was incandescently happy, perhaps happier than he had ever been before. She had accepted him for what he was. She still loved him. Sigyn giggled as he returned her feet back to the ground.

“Thank you,” Sigyn said to him with a smile, “for showing me this. I know it hasn’t been easy. It
means everything to me that you have done this.” Loki was briefly at a loss for words. Not only had Sigyn accepted him but she seemed almost grateful for what he was.

“Your ability to show love for me no matter the circumstances always astounds me,” Loki said finally.

“You accepted me when I was but a girl,” Sigyn reminded him, “when people were quick to judge the daughters of a Vanir princess and a dwarven smith as foul, monstrous creatures who should never have existed. Before the influence of your parents and my grandfather was able to secure the safety and security of my sisters and myself, you protected me. You never once let me believe the rumors about myself, that I was an abomination or a mistake. And you never forgot those who hurt me, even long after we were finally accepted and everyone pretended like there had been no prejudice. How could you expect me to not do the same?”

“Because I believe I am a monster, Sigyn,” Loki admitted finally. “At least the realms you are from are from have accepted you. You could find your home in Vanaheim and Niðavellir as well as Asgard. I am was cast out of Jotunheim as a babe and after Laufey’s death… Well, I doubt they would welcome me back. And if this were to become known, I would certainly be thrown from Asgard as well, no matter what my family or Odin tried to do.”

“Then we would find somewhere else to make our home,” Sigyn said with a shrug. “There are other realms.”

“You make it sound easy,” Loki huffed. Sigyn gave him one of her knowing smiles and he rolled his eyes.

“Come now, husband,” Sigyn said, leading him back toward the bed. “Perhaps in the morning I will ask you what prompted this sudden display, but we have several more hours until the sun rises. And I find I sleep better in your arms.”

As Sigyn slipped between the covers, Loki moved to join her and slowly began returning his glamour. Sigyn watched him expectantly, prompting him to stop. Then, still in his natural form, he slipped into bed beside her, allowing Sigyn to curl up against his chest. She placed a kiss on it and then snuggled deeper into him as he wrapped an arm around her. Soon, Sigyn had drifted off to sleep again seemingly perfectly content and safe in the arms of a Frost Giant. While he was sure the nightmares would no longer come, Loki stayed up until Sigyn was ready to wake so he could indulge a few hours in watching over the woman he loved and who never backed down from loving him in return.
Tony Stark had thought he said seen all of the weird birds Asgardians used for deliveries when a peacock with the color scheme of a parrot landed on his balcony and then proceeded to open its flamboyant wings. Tony wasn’t sure if the bird’s posture was supposed to be threatened or seductive, though even if he was an expert in bird behavior he still would have panicked a bit at its strange appearance. Strange birds showing up out of the blue normally meant something was up in Asgard. JARVIS had the good sense to call Thor and Loki into the room before Tony could attempt to shoo the bird away with a broom. Not that the bird seemed to think Tony was a threat in anyway. When the elevator opened to reveal the brothers, the peacock turned to them and let out a happy noise.

“Oh, hello Sateen,” Loki said as the peacock-parrot-thing trotted over to him. “I’m sure Sigyn can get you some nice seeds and bugs if you visit her.”

“Why am I not surprised you two know this… thing?” Tony sighed.

“Sateen is one of Uncle Vali’s birds,” Thor said. The bird began to shake its feathers and two bags dropped out. Thor picked them up, reading the runes on them, taking one himself and then holding the other one out for Loki to take. The bird let out a weird cry and then headed toward the elevator.

“Where is it going?” Tony asked, panicked.

“Sateen is just off to see Sigyn,” Loki replied, taking the bag Thor handed him. “He’ll be gone afterward.”

“And what’s that?” Tony asked as Loki and Thor opened their respective bags.

“Presents from Uncle Vali!” Thor said happily. He produced a small necklace from his bag that seemed to have a tiny nebula trapped within its pendant. “How thoughtful! He has sent me a gift for Jane!”

“Oh, Sigyn will love this,” Loki smiled as he produced a porcelain bowl decorated with a sea serpent coiling around it. “She does love her incense bowl collection. And I think the serpent is meant to spout smoke…”

“What is going on here?” Tony said.

“Uncle Vali sent us gifts for our beloveds,” Thor said, reaching down into his bag again. “And apparently letters of encouragement as well. He is a good man.”

“Who is Uncle Vali?” Tony asked.

“One of Odin’s brothers,” Loki said, flopping onto a sofa in the communal living room to read his letter.

“So, where is Odin hiding these brothers of his?” Tony asked.
“Various places,” Loki snorted.

“The Allfather has three younger brothers,” Thor explained. “Uncle Hoenir, Uncle Vali and Uncle Ve. Uncle Vali and Uncle Ve are twins. Uncle Hoenir is the youngest of the four.”

“The Four Sons of Bor,” Loki said, flinging his arms out in a mock dramatic fashion.

“Of course, only one could inherit the throne from our grandfather,” Thor said.

“And the other three went stark raving mad,” Loki snorted.

“Not so!” Thor insisted.

“And what would you call them, then?” Loki replied.

“Uncle Ve is quite the successful ambassador to Alfheim,” Thor pointed out. “The two of you get along quite well and often converse, don’t you? And he was the one who was always pushing the Allfather to train you in diplomacy. I think you rather looked up to him as a child.”

“Because he’s the only sensible person to come out of that group of brothers,” Loki snorted before turning to Tony. “Uncle Hoenir used to be a great warrior and had a very distinctive battle cry. But while leading a group of troops against some mad sorceress, she cursed him and removed his voice. Now he’s a hermit living in the forests around Asgard. You’ll be out hunting and the next thing you know, Uncle Hoenir has appeared out of a bush and is rifling through your picnic basket.”

“He felt he needed to do penance for the lives he had cost, all the voices he had rendered silent,” Thor tried to reason. “And he makes good stews. If you don’t mind the twigs... And you like him because he thinks you’re funny and is good at hnefatafl. And he likes to make flower crowns with Sigyn when he finds the two of you out on a picnic.”

“Then there is Uncle Vali,” Loki huffed. “Randy as an old goat. Never married, but he always has at least one person at least two thousand years younger than him in his bed. Tries to be a bard, but he can’t rhyme or pluck a lute string worth a damn. Not that it’s ever stopped him from trying to compose music tributes to the various body parts of his various lovers. He’s basically Fandral a couple thousand years from now.”

“Uncle Vali loves love,” Thor clarified. “While his poetry is rather...”

“Detestable? Deplorable? Shuddersome?” Loki supplied. “And those were some of the more positive reviews!”

“...his prose is delightful,” Thor finished. “He’s also very good at matchmaking and likes bringing people together. He takes it as a personal challenge when a couple comes to him saying their love is being thwarted or someone wants advice on how to woo a lover. In fact, his love of love is so well known that for his birthday, people tend to honor him by making their own professions of love or gifts to those they love.”

“And as a concession,” Loki grumbled, “the Allfather usually lets Uncle Vali perform one of his newest compositions after supper on the day.”

“You can speak cruelly of him all you like,” Thor snorted, “but I know who you sought advice from when you began courting Sigyn and again when they told you that she was to marry another. And it was his efforts twinned with Mothers that convinced Father not to punish you for the wedding spectacle. And I know that every year on your anniversary you and Sigyn send Uncle Vali a gift as thanks for that.”
"I have to admit, he isn’t all bad," Loki sighed. "while his poetry is flawed his treatise on the craft and composition of romantic poetry is insightful. And his social gatherings are legendary."

"So… I’m guessing the Allfather isn’t exactly an ideal model for how to conduct sibling relationships," Tony said.

"No," Loki snorted before Thor could respond. "The only sibling he gets along with is the one who is in self-imposed exile because he can’t stand being in the same room as Odin. Uncle Ve hasn’t physically seen the Allfather in three thousand years and who they only communicates with via very official and sporadic correspondence. Odin just thinks of this other brothers as embarrassments."

"I don’t think Father is embarrassed by them," Thor insisted.

"Really? Then why are they never introduced as members of the royal family to visitors?" Loki huffed. "You know he’s employed the same tactic with me. Shutting me up and putting me out of sight and out of mind when there are certain guests he doesn’t want to be embarrassed in front of."

"Uncle Vali’s the only one who lives in the palace," Thor pointed out.

"Yes, and when was the last time he was introduced to or even present at a function for visiting dignitaries?" Loki snorted. Thor frowned, trying in vain to think of an instance that could prove his brother wrong. "The Allfather didn’t even let him show for my trial for treason!"

"Hey, every family has issues," Tony shrugged. "My parents always told people they met at a wedding where my mom was a bridesmaid. They never told anyone it was the wedding of mom’s cousin to dad’s old school chum, the mafia don. The fact that my parents’ marriage began basically the same as the plot of *The Godfather* maybe should have been an indication things would not go well."

"I suppose," Loki huffed.

"So, why is your uncle sending you guys gifts to give your sweethearts?" Tony asked.

"We could not come to his annual party this year," Thor shrugged. "I suppose this is his way of showing he still cares."

"It’s a regular bacchanal," Loki nodded with a smile. "You might actually enjoy it."

"Score me an invite and I’ll come," Tony said.

"Well," Loki said, putting Sigyn’s incense bowl into the front pocket of the black hoodie he was wearing, "I best give this to Sigyn. She will be most pleased."

Loki was not pleased to find Sigyn wasn’t alone when he returned to their rooms. While Sateen the bird had flown back home, Lady Jane and Lady Darcy had stopped by Sigyn’s rooms for a bit of “girl time.” Taking a break from work, Jane and Darcy had decided to come hang out with Sigyn for the rest of the afternoon. Sigyn was braiding Jane’s hair while Darcy was going through the massive collection of nail polishes Loki and Sigyn had acquired since their arrival on Midgard. Not particularly wanting to put up with Sigyn’s friends in his chambers, Loki stood silent and perfectly still as he mentally debated whether to make a run for the library and solitude or to slowly back out of the room and hide somewhere else.

"Hey, Lokes," Darcy said, noticing him. "Come let me paint your nails."
“What is wrong husband?” Sigyn asked him worriedly. Loki sighed and stepped toward his wife, pulling her gift out of his hoodie pocket.

“Uncle Vali sent this for me to give to you,” Loki informed her as Sigyn happily took the bowl. “He wrote to say he misses us and he hopes we can attend his annual party next year. I’ll let you read it when you have time. It’s full of some of the best gossip he’s collected for us.”

“Uncle Vali is so thoughtful,” Sigyn sighed, taking the bowl and setting it on a side table before returning to Jane’s hair.

“Who is Uncle Vali?” Jane asked as Loki said down, allowing Darcy to inspect his nails. Loki selected a black onyx shade for Darcy to use on his nails and she got to work quickly.

“One of Odin’s younger brothers,” Sigyn replied. “And one of the most entertaining people in Asgard. He’s well known for his parties. And he single-handedly revived Asgardian theatre.”

“Odin lets him do what he wants as long as he doesn’t cause any embarrassment in front of important dignitaries,” Loki explained. “Naturally, Uncle Vali doesn’t particularly like stuffy people and politics, so he is just fine avoiding Odin and the court. Still, Uncle Vali always has the best gossip and knows all the right people. And he’s slept with most of them, too.”

“I can see why he and Odin probably don’t get along,” Jane said. “The Allfather seems to be the physical embodiment of stiff upper lip.”

“Uncle Vali is very colorful,” Sigyn smiled, “and he did work with the Allmother to convince the Allfather not to punish Loki after our nuptials. In fact, he rather convinced Odin that our marriage was a great move for Asgard as a whole and not to hold any grudges about how it came about. We’ve always been so grateful to him for that.”

“His heart is usually in the right place,” Loki admitted. “So, what have I interrupted?”

“Darcy’s going to this anti-Valentine’s day singles thing later tonight, and we were helping her get ready,” Jane said. “We’ve also been bashing our exes.”

“I’m sure a lot of people never thought they’d say this,” Darcy said to Loki, “but I’m glad you wound up with Sigyn instead of the other guy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t consider him a true ex, considering I wasn’t willing to be in the relationship,” Sigyn admitted.

“He was an ass and I’m glad he’s dead,” Loki muttered.

“I was telling them about Charlie, the guy I dated in high school who dumped me right before prom because he got a hotter date,” Darcy said, finishing up Loki’s nails. “And then there was Nick who broke up with me via text message and still owes me twenty bucks. When you walked in Jane was talking about Donald, whose identity we stole to make a fake ID for your brother when he fell to earth the first time.”

“He must have been truly terrible if you thought having Thor pretend to be him was a suitable punishment,” Loki nodded.

“Honestly, Don wasn’t the worst guy I dated,” Jane admitted. “That title goes to this guy Harris who I was seeing while still doing my undergrad. When I told him about my plans to be an astrophysicist and he told me ‘women can’t be scientists.’ He knew what I was majoring in and that I had been applying to schools for my master’s, but he waited until I had invested five months of time in him to
bring that up.”

“Seriously, is it just earth or do men all over the universe just not know how to be romantic?” Darcy huffed.

“I am sitting right here,” Loki pointed out.

“How did the two of you get together?” Jane asked Sigyn. “I mean, besides the whole wedding switcher-roo thing.”

“Oh, it was so romantic,” Sigyn sighed as Loki shifted down into his hoodie like a turtle retreating into its shell. “It was about four hundred and fifty years ago, give or take, when Loki began courting me. But he was terribly shy about the entire thing and was afraid I would reject him. So, he naturally turned to his tricks. He transformed himself into a magpie and would bring me little gifts, trinkets and whatnot.”

“Aren’t magpies unlucky?” Darcy frowned just as the two birds in question squawked at her. “Sorry guys.”

Perhaps a single one, if disrespected,” Sigyn mused. “But I tend to find the birds are rather misunderstood. People say they scare off songbirds, but that isn’t true. Many believe they are omens of bad things to come, but this is only because they are trying to warn others. They also mate for life and are seen as harbingers of good marriages and relationships. They are clever and resourceful, bold and fearless, and playful and kind.”

“I see some sort of resemblance,” Jane noted as Loki seemed to nearly ball up into his hoodie.

“At any rate, I was delighted to have an anonymous admirer sending me little baubles and things,” Sigyn continued. “It wasn’t until the little magpie brought me a poem attached to his leg that I realized Loki was behind it all.”

“Was the poem that bad?” Darcy scoffed, just to have Loki’s glaring eyes peer out at her from his hoodie.

“It was a delightful poem!” Sigyn insisted. “He’s always written me such pretty verse. I have them all collected into a book. No, I realized it had to be Loki because he hadn’t bothered to disguise his handwriting. My sisters shared the same tutors and classrooms with the Asgardian princes for years, so I knew his handwriting well.”

“Did you confront him?” Jane asked, trying to ignore the fact that Loki seemed to be muttering curses at himself all these years later for not thinking to disguise his handwriting.

“I thought about it, but I decided that he must have a good reason for not being forthcoming about it,” Sigyn shrugged. “I planned to wait until Loki was ready to come forward on his own, but… I suppose the Norns had other plans.”

“This is going to be great,” Darcy grinned as Loki let out some garbled protest from inside his hoodie.

“My sister Var had come to visit me in my rooms and she had brought along her old cat Eimi,” Sigyn continued.

“Awful beast,” Loki muttered. Darcy wasn’t sure but it seemed as though Loki had a book stuffed into his hoodie and he was reading it.
“Eimi was an old grumpy cat, but he rather liked chasing birds even in his older days,” Sigyn explained, “so when this little magpie flew into my room with some flowers in its clutches, Eimi leapt for it. It took both Var and I to separate the two, and next thing we know, there is Loki half-naked on my bedroom floor with a broken arm.”

“Why were you naked?” Jane demanded of Loki, who popped up out of his hoodie to defend himself.

“I was half naked,” Loki hissed. “And shapeshifting is a very difficult ability to master. The fact that I was able to transfigure myself into a new form and then return to my old one with any clothing in tact was a supreme feat at that age. It can take some sorcerers more than a thousand years to master changing form while wearing anything, and not all master being able to transfigure themselves while clothed ever! Thankfully, I had the presence of mind to retain my trousers even whilst suffering from an arm that had been broken and nearly ripped from its socket. Otherwise the incident could have been even more embarrassing than just looking up to find yourself half-naked in the love of your life’s room with her scowling sister and an angry cat glaring at you.”

“Oh, it was so pitiful,” Sigyn sighed. Loki looked as though he was ready to argue the point that he had looked pitiful. “He was there on the floor, his arm at an odd angle, bleeding everywhere and he was trying so hard not to let us see how hurt he was. I had Var fetch Queen Frigga, and I escorted him into the healing rooms.”

“Let me guess,” Darcy grinned. “You then got to play sexy nurse?” Both Sigyn’s cheeks and the tops of Loki’s ears flared red, giving Darcy the answer she needed.

“At any rate, the cat was out of the bag at that point,” Sigyn said, causing Loki to snerk at the pun, “and Loki couldn’t hide his machinations from me anymore. Of course, I did kindly let him know I knew what was happening all along.”

“Yes,” Loki rolled his eyes. “At least you telling me that while my arm was fusing together was infinitely less embarrassing than nearly being killed by your sister’s cat. Thought it did contribute to the overall embarrassment of the day.”

“Ladies! And Loki!” Thor said, bursting into the room.

“Thor, remember that discussion we had about knocking?” Jane huffed.

“But JARVIS said…” Thor began.

“JARVIS doesn’t admit you into rooms,” Jane chastised him. “The occupants of those rooms do.”

“Your hair is beautiful,” Thor said to Jane. With a loving sigh, Jane got up for Thor to present her with a gift. Loki rolled his eyes, but had to admit Thor had learned well how to butter up a woman that was annoyed with him.

“So,” Darcy asked Sigyn, focusing the attention away from Thor and Jane. “Any juicy stories about Loki’s exes?” Sigyn and Thor both burst out into laughter while Loki turned a shade of red similar to his eyes in Frost Giant form.

“Loki has no previous lovers other than Sigyn,” Thor replied.

“But I thought…” Darcy began, confused.

“If, by any stretch of the imagination,” Loki gritted out, “you are about to bring up those insufferable so-called mythological tales about me I swear I shall pick someone out at random and throw them off
“This Tower.”

“Jeez,” Darcy said.

“Come brother,” Thor said to Loki once the necklace was secure around Jane. “Let us leave the ladies to their bonding. Sir Barton wishes to teach me a game involving horse shoes and I think you would enjoy it most thoroughly.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed, “but I won’t be fussed at if I hit someone in the head.” Thor seemed to think this was acceptable and guided Loki out of the room, happily explaining what he knew to be the basics of the game.

“Seriously?” Darcy asked, surprised. “Loki doesn’t have any exes?”

“Oh, he’ll flirt with anything that has a pulse if he’s in the mood, but as for serious relationships…” Sigyn sighed. “It can be very hard for Loki to bond with other beings. He doesn’t make friends easily and romantic entanglements I suppose are even harder for him. But I have him and he has me, so I suppose that is well enough.”

“You are pretty awesome,” Darcy nodded. “And I think Loki knows it.”

“He better,” Sigyn smirked.

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After helping Darcy find a dress to wear on her outing that evening and Sigyn styling her hair - with some assistance from Jane - the three women headed up to the communal kitchen to help Darcy get some liquid courage before going out to meet with other singles that evening. Off work, Pepper stopped by for a white wine spritzer. Upon hearing the other women had previously been discussing ex boyfriends, delighted them with all of her stories about the various one-night stands Tony had that she had to clean up after. Pepper was in the middle of a story about some actress trying to break into Hollywood who woke up screaming after realizing Tony wasn’t Johnny Depp when the sounds of the Bifrost opening up interrupted here.

“Is the rainbow peacock coming back?” Darcy asked excitedly.

“Rainbow peacock?” Pepper asked, confused.

“Unique Asgardian delivery,” Jane explained. Pepper nodded, having long ago accepted the fact that mail in Asgard was sent via strange birds.

“No, someone is coming,” Sigyn said worriedly.

A flash of lightning and cloud of smoke signalled the arrival of someone from Asgard, and Jane cursed herself for not having her instruments on hand to take a reading. When the fog cleared, it revealed a very worried looking Lady Sif in full battle regalia. Despite the fact that her friend was literally dressed to kill, Sigyn squealed and rushed to embrace Sif, who broke her normal resting bitch face to smile as Sigyn hugged her. Pulling back, Sigyn’s face mirrored the worry on Sif’s. If the Allfather had called Sif back from her duties in Vanaheim, something was amiss. Only the fact that Sif was not flanked by the Warriors Three comforted Sigyn.

“It is good to see you, friend,” Sigyn said. “What brings you to Midgard?”

“I have been sent by the Allfather on a most dire mission,” Sif admitted. “I must find Thor. He may be in great danger.”
“What’s wrong?” Jane asked worriedly.

“An old enemy of his has resurfaced, one who has publicly sworn revenge on him,” Sif explained. “He must be alerted. The Allfather would like Thor to return to Asgard for his own safety, though I do not anticipate that conversation going as the Allfather would like…”

“Yeah, Thor is still pretty mad at his dad,” Darcy nodded.

“And Thor has never been one to go into hiding if his own life is at stake,” Sigyn sighed.

“I know he will want to vanquish any enemy who has threatened him,” Sif admitted. “But this time, I do not think he will be helpful to the cause. If I cannot persuade him to return to Asgard, I must ask you, Sigyn, to ensure he is properly guarded and secured here on Midgard.” Sigyn’s eyes went wide with fear, making Jane, Darcy and Pepper even more concerned.

“Who is coming for Thor?” Jane asked. Sif looked at Sigyn worriedly, not wanting to reveal to Thor’s new love interest who was after him.

“Amora,” Sigyn announced. “If my guess is correct.”

“Yes,” Sif sighed. “Amora the Enchantress.”

“But how did she break free?” Sigyn asked, worriedly. “I am sure King Hreiðmarr had her locked in one of his most secure cells.”

“He did,” Sif confirmed. “Unfortunately, there was another incident with the Fire Demons and several guards had to be called to defend Niðavellir. As it was more imperative the female guards be assigned to Lorelei’s cell…”

“They were forced to have male ones with Amora,” Sigyn sighed. “And I am guessing she seduced one.”

“Yes,” Sif said. “And then slit his throat once he was no longer of use to her. It is believed she found a path from Niðavellir to Midgard and I have been sent to arrest her.”

“Who is this person?” Darcy said. “That goes around seducing jail guards and then killing them?”

“I am actually surprised Thor hasn’t told you,” Sif admitted.

“She’s one of his greatest enemies?” Jane said.

“And his former lover,” Sif nodded with a wince.

“Um… what?” Darcy asked as Jane paled and froze, unable to respond.

“Why is Thor’s ex-girlfriend coming here to seek revenge on him?” Pepper asked.

“For various reasons, but I would say mainly and most recently because Thor contributed to her imprisonment,” Sigyn said. “She had been arrested in Asgard after she and her sister, Lorelei, charmed Thor into stealing something for them from the Asgardian treasury. The sisters had previously gotten in trouble for attempting to steal some magical gems from the king of Niðavellir and were first imprisoned there before serving their time in Asgard. Because their plot was thwarted, both sisters swore revenge on Thor. And to a lesser extent Loki.”

“Both Amora and Lorelei are sorceresses, born in Asgard and fostered out to Karnilla, also an enchantress,” Sif explained. “When they were young, Karnilla was expelled from Asgard for using
illegal magics...illegal...um, sex magics... Amora and Lorelei learned well from her and showed up a few hundred years ago, wreaking havoc across the realms. A single kiss from Amora’s lips is enough to enchant a man to do her bidding until she releases him.”

“Or turn him into a tree or stone if she is displeased with him,” Sigyn nodded. “She has other... unconventional powers that stem from her womanly wiles. She, like Loki, is also very skilled at astral projection and illusions. Of course, her greatest illusion is her seduction. I do not think she is capable of love at all. It is what makes her the most dangerous. And if she is after Thor... may the Norns help him...”

“Why didn’t Thor tell me he had a magical ex-girlfriend,” Jane said furiously.

“Two,” Sif said quietly. “Two magical former paramours. He was also Amora’s sister Lorelei’s lover for a brief period.”

“I am going to kill him!” Jane fumed.

“Hey, Janie, calm down,” Darcy assured him. “I’m sure he was just trying to protect you.”

“It seems like Thor thought they were out of the picture,” Pepper agreed.

“I am sure Thor meant no malice,” Sigyn assured her. “He had no reason to think either woman would ever appear again. And it is a rather embarrassing story from his past, which is why I can’t imagine him wanting to share it.”

“Wait.. these are the women Loki brought up at his birthday party, aren’t the?” Pepper remembered. “The ones who he said broke up with Thor?”

“Only because Thor didn’t, as you say, break up with them first,” Sigyn explained.

“Did I hear my name?” Thor called. The women looked up to find Thor, Loki, and Tony had entered the room, having heard the opening of the Bifrost a few floors below.

“So, what’s going on?” Tony asked curiously.

“Lady Sif,” Thor said, surprised.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” Tony asked with a wiggle of his brows. However, the jovial mood of the room was soon quieted by the look on Sif’s face.

“I have come on behalf of the Allfather. Midgard and you yourself, Thor, are in danger,” Sif said gravely. “Amora the Enchantress has escaped and seeks revenge against you for her imprisonment.”

“Bollocks,” Thor groaned.

“Oh, Thor’s ex is coming to town?” Loki snorted. “Well, this should be fun.”
Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves

Chapter Summary

Or, in which Thor’s ex-girlfriend returns just in time to ruin his Valentine’s Day with his new girlfriend

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No, who is Amora? And Lorelei?” Jane asked pointedly. Thor looked frightened and around the room for a minute before zooming in a nervous looking Sigyn.

“What did you…” Thor began.

“Oh, don’t you blame this on me,” Sigyn huffed. “You’ve had plenty of time to tell her by now, and if you were as honorable as you claim to be, she would have already known. How was I supposed to know that you were keeping some big secret from Jane, hmm? Don’t blame me for something your own honesty could have prevented!”

Pepper had ordered the Tower into lockdown mode just in case Amora was as dangerous and hellbent on destroying Thor as Sif seemed to indicate. Darcy hadn’t been too upset about having to skip her singles night, finding the argument brewing between Jane and Thor far more interesting. Loki had joined her and Pepper at the kitchen bar, pouring himself most of a bottle of red wine into one of Tony’s comically large novelty margarita glasses. Sigyn and Sif were standing between Jane and Thor but weren’t actually doing anything to prevent Jane from going off on Thor for his lies of omission.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t think it was a concern,” Thor insisted. “Amora and Lorelei were both supposed to be in jail in Niðavellir for the next two thousand years, followed by another three thousand years in the Asgardian dungeons. It isn’t my fault Amora escaped!”

“Oh, you are blaming dwarves now?” Sigyn said, incensed.

“I’m not blaming the dwarves!” Thor said. “And it was Loki who found out there were wanted in Niðavellir before any crimes they committed in Asgard!”

“Don’t blame me for this,” Loki snorted. “You’re the one who met a comely wench at a tavern, let her seduce you, and then use you to break into the Asgardian treasury. And I was the one who saved you from that enchantment in the nick of time only for you to repeat the same mistake with said comely wench’s younger sister!”

“Wow,” Clint said, catapulting himself down from the rafters. “Way to think with your dick, Thor. So, what’s going on exactly?”

“Oh, we’ve just been invaded by Thor’s former lover who once swore she would stand over his bruised and beaten corpse in victory in retribution for both slights real and imagined,” Loki said before extending the nearly empty wine bottle he was holding in Clint’s direction. “Côtes du Rhône?”
“No thanks,” Clint shook his head before heading toward the carafe of coffee.

“Please at least tell me Lorelei is still secure,” Sigyn begged Sif.

“Yes, she is still bound and silenced,” Sif nodded. “There is apparently no sisterly love lost between Amora and Lorelei. Despite her seduction of the guards and escape, Amora apparently made no attempt to help Lorelei escape as well. And Lorelei has let anyone who has come to interrogate her about Amora’s plans know it. I doubt very much the reunion between the two will be pleasant.”

“Silenced?” Jane asked worriedly. “Why does this Lorelei person have to be silenced?”

“Lorelei has developed a unique ability to make male creatures do her bidding,” Loki explained. “Somehow, whatever order she gives them becomes their own deepest desire and they must fulfill it, even if the task is against their nature or even counterintuitive to their own survival.”

“Basically, men feel compelled to do anything she tells them to,” Sif explained. “Which is why she is only given female guards and often requires a female force to take her down. Thankfully, it is Amora who has gone missing this time. She can make men do her bidding, but she at least has to kiss them first.”

“So, what embarrassing stuff did Lorelei make you do?” Darcy asked Loki.

“Nothing,” Loki replied. “I have apparently spent enough time as a woman or in between genders that Lorelei’s own particular brand of magic does not recognize me as truly male and therefore does not work on me. Thor, however, was always particularly susceptible to her brand of sweet talk.”

“Loki rescued me from an attempt to have me raid the Asgardian royal treasury on Lorelei’s behalf,” Thor admitted. “It was not my proudest moment.”

“It wasn’t exactly embarrassment free for me either,” Loki grumbled.

“Trip over your cape?” Clint asked.

“More like he was completely nude,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Not sure how Lorelei thought a naked man hauling treasures out of the palace wouldn’t raise any eyebrows, especially if that man happens to be the crown prince. I suppose she had gotten desperate. And sloppy. There was a bet between Lorelei and Amora, you see, to get certain objects out of the treasury for their personal use. Amora’s tactic was to have Thor sneak her in. She didn’t think the mind-control enchantment she had on Thor was so literal until she saw the vast wealth of the treasury and exclaimed ‘fuck me.’ When the guards found them five minutes later…”

“Loki!” Thor interjected as Jane stomped over, grabbed the red wine bottle from Loki and chugged what was left in it. “Must you really go into such detail?”

“Well, your friends need to know what they’re up against,” Loki shrugged, sipping the wine from his novelty margarita glass. He turned to Jane as she finished the bottle and wiped her upper lip with her hand. “I believe Stark has another bottle in that small cold keeping device there.”

“Thanks,” Jane groaned before reaching into the wine fridge.

“And this chick’s name is Amoral?” Clint said.

“No, Amora,” Loki said, “though amoral is an apt description of what she is.”

“Thor, other than Foster, I think you have terrible taste in women,” Tony informed Thor.
“Aye,” Thor admitted.

“Maybe we should put Thor in the Hulk cell until this is all over,” Clint suggested.

“I think that is a marvelous idea,” Loki grinned.

“All the men should be confined,” Sif agreed, “for their own safety.”

“Wait, what?” Tony and Clint said at the same time.

“I’ll get Bruce,” Pepper offered.

“You can’t just lock us all up!” Tony protested.

“Amora is capable of making you do dastardly things, things you would never willingly do,” Sif tried to explain.

“Tony would do a lot,” Pepper pointed out.

“Things you and Lady Pepper would regret you doing,” Sigyn clarified.

“So, that’s it? We just get locked up?” Clint huffed.

“Should we contact Natasha?” Pepper asked after asking Bruce to come to the communal room.

“It might not hurt,” Sif nodded.

“It might be safest to lure Amora to the building,” Sigyn suggested. “She already knows Thor is here, and he is most definitely her target.”

“I’ll send everyone home for the rest of the day to lessen any chance of collateral damage,” Pepper said. “I’ll make something up about a technical issue. Happy, too, though I can’t see him wanting to leave easily.”

“He’ll have to be corralled with the others if he stays,” Sif said. “And if Amora reaches them, we would have to be willing to take him out if need be.”

“I’ll get on the horn to Natasha,” Darcy offered.

“What’s going on?” Bruce asked worriedly.

“I shall explain on our way down,” Sigyn informed him. “Sir Tony and Sir Clint, if you would come with us…”

“What about Thor?” Tony asked. “Or Loki?”

“Yeah, why aren’t they getting locked up for their own safety?” Clint huffed.

“I am immune to Amora’s charms,” Loki replied haughtily. “And her spell work is juvenile at best.” Sigyn rolled her eyes at her husband.

“Are we sure about that?” Tony asked.

“If there was any chance I was in danger, don’t you think my wife would have me chained up in some pocket dimension by now?” Loki pointed out.

“Fair point,” Tony agreed.
“What about Thor?” Clint said.

“Thor,” Sif said with a hint of a smirk, “we are using as bait.”

Natasha had borrowed a helicopter and was heading back to Stark Tower without delay. Her communications were going to be patched through Hill instead of Fury as a precaution with Steve reluctantly sitting this one out. Fury wanted all the information he could get on this new Asgardian adversary, but wasn’t about to do anything that would embarrass SHIELD if it went public. Bruce, Tony, and Clint were secured in the Hulk containment area for the time being with Sigyn casting as many wards and spells as she could for added protection in case Amora somehow found them. Clint wasn’t keen to be brainwashed again and Tony knew, for his personal safety, it was probably best that Pepper be the only woman who bossed him around. There was also concern about what might happen if Amora got ahold of the Hulk instead of just plain old Bruce. Even JARVIS was shut down as a precaution, though Tony argued a male voice didn’t necessarily make his A.I. male.

With the menfolk safe, the women went about doing their best to keep the Tower secure. Pepper worked on security over comms with Natasha while Darcy and Jane secured what equipment they didn’t want damaged and collected equipment that could be useful against Amora. Thor was nervously following Jane around, looking like both a fearful child and a kicked puppy. Jane still wasn’t happy with him for not letting her in on this part of his past, but she was more concerned about what could happen to him under Amora’s control. Jane had to admit it was one of the very rare occasions when Thor actually seemed scared, which frightened her a bit too. Sigyn and Loki too to their chambers, Sigyn doing her best to scrye for Amora’s possible location with Loki doing as much to help as he could sans seiðr. The other women and Thor had all gathered in the communal kitchen for a strategy session when a nervous looking Sigyn followed by a tired looking Loki appeared.

“Did you find her?” Natasha asked, straight to the point.

“I am hoping something is interfering with my readings…” Sigyn began.

“Nothing is interfering with your readings,” Loki sighed. “Amora’s in the Tower. She probably has been for quite some time.”

“Oh, this is not good,” Darcy frowned.

“What do we do?” Jane asked worriedly.

“Do you know where she is in the building specifically?” Pepper asked.

“I, for one, am not going to wait for her to find me,” Sif said, producing her sword and shield. “I am not going to be a fly in her web.”

“Even if I could pinpoint her position,” Sigyn admitted, “she can teleport. She might not be where I found her a few seconds later.”

“If we could get to the building’s security center we might be able to pinpoint and monitor her position,” Natasha said. “Since it’s too much of a risk to tap into JARVIS right now.”

“I’ll go with you,” Pepper offered to Natasha.

“Yes,” Sif agreed. “It’s best that no one goes alone.”
“I’ll go with you looking for Amora,” Jane offered to Sif.

“No,” Thor said instantly. “You will be safer here with Loki and Sigyn. You and Lady Darcy should stay here. I will go with Sif.”

“I’m not just waiting around, doing nothing,” Jane argued. “Besides isn’t it more dangerous for you to go off with Sif if Amora can manipulate you so easily?”

“I can handle Amora, with or without Thor’s help,” Sif said. “As it is, I am sure Amora will delight in nothing better than harming you and making Thor watch. Therefore, I do not believe it would be wise for the two of you to be together.” Jane was about to argue with Sif’s assessment and if Thor tried to intervene, he would probably just alienate Jane further. Loki sighed and stepped in, much like he always did when someone had to play devil’s advocate.

“Sif is right. About something. For once,” Loki said, earning a glower from the warrioress and a poke in the stomach from his wife. “Having both you and Thor in the same area will be too tempting for Amora and while we want to lure her out, we don’t want to do that at someone’s expense. Sif and Thor should go looking for her. Sigyn and I will stay here with Jane and Darcy in case she comes looking for Jane.”

“Aren’t you a bit useless without your magic?” Jane pointed out, still annoyed.

“No one can get around Amora’s verbal trickery as I can,” Loki sniffed. “And I’m not leaving Sigyn. Ergo, if Sigyn stays here to protect you, I stay as well.”

“Maybe the two of them should go with Thor and we should stay with Sif,” Jane huffed.

“Come on, Janie,” Darcy insisted. “It’s a good plan.”

“And the longer we stand here debating said plan, the better chance Amora has of catching us unaware,” Loki pointed out.

“Which is why we need to move out now,” Sif nodded.

“Fine,” Jane said, throwing her hands up in disgust before turning to Thor. “I am still mad at you.”

“I will endeavor to again win your favor,” Thor said, placing a chivalrous kiss on Jane’s hand before she could snatch it away.

“We shall head to the spots Thor frequents the most,” Sif informed Loki and Sigyn. “No doubt she will be seeking him where he is most present. In the meantime, if you encounter her…”

“…make sure to let loose screams and sounds of intense pain,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, Sif. Let’s get on with it.”

“You deserve whatever Amora throws at you,” Sif informed Loki.

“Probably,” Loki agreed with a shrug.

After Sif and Thor headed out to see if they could sniff out Amora - possibly literally as Loki snarked - Jane, Darcy, Sigyn and Loki gathered around the kitchen counter and a selection of various shots of tequila, kamikazes, and Jager bombs Darcy provided so Jane could deal with the fact that Thor was keeping things from her. Seeing how Jane was double-fisting shots, Darcy began sliding the
remaining ones in Sigyn’s direction, knowing she was much better at handling her alcohol. Loki was encouraging Jane’s annoyance at Thor in between gazing affectionately at his wife because of how much alcohol she could consume without even getting buzzed.

Natasha and Pepper were having no luck pinpointing Amora, though they could tell there was someone in the Tower other than those accounted for. Of course, half of Pepper’s attention was taken by Tony, who was using the line from the Hulk containment cell up to the security center to complain about the fact he was being wrongfully imprisoned based on his gender and that Clint was cheating at go-fish. It was only after Pepper asked Bruce to give Tony a juice box and make him take a nap that she and Natasha noticed the elevators in the building were going bezerk. Loki and Sigyn confirmed Amora was probably using them as a tactic to confuse anyone who might be looking for her, which didn’t actually help put anyone unfamiliar with her abilities at ease.

Sif decided now was the time to double back and check to see if Amora had broken into Thor’s chambers yet. Loki was a bit miffed that Sif thought Amora would spend her time turning over Thor’s room looking for him when she could be focusing her energies on breaking the magical wards that protected the untold treasure trove of enchanted amulets, grimoires, and talismans the pair possessed. Sigyn thought her husband was being ludicrous and the pair were amid a very entertaining argument about whether or not it was an insult not to steal their valuable assortments of arcana when both paused and froze, like animals whose hackles had been raised. Before Jane or Darcy could ask what was wrong, Loki had shoved them both behind the island counter and Sigyn had stood up on the island, wielding a very strong ward in a goldish bubble around them all.

“And here I had so thought my arrival would be a pleasant surprise,” Amora sighed dramatically from the door frame. Jane peaked up over the island in time to judge that Amora was dressed like some kind of space hooker before Loki pulled her back down. “Is this Little Sigyn I see?”

“You are not welcome here, Amora,” Sigyn said. “Nor anywhere outside of your cell.”

“Do you ever get tired about lecturing others about confinement?” Amora snorted. “I suppose, not, fetterer and all. Speaking of confinement, how is it you find yourself here on Midgard again?”

“I’m more interested on how you got here,” Sigyn replied.

“Where is that annoying little husband of yours?” Amora asked airily, flipping her hair. “I have a knife ready for him. Just perfect for sinking it into his back.”

“As if he would ever let you get close enough to do so,” Sigyn snorted.

“Is it true what the Allfather did to his seiðr?” Amora smirked. “I heard your poor husband can’t get it up anymore…”

“I heard it was you that was having issues,” Sigyn replied. “I heard that you’re jealous of your little sister. Everyone was so focused on her, as Lorelei has always been the bigger threat. I heard that you were upset no one paid you any mind in your cell because you’re the weaker one. And I know how much you hate being weak, Amora. There are also rumors that your seiðr is fading with your looks as you age…”

“I am fully able to wield my seiðr,” Amora hissed, summoning what seemed to be a massive lime green flame not too far off from how Loki’s manifested. “But I suppose you and I are the only one’s Sigyn. Otherwise, I’m sure Loki wouldn’t leave you alone. I’m guessing that’s why he’s hiding away with those two Midgardian ninnies while you try to keep this ward up,” Amora said. “After all, fettering requires almost all of your control and concentration. It’s nearly impossible to do it and another type of enchantment… say, a ward of protection… at the same time.”
“Well, no sense in cowering,” Loki sighed, popping up from behind the island counter. “Hello, Amora, you old hag. Sucked any souls dry lately, you simpering succubus?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Amora said to Sigyn. “I think I’ll cut out your husband’s tongue before I stab him in the back.”

“Many have tried, none have succeeded,” Loki warned her. “Several of them more competent than yourself. All of them much less disease-riddled.”

“And where is the mousy little Midgardian tramp you’ve been protecting?” Amora asked airily.

“Hey! You can’t talk to Jane that way!” Darcy said angrily, popping up from behind the island counter.

“Darcy!” Jane hissed, popping up right beside her. Amora looked at Darcy, slightly intrigued, and then Jane, utterly bored.

“I was surprised when I heard Thor was courting a scholar,” Amora said, “but then again, she’s too plain to be much of anything else.”

“Hey!” Darcy and Jane exclaimed at the same time.

“I can’t seem to think she’s anything more than a little diversion,” Amora said, still eyeing up Jane as if she was inspecting a new piece of furniture or object d’art. “After all, if he actually thought anything of her, I’m sure he’d be here defending her right now.”

“You’re one to talk. I’ve never met someone who wears a push-up bra as outerwear,” Darcy snorted.

“I don’t need Thor here to defend me,” Jane insisted to Amora.

“Skeevey bitch,” Darcy added under her breath, which Loki nodded in agreement at.

“Oh, dear, she thinks she knows about him,” Amora laughed, predatorily stalking toward Jane but stopping short of the ward Sigyn still had up. “You’ve known him, what? A couple handful of moon cycles?”

“I know him better than you do,” Jane replied. Amora let out a roaring laugh.

“Oh, yes. I’m sure he lets you think that,” Amora said with a vicious smirk. “Thor and I were together for centuries. I suppose he didn’t tell you about all that, though.”

“No,” Jane responded evenly. “Thor only talks to me about important things.”

“Centuries, Amora? Really?” Loki snorted. “The two of you may have been together for a century, tops. And if I recall, you spent most of that time cheating on him with various hereditary princes of Alfheim, members of the Vanir noble court and that odious old Rhunian vizier.”

“Poor, sad, little Loki,” Amora sighed tiredly. “You’ve always been jealous of me. You know full well that your female half and this insipid little wife of yours combined could never amount to half the woman I am.”

“Ah, yes,” Loki rolled his eyes. “so womanly you have to enchant your tits every morning so they stay perky.”

“You really think anyone believes those lies of yours?” Amora retorted with a flip of her hair.
“You know, I never had Thor confirm it,” Loki said to Jane conspiratorially, “but I’ve heard rumors that Amora has teeth in her…”

Loki was interrupted by the sound of Mjolnir shortly followed by Thor crashing through one of the large windows in the communal living area. As Thor positioned himself in front of the island counter and protectively in front of Jane, Sif jogged into the room and behind Amora. It seemed as though Thor had just taken his hammer to flight when he found out about Amora’s whereabouts, forcing Sif to take the stairs as Amora still had the elevators acting wonky. From their observations in the security room, both Natasha and Pepper made mental notes to inquire into the nature of Sif’s cardio regime.

“What are you doing here?” Sif interrupted, glowering at Amora. Ignoring the female warrior before her, Amora turned her eyes instead to Thor, who was standing behind Sif as if intended to use his female friend as a human shield. Amora batted her lashes and lasciviously licked her lips in a method that made Loki and the other women roll their eyes and Thor shift his weight uncomfortably.

“Hello, Amora,” Thor grimaced, as if the words physically pained him to say. “You look….” he seemed to search for an adjective that was accurate but not overly kind, “well?”

“As erudite as ever, Thor,” Amora smirked, sauntering toward him with an exaggerated swivel of her hips.

“Amora of Nornheim, for your crimes against the peoples of Asgard, Vanaheim, Niðavellir, and the other realms, you are hereby commanded into my custody to be brought before the Allfather and judged for your offenses,” Sif ordered.

“Oh, hello, Sif,” Amora said, glancing over her shoulder dismissively. “Didn’t see you there.”

“You will be brought to justice, Amora,” Thor said her threateningly.

“You really think so?” Amora smirked. She then spoke a phrase in a strange tongue before blowing a kiss in Thor’s direction.

Thor looked momentarily stunned as Loki again pushed Darcy and Jane down behind the counter. Sigyn and Sif both moved to capture Amora at the same time, though they got in each other’s way a bit. Still, Sigyn managed to get Amora’s right arm and right leg bound with the cuff and chains she had produced from an unknown dimension while Amora tried to use her seiðr to fight off Sif and her sword. Thor continued just standing there dopily, Mjolnir hanging at his side. Loki sighed in annoyance, really wishing he had his own seiðr and could do something other than be a human shield.

“What’s wrong with him?” Jane asked worriedly.

“Amora’s just turned him into a dolt,” Loki huffed. “Not that one needs seiðr for that. He’s probably going to do her bidding now, once she can concentrate on giving him a task.”

“The hell he is,” Jane huffed, struggling up from where Loki was attempting to keep both her and Darcy safe.

“Stop!” Loki ordered Jane at the same time Darcy, seizing her opportunity, stomped on Loki’s foot and escaped from him. “Fine!” Loki yelled at both women. “I’ll not stop you from killing yourselves!”

Jane attempted to distract Thor from staring limply at Amora while Darcy began tossing various loose appliances and items from the kitchen in Amora’s direction, hoping to provide enough of a
distraction that Sigyn and Sif could get the remaining magical cuffs on her. The Enchantress was angry enough by this interruption that she started to swell her seiðr with the intention of turning the annoying mortal to goop. However, as Amora readied herself to melt Darcy, she felt one of Sigyn’s cuffs come across her free foot just as Sif bashed the hilt of her sword into Amora’s stomach. The wind knocked out of her, Amora didn’t notice the giant plastic vegetable tray Darcy lobbed at her head.

“Come on, Thor, snap out of it,” Jane ordered Thor’s barely animated body. “You’re really going to let this bitch control you?”

“Please, when has that line ever worked,” Loki huffed, examining his nails.

“You’re not being helpful,” Jane pointed out.

“I don’t have seiðr,” Loki replied. “And even if I did, there is very little that can actually undo this little charm on brother dearest. I’d need my potions laboratory and about two weeks to come close.”

“Thor!” Amora ordered angrily, “vanquish these harridans!” Amora ordered. Thor seemed ready to step forward, but then paused for a moment, as if debating his next move.

“Thor, don’t listen to her!” Jane begged as Amora elbowed Sif in the face and then tried to strangle Sigyn with links from her own chain. Loki seemed ready to move forward to physically defend his wife until Sigyn gave Amora a swift kick in the crotch. Darcy was still safely on the island counter and had resorted to throwing individual fruit at Amora.

“We’re coming down,” Natasha said over her comm to Darcy.

“No, no,” Darcy insisted. “Someone has to monitor the guys down in the basement just in case. She’s already got Thor.”

“Thor! Any minute now!” Amora hissed as Sigyn punched her in the nose followed by Sif bashing her over the head with a shield, both of which only staggered the Enchantress. “By the Norns, Thor,” Amora muttered. “I always knew you were thick headed but…”

“Please, Thor,” Jane begged as Thor took a step in Amora’s direction. “Don’t do this!” Thor turned and looked at Jane with blank eyes. So, Jane did the only thing she could think to do as a last resort. She made out with him.

Suddenly, Thor’s grasp on Mjolnir dropped and the hammer sank onto the floor, cracking it. Slowly, Thor moved his hands around Jane as Loki let out a garbled noise from the back of his throat. Amora screeched in anger, just giving Sif and Sigyn enough time to finally chain her free hand and bind her seiðr. For good measure, Sigyn wrapped the chain links around Amora’s body a few more times while Sif put the face muzzle on Amora as the enchantress continued to struggle. Darcy was doing a happy dance on the counter.

“Bitch!” Amora hissed before her mouth was covered.

“It worked!” Jane said, pulling back from Thor happily.

“No,” Loki sighed. “It just transferred.”

“What?” Jane asked.

“The enchantment Amora used,” Sigyn said, “makes one do the bidding of a former lover. However,
if another lover the victim is more attached to comes along and kisses them... they then become a slave to that person.”

“What does that mean?” Jane asked worriedly.

“Sigyn, dear, you make it sound so glum,” Loki sighed. “Basically, Thor is now going to do anything you ask him to until the spell wears off. He’s your mind slave.”

“When will it wear off?” Jane asked.

“It could depend on the strength of the spell and Amora’s proximity toward it,” Sigyn said. “It could weaken the further away from Midgard she gets or it could stay strong until the next new moon…”

“Which is about twenty days from now, so enjoy,” Loki said to Jane.

“Oh, Jane!” Darcy said excitedly. “Tell Thor to lift me up over his head! Ooh! Or to do the cha-cha-slide!”

“Darcy!” Jane hissed.

“Do you need any help?” Sigyn asked Sif as the other woman lobbed Amora over her shoulder.

“I think I’ve got it,” Sif smirked as Natasha and Pepper entered the room.

“Are you all okay?” Pepper asked. “Why is Thor still glazed over? Can we let the guys go now before Tony loses everything he owns in poker?”

“Whenever you get a chance,” Natasha said to Sif, “we need to compare training regimes.”

“I look forward to it,” Sif nodded, “but for now, Amora is captured and I must fulfill my duties.” Sif walked out onto the balcony and yelled for Heimdall before she and Amora were transported back to Asgard.

“Is he going to be okay?” Pepper asked, waving a hand in front of Thor’s face worriedly.

“Yeah,” Darcy chirped. “He’s just going to be Jane’s sex slave for like the next month or so.”

“Darcy!” Jane hissed.

“What?” Darcy shrugged. “That’s how it works, right?”

“Sort of,” Sigyn said at the exact time Loki said “Exactly.” Sigyn glowered at her husband and added “It’s complicated.”

“What can I expect until he...uh... snaps out of it?” Jane asked Sigyn worriedly.

“He’ll follow you around like a lost dog,” Loki interjected before his wife can speak. “Do anything you ask. Stand over your bed and watch you while you sleep.”

“Creepy,” Darcy pronounced.

“How do you know so much about this particular enchantment, anyway?” Natasha asked Loki skeptically.

“Because the last time it happened my mother and I spent three days in her laboratory to find a cure,” Loki said. “It wore off before we could find one. But in order to cure any disease, one must know
“The good thing is the spell is only temporary,” Sigyn said. “To keep it up, one must cast it again before it weakens too much.”

“Which means you have only a short time in which Thor will do anything you tell him,” Loki replied. “If I were you, I’d start by making him clean your laboratories.”

“This is too weird. I need to think,” Jane sighed. She moved to exit the room only for Thor to begin following her. With a sigh, Jane turned around and ordered him “Thor, stay!”

“He’s not a dog, Janie,” Darcy pointed out as Thor let out the most pathetic whimper any of them had ever heard.

“Ugh, fine, Thor you can come,” Jane sighed, leaving the room as Thor bounded after her.

“Well, I suppose it is fine to let the others out of confinement now,” Sigyn sighed.

“If they haven’t killed each other yet,” Pepper sighed.

The morning of the Valentine’s day holiday, Sigyn’s fettering chains that had been used to subdue Amora appeared on the Iron Man landing deck via Bifrost, along with a note detailing Amora’s renewed imprisonment. Amora was now was swearing vengeance against Jane in addition to Thor for interrupting what Amora had assumed was a foolproof plan. Alarmingly, Amora had made some sort of comment about recruiting Darcy to her weird little cult of followers, which made the intern-cum-lab-manager beam with pride. While Loki found the prospect of Darcy falling in with Amora’s little gang hilarious, Sigyn seemed concerned and spent several days trying to convince Darcy not to throw her lot in with the likes of Amora and Lorelei.

It only took a day for Amora’s enchantment to wear off, but it gave Jane a Valentine’s Day where Thor literally did everything she said. Despite initially rejecting the thought of bossing her boyfriend around, Jane did break and use her power to have Thor give a complete down and dirty history of his previous relationships. Jane responded in kind, though she had to stop Thor from flying off to bash the head of one of her exes. She supposed it was progress in the spell wearing off. It wasn’t until late that afternoon when Jane realized Thor was still doing her bidding despite the fact the spell had worn off. Under magical influence, Thor would return to Jane with whatever object she had asked for - even if he didn’t know what it was or had never seen it before. However, when Jane asked for a certain device and Thor brought back another, she realized the enchantment had broken.

Even after pointing out to Thor that he was now free of the charm, he continued to do as Jane said to the best of his ability for the next week. It was partially habit by that point and partially him trying to make up for not being completely truthful and Amora’s attack. Still, Thor did manage to tell Jane he was very proud of the way she had handled both Amora and his enchanted self. And because Thor loved all things Midgardian, Jane let him take her out to a nice Italian restaurant for a romantic evening together as part of a traditional Valentine’s Day celebration.

Romance was in the air in other areas of the Tower as well. Tony also whisked Pepper away for a romantic evening while Clint, Darcy, and Bruce watched slasher films and ate their combined weight in junk food. Natasha had apparently attempted to set Steve up on a blind date in D.C. only for Steve to figure it out and instead pawn his date off on Fury by telling the SHIELD director to meet him at the appointed place. The video Natasha and Hill took of the incident was the last film Clint, Darcy, and Bruce watched that evening. No one really cared to ask where Loki and Sigyn had gone off to,
particularly after they retrieved the fettering chain that Sif had sent back. It would be nearly two days before the couple was seen again.

With the romantic holiday over, Tony had turned to ways to annoy Irish Catholic Steve Rogers with St. Patrick’s Day while simultaneously suggesting Bruce should get in the spirit and go green for the upcoming holiday. Kicked out of his own lab by the combined power of Bruce, JARVIS and Hulk Safety Protocols, Tony wandered toward Jane’s lab to find Thor still doing Jane’s bidding while Darcy ignored her work, instead questioning Loki and Sigyn about how exactly one joined the ranks of alien sorceress seductresses. Loki in particular was having great fun imagining the brunette Midgardian joining the ranks of two of the most annoying magical creatures he had ever come upon.

“Well, I’m sure first you have to suck a few men completely dry of their souls,” Loki said to Darcy, “Probably through certain parts of their anatomy…”

“Loki!” Sigyn huffed. “Do not encourage this!”

“But I haven’t even gotten to the animal mutilation rituals yet!” Loki complained, causing Darcy to turn pale white and then a sickly green.

“He’s making it all up,” Sigyn assured Darcy. “Or at least I hope so. There is no telling what awful things one must do for illegal magic.”

“Can I just say that I’m a little disappointed that Point Break here was the only one who got brain blasted?” Tony said. “I mean, I’m like the ideal candidate to enchant with illegal sex magic. But, no, your stuck up little enchantress friend didn’t even consider me.”

“It isn’t a badge of honor, Stark,” Thor said gruffly.

“Am I not her type or something?” Tony continued. “I mean, I’m handsome. I’m rich. I’m limber. I did yoga once with Pepper. Like three years ago or something.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to tell Amora that there is a particular mortal dying for her special brand of fuckery the next time I see her,” Loki informed Tony, “which, with any luck, will be long after all of you mortals are dead.”

“Thanks, man,” Tony said. “That’s all I ask.”
Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, Thor rides a dinosaur and Loki is putting out fires*

It was the last Saturday in February when Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis decided that everyone needed to go on a trip to the Hayden Planetarium before Thor was inevitably yanked back to Asgard by his father. Steve and Natasha had the odd weekend off and had come up to the city to spend time in the Tower, so it seemed like the perfect opportunity to head to the American Museum of Natural History, which the planetarium was part of. With tickets for an after lunch show of the new planetarium documentary, Jane had more or less informed everyone they were going and then Darcy helped smooth out the executive decision Jane had stream rolled over everyone.

Some of the Tower’s inhabitants were more eager to go than others. Sigyn had been absolutely delighted at the prospect of seeing Midgardian mineral collections and animal dioramas. Loki always went where Sigyn did, and Thor was excited to be doing something Jane liked to do. Despite having lived in the city for a while, neither Bruce nor Clint had ever actually gone to the museum before, so they wanted to see what all the fuss was about. And Natasha always liked to go to places with highly advanced security systems and ask their security staff strange and red-flag raising questions about their operations. Steve had discovered this while touring the various museums in D.C. with Natasha but stopped mentioning it after Natasha informed him the White House was much easier to break into than one might think.

Still, there were a few - i.e. Tony and Steve - who had mixed emotions about spending a day at the museum. As much as Tony Stark hated to admit it, he had only been to New York’s famed American Museum of Natural History once in his life. It had been on a field trip when he was in elementary school. The only thing he remembered about it was getting into a fist fight with the son of a prominent New York banking family over the correct pronunciation of “saurischians.” Jarvis - the human one - had to come pick him up from the field trip early, and he ended up getting reamed out by old Howard over dinner. Instead of punching out the kid whose father was investing in Stark Industries, Howard had wanted to know why his son couldn’t punch the grandson of the Democratic senator who was campaigning for stricter industrial regulation. As a result, Tony didn’t exactly have fond memories of the place.

Steve, on the other hand, might have memories of the place that were so fond they bordered on painful. The last time Steve had been to the museum was in 1942 when the Hall of North American Mammals still under construction. Most of the exhibitions hadn’t existed then, but the old planetarium had still been there. Any time there had been a free exhibition or they had scraped enough money together, Bucky had always wanted to head down to the planetarium for a show and to see the exhibits. Something about space and the thought of being among the stars got Bucky just as excited as Steve felt making his way through an art museum.

When they arrived at the exhibits about meteorites and the origins of the solar system, Jane soon learned that she might have been over eager to share Midgardian knowledge and theories about space with Asgardians who actually lived in space. Sigyn seemed already know about the origin of
half of the meteorites in the hall based on the type of rock alone while Loki would read plaques
about the creation of planets and stars before clicking his tongue and saying something like “aw, how
cute,” and “oh, that’s not right at all.”

“Thor, I am going to kill your brother,” Jane hissed at him “Either he unveils the secrets of the
universe or he quits talking about them entirely.”

“Loki is just causing mischief as usual,” Thor insisted. “Come, Jane, tell me about the rocks from
your planet’s moon again.” Jane huffed, knowing fully well Thor had probably learned about moons
in the Asgardian version of kindergarten, but acquiesced. After all, it was Jane’s passion about
astronomy that most delighted him.

“What’s up, Cap?” Tony asked as Steve sadly trudged around the Cosmic Pathway.

“Just… I used to know someone who would have loved all this stuff,” Steve admitted.

“I get it,” Tony said. “There’s this restaurant over on Madison and East 65th my mother loved. Whenever
we were in town, she’d always stop by with me. Sometimes it was just to get some dessert
as a snack. After she died… I never could go back there without feeling depressed. The thing is, the
place closed down in ‘97 and I didn’t realize it. Now that I can’t go back, I kind of wish I had.”

“This place has changed a lot since the last time I was here,” Steve said, gesturing around to all of the
models.

“Since the last time I was here, too,” Tony admitted. “I was like eight, but still.”

“Come on guys,” Clint urged them forward, “I am not missing the movie.”

“You’ll just end up sleeping through it,” Natasha groaned, following Clint into the planetarium
entrance.

Always interested in learning about other types of science, Bruce and Tony happily watched the film
on show at the planetarium. Steve was just as enamored with the film while Thor excited to see how
happy it made Jane. Having seen this particular film with Jane so many times, Darcy was practically
mouthing the words along with the narrator - who Clint pointed out was Whoopi Goldberg before
falling asleep as Natasha had predicted. Natasha had also predicted that a darkened room and
information about space travel and history would put Loki and Sigyn in the mood to make out. At
least until Tony began kicking the back of Loki’s seat and threatening to tell planetarium
management.

Sigyn’s friend from Tony’s costume party then came out to greet the Avengers following the show.
After receiving some strange but enthusiastic praise from Sigyn about the quality of his planetarium,
the director then started talking with Jane about some mutual friends and her research. Bruce and
Tony chipped in from time to time, even though astronomy wasn’t either one of their choice fields of
study. Loki boredly began poking around the gift shop as Darcy took various pictures of the
Avengers and the planetarium director to post on various social media accounts. After all, there was
no harm in using the Avengers as a way to lure kids into pursuing STEM careers in Darcy’s book.

Afterwards, the group headed to see the mineral and gem exhibits for Sigyn who impressed everyone
- sans Thor and Loki who already knew about it - with her extensive knowledge of every type of
mineral and gem on display in the museum without reading any plaques or descriptions. Various
tourists seemed to think she was some sort of docent as she rattled off various uses of different
objects and how different gems were created geologically. Of course, Sigyn’s question and answer
session with the other museum patrons was cut short when Loki asked a real museum employee
about the possibility of buying the Patricia Emerald, and Darcy forced the group out of the exhibit hall and somewhere else before things got ugly.

Thor was disappointed that the Discovery Room was meant for children, but his sadness soon faded away when he got to see the large animals on display. Sigyn was absolutely enthralled with the Hall of Ocean Life and even Loki seemed a bit impressed by the display of Midgardian biological diversity. Of course, Steve then had to explain to Thor and Loki that Theodore Roosevelt was a president and not a “hunter king” as they seemed to think. Then Tony had to explain to Steve, Thor, and Loki the plot of the film “Night at the Museum” after Clint began cracking related jokes.

As they toured the halls of man, Thor began clapping his Midgardian compatriots on the back and congratulating them on the rapid evolution of their species. Clint got into a discussion about the historical progression of bow and bow-like weapons with a docent and began asking questions so intricate that the museum finally sent out an actual prehistoric weapons expert to chat with him so other patrons could be helped. Tony asked Steve “friends of yours?” at every neanderthal exhibit until the combined force of glares from Bruce, Darcy and Jane made him stop. Two halls later, Natasha made a similar joke about Steve and a fossil, causing Steve to roll his eyes and Tony to give his ex-employee-turned-teammate a high five.

While everyone else visited the exhibits, Natasha was mentally compiling the list of animals Sigyn found “cute.” It presently included all snakes, moths, walruses, whales, giant squid, penguins, alligators, crocodiles, poison dart frogs, giant tortoises, moose, bears, minks, ferrets, the collared peccary, voles, armadillos, raccoons, otters, skunks, rhinos, ostriches, mice and rats. Thor was particularly entranced by the mountain goats as well as the many large mammals Midgard had. It had taken some time to explain to the various Asgardians that the Komodo dragon was not a misnomer and then further time for most of the Midgardians to wrap their heads around the fact that there were actual dragons in other realms. In fact, Asgardian descriptions of dragons seemed to validate the emerging theory that dinosaurs were more closely related to birds than reptiles.

It had been the dinosaur and fossil exhibits that seemed to most delight Thor. It was when Thor began talking loudly about some of the skeletons as if he had seen the real life versions of these creatures that Loki begrudgingly admitted that Alfheim had a sort of zoo or menagerie where they sometimes collected animals from various realms. Of course, the last time the elves had been on Midgard was before either Thor or Loki was born and much of their animal collection had occurred when massive megafauna still roamed the earth. Clint about cried at the prospect there was a woolly mammoth somewhere out there in the universe and he had not been afforded an opportunity to ride on it like some sort of prehistoric king. Darcy, on the other hand, began pestering Thor about if any realms had mini horses.

It was only after Thor began climbing atop one of the dinosaur skeletons to see if he could ride the creature comfortably that the group was finally asked to begin making their way out of the museum. As if things weren’t awkward enough, the group was stopped at the door and then Loki was searched to make sure he hadn’t taken anything out of the mineral collection. He protested the indignity of it all until a small yellow sapphire was found tucked into one of his socks. Tony volunteered to pay a massive amount of money in the form of a museum donation to make the entire incident go away while Sigyn lambasted her husband for theft and causing Jane stress at one of her favorite places in the city. Natasha and Clint later approached Loki for information about how he got the gem out of the glass without breaking anything or setting off any alarms. Steve decided there was probably a good reason the Avengers didn’t do many casual outings together and that they had chosen to visit the gift shop well before leaving.
Tony, Bruce, and Darcy were helping to arrange the massive amounts of takeout ordered for dinner while the other members of the group were sprawled out in front of the TV. Clint had demanded they watch “Night at the Museum” now that they had been to the museum. Steve had purchased a 4-D cityscape puzzle of New York City, which Natasha and Darcy were helping him assemble. Jane was drinking coffee from the mug with a map of the night sky she had bought at the museum store while doing some last minute calculations. Thor was having fun playing with the Einstein bobblehead he had purchased, glancing over at Jane every once in a while to see if she was still annoyed with him. Tony had gotten Loki a “snow-making kit” as a joke, only for Loki to point to a miniature statue of a Maoi and ask Tony if they were related.

Still disappointed he couldn’t purchase or steal actual parts of the museum’s mineral collection, Loki had purchased some jewelry for his wife as well as a nice pair of socks depicting constellations for himself. Sigyn had also purchased a stuffed green anaconda to add to her stuffed animal collection. Currently, Sigyn was sitting in a plush chair, lecturing Loki about theft while he sat on the floor in front of her, painting her toenails and offering gentle apologies and murmured acquiesces. She had apparently threatened to tell her family Loki had stolen from a mineralogy exhibit. Doing so was apparently punishable by life imprisonment or death in Niðavellir because most of the museums were either owned by the royal family or the powerful dwarven banking families, who were somewhat akin to the Midgardian mafia. It delighted Tony and Clint to no end to hear Loki muttering his apologies and promises not to steal things again to his wife.

“So, I’m guessing everyone had a good day at the museum?” Pepper asked as she entered the common room.

“Oh yeah,” Tony said. “cept Thor and Loki are now totally banned from it.”

“For what?” Pepper asked.

“Loki for theft and Thor for attempting to ride a dinosaur skeleton into battle,” Tony said nonchalantly.

“I can’t believe this,” Pepper groaned.

“It was actually pretty neat,” Darcy volunteered. “Not Loki stealing things, but the security guards trying to explain to Thor that he wasn’t supposed to touch the exhibits. As he sat on the back of a T. rex.”

“Apparently the only museums in Asgard are run by the Allfather,” Bruce said, “and as his sons, Thor and Loki have permission to do whatever they please with the exhibits.”

“Thor thought the stuff that wasn’t behind glass was fair game for him to climb on,” Darcy continued. “We had to explain to him that he isn’t allowed to touch anything.”

“At least we went to the gift shop in the middle of the visit instead of waiting until we headed out,” Tony said. “By the way, Pep, I got you a new desk doo-dad to replace the one I broke back in Malibu.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” Pepper sighed, “but I’m more worried about the Asgardian PR nightmare we may have just unleashed.”

“Oh, Jane and Sigyn are taking care of it,” Darcy said. “Thor has to write a letter of apology to all of the paleontology staff at the museum and go help next time the museum has any heaving lifting duties. And Sigyn is making Loki clean up all of the labs until he’s worked off the approximate dwarven value of a yellow sapphire.”
“That reminds me,” Tony said. “JARVIS, please let me know if Loki seems to be setting up any pranks in the labs.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS replied. “Do you wish to also know about the dead fish currently festering at the bottom of the trunk of rescued parts from California you still haven’t sorted through?”

“What?” Tony groaned. “JARV! Loki!”

“What?” Loki huffed from where he was trying to concentrate on painting a stripe of gold over his wife’s green toenails.

“Dead fish? In my parts chest?” Tony said.

“Nah, that was me,” Clint admitted. “Payback for the experiment with the magnetic arrows that ended up with me shooting myself in the ass.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony thought back. “Well played.”


“Yes,” Thor said. “Loki would have turned into the dead fish and then, after you had picked up the dead fish to remove it, transformed back into himself and attacked you.”

“Did that… happen before?” Steve asked Thor, surprised. Thor shrugged and went back to playing with his bobblehead doll as Loki continued working on Sigyn’s toenails, focusing all of his concentration on making designs with the gold paint.

“You know,” Tony said to Bruce, Pepper, and Darcy, “those two make me glad to be an only child.”

Loki was not pleased with his wife’s punishment, though he understood her reasons for her anger at him. He was a bit embarrassed himself - not about his theft but about being caught. Loki knew he wouldn’t have be found out were he in possession of his seiðr. Stating that fact hadn’t helped with the joint lecture that Sigyn and Jane had given him about how the objects in the museum belonged to the public so all Midgardians could enjoy them. While the concept of public ownership didn’t really wow Loki, Sigyn pointing out that he wouldn’t like it if someone took his things did seem to ring a bell.

Now, he was finding himself forced to clean up behind the various scientists in the Tower and Loki was pretty certain that they were making bigger messes than usual just to irk him. Jane and Darcy could both be a bit clumsy and, since their work wasn’t easily contaminated by food, left crumbs and spilled or sloshed coffee everywhere. Working long hours without breaks often meant the two women would collapse at random intervals for naps. Jane and Darcy were hard enough to manage without Thor coming in at odd hours to see what Jane was up to. In addition to adding to the spilled drinks and food crumbs, Thor loved nothing more to sigh dreamily as he watched Jane work, creating a large obstacle for Loki to vacuum around. Thor also occasionally broke things and then got shooed out of the lab with a sad look on his face, only to be let back in a few minutes later when Jane saw his sad puppy dog look and felt bad enough to let him back in.

However, the biggest challenge to keeping the lab’s tidy was the man who owned them. Tony was scatterbrained, often getting distracted in the midst of one task to take up another. He often left behind whatever he had been working on to focus on his new task. Apparently, Tony’s quasi-abandoned projects could sit out in the open for months before either they were cleaned up or he returned to them. Tony’s newly rebuilt robots didn’t help matters. They were the least helpful
automatons Loki had ever come across. Yet, despite the fact they barely did what they were designed to do and had been blown to smithereens, Tony rebuilt the bots exactly has he originally had, clumsiness and all. While one bot was usually assigned to filming Tony’s creative process for patents and copyright purposes, the two others were often running amuck. DUM-E loved nothing better than to spray passersby with his fire extinguisher and Butterfingers’ still attempted to toss tools and parts to Tony, despite the fact he wasn’t very well calibrated for direction or speed.

The only person in the private labs that Loki didn’t have to clean up after was Bruce. Unlike the other denizens of the area, Bruce never ate in the lab though he often had tea to drink while he worked. Bruce always tried to leave as little of a mess in the first place and cleaned up after himself whenever he could. Bruce was also the only member of the lab who hadn’t caught anything on fire during Loki’s two-day run as the unofficial lab janitor. Tony had forgotten to turn off a soldering iron and burned a jacket he left draped over the back of the chair, which was how Loki learned Tony had programmed JARVIS to start playing “Burning Down the House” by the Talking Heads if there was an uncontrolled fire in the labs rather than an actual fire alarm people might recognize. Loki had to find a fire extinguisher, learn how to use it and then put out the flames while Tony and his robots just danced to the fire alarm song. Next time, Loki vowed he would let Stark burn alive for his uselessness.

The following day, an attempt Jane made to open a Bifrost-like portal ended up just teleporting some fire from Muspelheim into the labs. Thor had been exceedingly proud of her, even as the flames crept toward him and the Talking Heads sang about burning houses on repeat. Jane had frozen for a moment before going to look for the room’s fire extinguisher, which she thought was in the cabinets next to her. Jane panicked when she couldn’t find the device and as the song seemed to get louder, Darcy and Loki finally located the extinguisher hiding behind a tower of duct table. As Darcy and Loki argued over who should operate extinguisher, the overhead sprinkler system finally turned on, followed by DUM-E arriving in the room in time to douse everything that wasn’t on fire with foam. Tony then walked into the room casually with a cup of coffee and asked if everything was alright. It was at that point Loki stalked out of the room.

While the others attempted to clear up the mess made by the fire and DUM-E, Loki had stomped into Bruce’s lab, brushed the last of the firefighting foam off of his clothing, and then crawled into one of the empty cabinets in the lab, presumably to hide. Bruce heard the cabinet click closed to indicate it was locked. Between Loki’s short temper and the fact he had just heard the Talking Heads on repeat, Bruce decided that maybe now wasn’t the time to be asking Loki what was going on. Two hours later, Loki’s only emergence from inside the cabinet had been when Bruce offered him a cup of freshly brewed green tea. A hand had come out, taken the cup, and a mumbled thanks had come from inside the cabinet once the door was closed. While he knew some people might find it strange that Loki was literally hiding from work and his problems, Bruce knew what it meant to need a cool down period and some space from things. He continued to work as if there wasn’t an Asgardian prince hiding in his lab space. At least until Sigyn came looking for her husband.

“Where is he?” Sigyn demanded of Bruce.

“I think he just needed some quiet time…” Bruce began.

“Quiet time and my husband can be a dangerous combination,” Sigyn pointed out. Bruce sighed. He didn’t want to betray Loki’s trust if he was unwilling to come out of his hiding spot, but at the same time he knew Sigyn was right.

“I’m in here,” Loki’s muffled voice said from inside the cabinet. With a sigh, Sigyn stalked over to the cabinet but she made no move to open it up.
“What are you doing?” Sigyn demanded.

“I am not putting myself at risk of catching aflame again,” Loki said. “Twice in as many days is enough.”

“You say that as if you have never caught our laboratory on fire before,” Sigyn pointed out.

“When I catch my laboratories on fire, I put the flames out,” Loki said, “not stand there and do an awkward dance or freeze until someone else figures things out for me.”

“Awkward dance?” Sigyn frowned.

“Tony has a song play instead of a fire alarm,” Bruce explained. “And he dances when it goes off until he or one of the bots figures out what to do.”

“Does anyone in this building know where the fire extinguishing devices are kept?” Loki huffed from behind the cabinet door.

“I know where mine is,” Bruce said. “But I can suggest to Tony we have a fire safety lesson for everyone using the labs since this has become somewhat of a problem.”

“Well that make you feel better about returning to your duties?” Sigyn asked her husband. There was a long pause before a muffled “no” came from behind the cabinet door. Sigyn let out a sigh of frustration.

“Maybe he’s learned his lesson,” Bruce offered.

“I have,” Loki insisted from within the cabinet. “I will not steal from Midgardian museums.”

“I don’t know,” Sigyn frowned. “You haven’t paid off the amount of money the museum would have been out yet.”

“I’m not leaving this cabinet then,” Loki said. Sigyn sighed, not sure what to do, when Jane popped her head into the lab.

“Hi,” Jane asked nervously, looking between Sigyn and Bruce, “Sigyn, I was wondering if you would help me double check some of these equations and calculations? I had asked Loki to help me with it earlier, but since he’s… disappeared?”

Sigyn kicked the door of the cabinet and Loki came tumbling out onto the floor. He glared at his wife for a bit, annoyed that he had been forced out in such an undignified way. Bruce was even struggling not to giggle at the fact Loki was now sprawled out on his back on the floor of the lab. Sigyn, however, seemed a bit proud of her husband in the moment.

“He’s here if you still want him to help you,” Sigyn said.

“Dearest, lykyng,” Loki insisted, “aren’t you sure you would be better to help Lady Jane with this sort of thing?”

“You’re as good at it as I am,” Sigyn shrugged. “Besides, I have to feed the magpies, Jor and then you, so I have to get upstairs and back to the kitchen.”

“Fine,” Loki groaned, getting himself up off the floor. “But I am entitled to a break if any more fires are set.”

“It was an accident,” Jane said. “And at least I was trying to help put it out unlike some people.”
“Oh, I’m sure,” Loki rolled his eyes, following Jane out of Bruce’s labs and toward her own so they could begin working.

“Seriously,” Bruce said to Sigyn, “you have to catch Tony’s ‘things are on fire and I’ve forgotten what to do’ dance. It provides a weeks’ worth of entertainment in a few minutes.”

“I can play my personal ‘best of’ clips if you would like, Your Highness,” JARVIS intoned from above.

“Perhaps while I cook,” Sigyn smirked.

“Thank you for helping my Lady Jane. And for putting out the blaze she brought into this realm,” Thor said as he walked his little brother to Loki and Sigyn’s chambers for the night.

“Yes, well, tell her to try not to portal any more blazes into her labs,” Loki shrugged. “It’s dangerous.”

“I wish I could reveal more of the secrets of the realms to her,” Thor admitted.

“But seeing as it is treason and Heimdall is always watching…” Loki pointed out.

“I do appreciate that you try to help her where you can,” Thor said. “I am always afraid I will reveal something I shouldn’t. Sometimes I think it is better if Jane does not try to talk to me about such things in case I say something wrong. Or that I am not supposed to share. Though it seems a bit barbaric to me that Asgard must horde this knowledge from realms it seems as lesser.”

“Many realms have mastered the art of travel via the Bifrost and other means, not just Asgard,” Loki pointed out. “Midgard will do so in its own time… perhaps faster if your Lady Jane has anything to do with it. I know it seems wrong to hide our knowledge, but there is a reason. These realms must develop it in their own time to show they are ready for it. Trying to push a realm into new technology before it is ready can have disastrous consequences. Some realms - both ours and Midgard included - still struggle with new things they have developed on their own. Besides, it will mean that much more to them being able to say they were able to develop independently of our aid.”

“I am surprised that you agree with Father about something,” Thor said. “Even more surprised that you agree with him about something I don’t.”

“I am entitled to my own opinions,” Loki huffed, “and if some of… the Allfather’s opinions happen to coincide with mine… Well, I suppose there is a first time for even him to be right.” Thor laughed uproariously at that as the two brothers entered into the elevator together.

“I miss your wit when we are parted, brother,” Thor said to him. “I don’t know of anyone who can turn a phrase as cleverly as you. Even when we were children, you always managed to befuddle our tutors with your words.”

“Yes, well,” Loki said, a bit unused to such open and outward praise from his older brother, “you were always able to best me in feats of physical strength. I suppose I developed my wit so that I could at least beat you in verbal sparring.”

“It did always get under my skin when you used a word I didn’t understand, or a turn of phrase it took me a while to work out,” Thor admitted. “You could be halfway down the hallway before I’d even realized you insulted me.”
“Well, of course. The further away I could get the less chance of you catching up to me,” Loki replied with a roll of his eyes. “Though, I have to admit, had you not been there to antagonize me I doubt very much I would have developed some of the talents I now possess today.”

“I would certainly be less aware of my surroundings without you,” Thor laughed. “And there are definitely a few scrapes I wouldn’t have made it out of.”

“More than a few,” Loki snorted.

“I think Midgard has been good to both of us, brother,” Thor said. “Perhaps we should stay here for a while. I know I have contemplated moving here permanently. It is much more freeing and happier than Asgard.”

“And who would rule Asgard once Odin no longer occupies the throne?” Loki pointed out. “You have duties as crown prince, after all.”

“Perhaps monarchy should no longer be the way of our world,” Thor shrugged. “It might do Asgard and the other realms well to elect their leaders. Midgardian democracies are not perfect, but they are more equitable and more engaging than autocracy.”

“I am torn,” Loki said. “On one hand, I would love to be in the room when you make this suggestion to the Allfather just to see his reaction, but on the other I fear if I were present I would somehow get blamed for your suggestion.”

“The Allfather can see reason when it is presented before him,” Thor argued.

“Tell me,” Loki said, “do you think he will use Gungnir to banish you again for such a suggestion or will he merely use it to hit you with in hopes striking your head will bring you back to your senses?”

“Loki,” Thor rolled his eyes.

“You should make sure Mother is present went you discuss this,” Loki continued. “She has better odds of preventing the Allfather from strangling you in a fit of his own rage than anyone else.”

“Aye, brother, I will,” Thor grinned as the elevator doors opened “Race you to the end of the hall?”

“Fine,” Loki huffed. Thor started off but found himself tripped by his brother as Loki skittered off. “Are you ever going to not fall for that?”
It was the beginning of March when Fury again assembled the Avengers plus Sigyn and Loki to take down a dangerous terrorist cell that had come under notice by several international agencies. The group was dealing with some sort of advanced technologies that seemed to border on magic, and Fury wanted to be proactive, nipping the group in the bud before they used some of the technology they were developing. The mission was simple and straightforward: subdue as many of the terrorists as possible and then get any and all information back to SHIELD labs for processing. Fury had limited information about what sort of technology the group was actually developing, though the Avengers weren’t sure if that was because he didn’t know or he just wasn’t telling them.

When they arrived, the group found there were two main locations in the cell’s underground facility outside Wilmington where most of its technology was being held and developed. It was decided to split up into two teams. Tony, Steve, Thor, and Loki would take one sector while Natasha, Sigyn, and Clint would take another. Bruce would be remaining behind to provide backup support. Loki had not been pleased that he and his wife were being split up, but the fact the some of the items might be magical meant that each team needed someone who might be able to provide insight into magical items. Loki was not happy about this and insisted on having his own comm unit in case he needed to be there for his wife.

Things had gone smoothly at first. It hadn’t taken long to subdue most of the useless henchpeople that populated the facility. Steve threw his shield, Tony blasted them with his gauntlets, and Thor threw his hammer but Loki ended up showing them all my merely using the full force of his Asgardian strength to basically high-five the villains in the forehead, knocking them unconscious. While Steve and Tony looked a bit surprised, Thor merely shrugged off Loki’s attack and said he could do the same thing but fighting with Mjolnir was better to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. As Thor and Loki bickered over who was more fearsome, Tony began downloading whatever information he could and then poking around to see if there was anything SHIELD needed to particularly make note of when they picked it up. Steve finished up tying up all of the knocked out henchpeople and then radioed to Nat to see how she was doing.

The sounds of a fight were all he heard followed by what sounded like a child crying. When Steve radioed again to ask if backup was needed, the fight and crying continued. Steve didn’t have to say anything before Thor, Loki, and Tony were already heading out to the sector where the other team had been sent. When they arrived, the four men were a bit confused by what they saw. Three children were taking on the various villainous lackeys in the hall. One had red hair, a second a little blonde girl and the third a blond, tow-headed boy. The abandoned bow near the boy helped it dawn on Thor, Steve, Loki and Tony that these three children weren’t exactly children at all. One of the items Tony found mentioned in the logs at the facility was a prototype shrink or deaging ray. Tony cursed under his breath.
Apparently, this particular terrorist cell had underestimated the power of Avengers, even while in child-form. By the time the rest of the group arrived, the toddler Natasha had subdued three of the four original attackers sent to grab them and was now taking on the six additional men who had been called out as backup. She had already subdued half of the six new attackers as well. Little Clint, whose initial reaction to being de-aged had been to fall on his butt and cry, had gotten over his initial shock and was now tying the shoelaces of the agents Natasha had knocked out to a drain pipe so they wouldn’t be able to escape upon waking up. The fourth of the original attackers was trying to kick Little Sigyn off of him, as she had bitten down onto his leg and refused to let go. A quick knock the head from a flying Mjolnir left the attacker unconscious. Her prey no longer fighting, Sigyn let go of his leg, let out a dwarven battle cry and then launched herself into one of the three men Natasha was taking on, biting the new man’s leg in the same fashion.

Loki couldn’t help but sigh. Idunn had once told him Sigyn had been a terrible biter as a toddler. She had bitten each one of her siblings and her father multiple times as well as each one of her aunts, uncles, and cousins. Even a few visitors to Ivaldi’s forge who had displeased tiny Sigyn had found themselves at the receiving end of her teeth. Apparently, in her de-aged state, she had resorted to this manner of defense and, just like Idunn had said, she was not only a deep biter but a tenacious one as well. She had bit down straight through the Kevlar of her attackers and into their flesh, leaving bloody bite marks in her wake. Cap and Thor took down the last of the attackers, only to be met with a glare from a Little Natasha - who apparently did not like sharing her decimation of hired goons.

“What in the fuck is going on here?” Tony shouted, arriving on the scene and taking off his face mask.

“Loki!” Little Sigyn grinned, the sound of Tony’s voice changing her focus from the goons on the ground to the four men standing behind her. “Loki! Loki! Loki!” She ran up toward him with outstretched hands, and Loki had no choice but to pick up his tiny wife. Sigyn instantly cuddled up to his chest.

“You can’t use that kind of language in front of kids!” Steve lectured Tony.

“Why the fuck not?” Tony grumbled.

“Fuck!” Little Clint grinned happily. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

“See?” Steve grumbled.

“Why are they children?” Thor demanded to know. “What has happened?”

“There is some sort of ray gun in the files,” Tony groaned. “They called it a shrinking ray, but I’m not sure that’s what it really does.”

“Bad man shoot at us,” Little Sigyn agreed, speaking in the Dwarven accent she had before having lived in Asgard for a few years. “But we bwoke ‘is machine.” Loki bit his lip to stop himself from laughing. He had forgotten how hilariously adorable his wife had sounded as a young child with both a Dwarven accent and lisp.

“Great,” Tony sighed. “I guess if we can find what’s left maybe Bruce and I can reverse engineer the thing to…”

“Do what?” Steve asked. “I don’t know if that’ll help us figure out how to… grow them up…”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Clint chanted.

“Jeez, he’s got a worse potty mouth as a kid than he has an adult,” Tony grimaced.
“Compatriots, we must take the children to safety before more attackers come,” Thor announced. Little Natasha glared up at the four men before her, as if daring them to corral her somewhere she didn’t want to go.

“Come Sigyn,” Loki said to her gently. “We shall take you to the ship.”

“A ship? Yay!” Little Sigyn cheered before she began singing some Vanir children’s song about ships in a row.

“Natasha, do you know where the ray gun is?” Steve asked, crouching down to her level. “We need it to help you.”

“Aye,” Thor nodded at the little girl, who seemed debating whether or not to trust the men before her. “Where did it fall?” Little Natasha nodded once and then walked back down the hall, Steve following at her heels.

“This is not good,” Tony groaned.

“I shall away to Asgard to inform them of to these happenings. Perhaps there is a solution to these effects,” Thor announced. “You must take the Tiny Barton back to the ship.”

“Why me?” Tony demanded to know. His only answer was Thor’s hammer twirling and then the blonde Asgardian shooting up through the Bifrost.

“Fuck!” Clint shouted happily.

“You’re telling me, kid,” Tony sighed before taking Clint’s hand and following behind Loki.

After Bruce and Tony argued about the fact the quinjet didn’t have car seats and the proper protocol for dealing with children in the quinjet, Clint and Natasha were strapped into regular seats with various medical texts and instruction manuals used as makeshift booster seats. Sigyn stayed with Loki, refusing to leave his lap, as they flew back. Tony wasn’t happy that Thor had just departed with no warning and Steve wasn’t happy that Tony wasn’t ceasing his foul language around Clint, who absorbed every bad word like a little sponge. Bruce was looking green around the gills and the second the quinjet landed back at the Tower, he rushed down to the Hulk containment cell to calm himself down. With Bruce locked up, Steve and Tony found themselves trying to figure out what to do as Loki minded the children.

When Bruce was calm enough to deal with the situation, JARVIS beamed his image from the containment cell on a screen. As Steve gave Fury an update into the situation, Tony called Rhodey - the only person he could think of who had direct dealings with small children. Rhodey might also have some ideas about how to deal with whatever technology had turned some of his more competent comrades into children. Loki had made the kids a bit of a pillow fort around the communal living room area in the hopes of entertaining them, but all three of them seemed to have short attention spans. Little Natasha was the worst, climbing up on everything and then trying to jump off.

“Natasha,” Steve cautioned her. “Don’t do that. You’re going to get hurt.” Little Natasha glowered at Steve and then whispered something in Little Sigyn’s ears.

“She says ‘ew name is Natalia,” Little Sigyn informed Steve. Trying not to sigh in exasperation, Steve knelt down on Little Natalia’s level.

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“She says ‘ew name is Natalia,” Little Sigyn informed Steve. Trying not to sigh in exasperation, Steve knelt down on Little Natalia’s level.
“Natalia, please stop climbing on things,” Steve said. Natasha grimaced at him and didn’t respond.

“How is that look scarier coming from a kid?” Tony groaned. “And where did your brother go, Snakes McGee?” Loki opened his mouth to answer only for a flash to come down from the Bifrost and Thor to rush into the room from the launch pad outside. It was a small wonder Thor hadn’t just crashed through a window, which seemed to be his normal mode of entrance.

“Hey, Thor, how was Asgard,” Tony grumbled. “Mind giving me a warning next time before you haul ass to your homeworld and abandon me with an infant?”

“You said ‘ass’,” Little Clint giggled at Tony, earning Tony another pointed glare from Steve.

“I’ll make a swear jar,” Tony rolled his eyes.

“Better make two,” Rhodey suggested.

“What news have you?” Loki asked Thor, concerned.

“It does not seem to be any known magic,” Thor said. “Mother is hastily researching aging spells and potions, but she believes that if we use such measures and these changes were not the force of magic, there may be dangerous and irreparable results. She fears that, as this change was Midgardian in nature, the solution must be Midgardian in nature as well.”


“You may insult Thor, but you will not insult my mother’s attempts to aid us,” Loki said to Tony threateningly.

“You dare question the abilities of the Allmother?” Thor said menacingly.

“No, I’m just… I’m not good with kids, okay?” Tony said, edging away from where Little Clint and Little Sigyn seemed to be playing some sort of game of tag. Little Natalia had managed to climb to the very top of a very expensive glass display case and was watching the goings-on in the room like the little spy she was.

“Your mother’s advice was very helpful,” Steve insisted. “We know where to start now.”


“Is there something you need, dearest?” Loki asked her, worriedly. Little Sigyn grinned, did a fancy little twirl and then proceeded to return to chasing Little Clint around the room.

“So, we have to count on reverse-engineering this de-aging ray in order to hopefully figure out how to re-age them,” Bruce sighed from the video screen.

“I think there are some other questions we need to answer before we start re-aging anyone,” Rhodey pointed out from the other half of the screen. “Were they de-aged together or separately? If it was separate, was the same setting used on them? And they are all different ages. What if by re-aging them to the point when Clint is in his thirties we bring Natasha’s age up a decade and Sigyn… what does an Asgardian look like at thirty-something?”

“Still a small child,” Loki frowned. “And she is half-dwarven, half-Vanir.”

“Now everyone sees why a magic solution to this would have been easier?” Tony groaned.
“Easier, but it’s not what will work,” Rhodey pointed out.


“Yes, dear heart?” Loki asked patiently. Little Sigyn was quiet for a moment and then giggled.

“‘ello!” she giggled before running off and around the room. Rather than annoyed, Loki seemed to watch his miniature wife with some affection before turning his attention back to the other adults.

“Look, I don’t care if this was magic or some kind of age ray or what,” Tony grimaced. “There has got to be a way to reverse it. And we need to figure it out soon, because the Tower isn’t childproofed.”

“I have actually been working on some childproofing protocols and actions,” JARVIS announced.

“For who?” Tony asked.

“Miss Potts suggested some ‘child-proofing measures’ be installed after you attempted to fly sans suit following that Red Bull and vodka incident last year,” JARVIS intoned.

“Don’t ask,” Tony said to the questioning glares he received from his fellow adults as Rhodey sighed.


“I see you, dear,” Loki smiled indulgently.

“Where are they going to sleep? What are they going to eat?” Tony said in a panic.

“We should probably keep them together somewhere,” Steve said knowledgeably. “They’re old enough to sleep in adult beds.” Tony looked at him, surprised. “Bucky had a younger sister and older kids in our neighborhood always had to look after the younger ones.”

“And don’t worry about what they eat,” Rhodey nodded over the conference call. “They’ll let you know.”

“Rhodes, you need to get up here,” Tony said. “You at least have experience with your nieces and nephews. Hill and Fury are tangled up in the cleanup, Banner has locked himself in his rooms because he’s afraid he’ll Hulk out and crush them…”

“It’s a legitimate concern!” Bruce defended himself from the other half of the conference call screen.

“...Pepper’s in Rome for the rest of the week, Darcy and Jane are at the conference out in California, and the only experience Capsicle has with kids is literally older than the vaccine for polio,” Tony groaned. “And I am the least child-friendly person anyone has ever met. I think I get it from old Howard.”

“What about your Asgardian friends?” Rhodey mentioned. “They seem to be doing alright with the kids.” Tony looked over to see Thor and Loki making faces with Little Clint and Little Sigyn.

“Yeah,” Tony rolled his eyes. “That’ll go over well. Loki’s experience with kids is that they can be bribed with sugar, and Thor doesn’t know his own strength.”

“Fine,” Rhodey sighed. “I’ll see if I can rearrange some stuff and come help you babysit.”
“Thanks,” Tony sighed. “Now, JARVIS, see if you can pull up anything on...


“SHUT UP!” Tony yelled at Little Sigyn and Little Clint, both of whom instantly shut up and looked up at the man before her in sheer terror. The room was quiet for a moment and then Little Clint and Little Sigyn both burst out into tears, Little Clint losing his balance and falling on his butt. Little Natalia seemed confused but a bit apprehensive as well, jumping down from the teetering class display case onto a sofa and into a fighting pose.

“You cannot yell at them thusly!” Loki said crossly, picking up Little Sigyn to calm her. Little Clint rushed and grabbed one of Loki’s legs for comfort and, with a sigh, Loki patted the boy atop his head.

“Why? They’re being annoying little shits!” Tony snorted.

“Clint’s dad was abusive, so he probably remembers that from his childhood,” Steve pointed out. “And I don’t want to think what Natasha experienced in the Red Room.”

“And Sigyn was always very sensitive,” Thor nodded.

“Fine,” Tony grumbled. “I’ll stay out of everyone’s way and try to fix this. Let the Child Whisperer over there deal with it!” With Tony gone, the children stopped crying and then looked at Loki expectantly.

“Alright,” Loki sighed. “I’ll fetch some of the fairy story books from the library. That should provide some entertainment for a while. The rest of you should probably focus on finding some child-friendly activities. Toys and the like. I doubt very much anything Stark has in his laboratory is child appropriate.”

Rhodey had arrived later that evening and dumped off some toys he had purchased with Tony’s credit card before he headed straight into the lab to work with Tony on reverse engineering the ray gun. It had been determined that helping with Tony’s anxiety over having super-powered toddlers in his Tower was more essential than actually babysitting the kids themselves. For now, reverse engineering the gun and specs they had found seemed to be the only thing keeping Tony sane. While the information downloaded from the cell had information on how to properly assemble the gun, it apparently not been tested before it was used and so there was no information on what it did or how to reverse the process. It was Tony’s impression the group seemed to think the ray would shrink people instead of reverse their ages. Bruce joined them in the lab, still too terrified to go around the children. Steve had been left to manage Loki and Thor as the pair of them managed the child-sized Natalia, Clint, and Sigyn.

Yet twenty-four hour passed with no breakthroughs. Tony had broken down and contacted Jane who was trying to help out during her breaks in her conference, though Tony felt a bit bad that he had to interrupt Jane’s conference for her help. Even so, nothing new had happened in thirty-six hours since the attack. There had been some hope that maybe the kids would reage on their own or after being given a bath, but by this point it was starting to seem like the group had to figure out how to get them back to their proper ages on their own. Tony hadn’t slept and had barely eaten in that
time, so when he fell asleep at his workspace, Rhodey and Bruce had woken him up and forced him to take a minimum of a two-hour nap followed by a meal. Nap complete, Tony headed toward the communal kitchen to get himself something to eat before heading back down to the labs.

The last thing Tony expected to see as he stumbled into the communal kitchen at three in the afternoon following a thirty-six hour science binge was Loki making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with three toddlers. All three of the miniaturized adults were sitting on the counters while Loki stood before the counter, letting the children choose what ingredients for their sandwiches. Little Clint preferred Nutella and grape jelly while Little Natalia was fine with just peanut butter. Little Sigyn wanted jelly on both sides of her bread. Loki himself seemed partial to peanut butter, nutella and strawberry jam. Tony was almost sure this was a weird dream if it hadn’t been for what happened next.

Aimlessly wandering toward the kitchen in his underfed, sleep-deprived state, Tony knocked into a chair and stubbed his toe. He let out a blue streak of curse words, instantly drawing the attention of Loki and his miniature minions. Next thing Tony knew, Little Clint and Little Sigyn were screaming and crying about his presence as Loki tried to calm them down. Before Tony could offer any words of sympathy himself, he heard a whiz and the sound of fabric scratching. Somehow, a steak knife had landed in the chair just centimeters below Tony’s crotch area. He looked up, mouth gaping, to find a perfectly poised and slightly annoyed Little Natalia, standing on the counter.

“Natalia, we’ve talked about this,” Loki said gently. “No utilizing weaponry and you are not allowed in the knife drawer. Please hand the rest over.” With a huff, Little Natalia showed Loki all of the knives she had hidden around the kitchen counter. At least Little Clint and Little Sigyn had ceased their sobbing long enough to gaze in wonder at the sharp objects Little Natalia had managed to secret away.

“Loki,” Little Sigyn said with the best pout she could muster, “make the scawy ‘alf-beawd man go away.”

“Half-beard?” Tony said, in disbelief.

“Well, it isn’t a full one, now is it?” Loki pointed out.

“It’s a goatee!” Tony protested.

“It’s disturbing the children, that’s what it is,” Loki snorted. Little Clint and Little Sigyn nodded as if in confirmation.

“Ugh, fine,” Tony grumbled. “I’ll just go get something to eat in the employee cafeteria.”

By the time forty-eight hour had passed since Clint, Natalia, and Sigyn had been de-aged, Tony was at the end of his rope. Bruce had to take a trip back to the containment cell after his frustration nearly set him off and Rhodey had taken a break to help Steve manage the delivery of the children’s toys that had been delivered to the Tower to entertain the pint-sized miscreants after Loki and Thor had to pull the three of them out of the vents. The fact that Little Sigyn was still in possession of her seiðr didn’t help, especially when she briefly brought her stuffed unicorn toy to life. At least her childlike seiðr wasn’t as long lasting as the adult version. Tony decided it was time to call the big guns in. However, Thor insisted he knew nothing about this sort of technology not having studied it nor could he determine anything magical that might help.

That left Loki.

And with Bruce threatening to burst into a green goliath at any minute, Tony frazzled and sleep
deprived and Rhodey tasked with making sure that neither Bruce nor Tony hurt themselves or anyone else, Steve was left with the task of fetching Loki down to the labs. However, the task wasn’t as simple as Steve initially thought. When he arrived at Thor’s chambers - which had been turned into a makeshift playroom for the tots - he found a team of Thor and Loki attempting to build up towers with various mega blocks before the “giant monsters” in the form of Sigyn, Clint and occasionally Natalia could tear them down. The grave look on Steve’s face when he came into the room indicated to both Thor and Loki something was amiss.

“Can we help you, friend Steven?” Thor asked hopefully.

“Thor, how about take the kids into the other room?” Steve suggested before turning to Loki. “Tony was hoping you might help with the reverse engineering process since this is unlike any technology they’ve seen. Thor can look after them while you’re down in the lab.”

“There might be a problem,” Loki winced.

“I’m nay goin’ in thewa!” Little Sigyn shrieked at Thor before rushing toward Loki and grabbing hold of his legs.

“Sigyn has developed a bit of an attachment issue,” Loki explained.

“We can’t take her into the labs. Could be dangerous,” Steve frowned. “I wouldn’t want her to get hurt.”

“Often times there is barely any reasoning with her as an adult,” Loki pointed out. “I’m afraid there is absolutely none with her in this state.” Steve thought he might try, crouching down to face the little girl.

“Hey, Sigyn,” Steve said. “I need to borrow our friend Loki for a pinch. But I promise, I’ll have him back to you in one piece before you even realize he’s gone.”

“No!” Little Sigyn chanted. “No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! NO!”

“Come now, sweetheart,” Loki said to the little girl before him. “Don’t you wish to play with your friends?”

“MY LOKI!” Little Sigyn screeched, grabbing onto him even tighter than before.

“Sigyn,” Steve said gently. “That’s not very nice. Loki has work to do, and I’m sure you can share him with us for a little bit.” Little Sigyn looked at Steve angrily and then, before the adults in the room could process what had happened, launched herself at Steve, karate kicking him in the thigh and proceeding to pummel any part of his legs she could reach.

“Sigyn! Sigyn!” Loki said, trying to scoop her away from Steve, who was trying his best to shake her off without kicking her. “Stop! That’s not nice!”

“LOKI IS MINE!” Little Sigyn chanted at Steve before letting forth some kind of dwarven battle cry and sinking her teeth down onto the side of his leg, scratching whatever she could get ahold of with her tiny fingernails. Steve realized quickly that even as a child, Sigyn had decent odds of overpowering him - though the fact she didn’t reach up past his knee caps was a bit of a hindrance for her.

“Thor! Quit laughing and help!” Loki shouted at his brother, trying to pry Little Sigyn’s jaw from Steve’s leg. Thor, however, was too busy laughing to be much help to anyone.
“She’s definitely broken the skin,” Steve groaned. Loki managed to pull Little Sigyn away to reveal, surely enough, she had bitten straight down through the fabric of his pants and broken the skin, leaving a bleeding outline of her teeth in his leg. She then began spitting something out once removed.

“Ye leg is ‘aiwy!” Little Sigyn informed Steve angrily, as if the leg hair in her mouth was somehow his fault.

“Sigyn, we do not hit and we do not bite, even when we are cross,” Loki lectured her sternly. “Furthermore, you are a princess and above such behavior. Apologize to Captain Rogers.”

“But I’m nay sowwy!” Little Sigyn pouted.

“Sigyn,” Loki said pointedly. Little Sigyn frowned, crossed her arms and then looked at Steve.

“I’m sowwy I bit ye big ugly ‘aiwy leg,” Little Sigyn grimaced.

“Sigyn,” Loki chastised.

“It’s okay,” Steve wheezed as he got up before looking at Loki. “Believe me, I think that’s the best apology I’m going to get. It’s the kind I would have given at that age, anyway.” Sigyn seemed oddly proud of herself at this statement.

“I do apologize,” Loki sighed. “I would say I don’t know what’s gotten into her, but it’s very obviously being so little and not knowing how to deal with things in an adult manner.”

“All mine!” Sigyn screeched before wrapping tiny arms around Loki’s neck as best she could, accentuating his point.

“Well, I guess she can come with you,” Steve sighed. “It might be better to just leave two kids with Thor rather than three.” Thor was presently laying on the ground where he had fallen down laughing, Little Clint and Little Natalia standing on either side of him in curiosity. Little Natalia kicked his side as if checking to see he was still alive, causing Thor to wheeze and then continue laughing.

“I suppose we can ask JARVIS to make sure no one gets bound, gagged and locked in a closet,” Loki shrugged.

“You think Thor would do that to kids?” Steve said, surprised.

“I’d be more worried the children would do that to him,” Loki snorted.

Five minutes later, Steve and Loki entered the labs with Little Sigyn still clinging fiercely to her adult husband. She had given Steve angry glares the entire elevator ride down. When he had adjusted his weight from one foot to another, making him shuffle a bit closer to Loki, Sigyn began chomping her teeth at Steve as if it was some kind of warning. Steve expected Sigyn to attack the others in the lab once Loki sat her down on the floor. But instead, Sigyn had begun poking around Tony’s equipment curiously. While everyone else seemed to find it adorable, Sigyn’s curiosity was testing Tony’s patience, and the fact that Tony’s patience was wearing thin was testing Bruce’s patience.

“Hey! Get her down from there!” Tony ordered as Little Sigyn maneuvered her way around the room, pulling herself up on stools and inspecting various pieces of machinery. Loki picked her up from a countertop and placed her back down on the floor. “Seriously, this is no place for kids,” Tony said to Loki.
“Sigyn was often in her father’s forge and workshop before she could walk or talk,” Loki pointed out. “I would dare say she’s less of a danger than you.”

“Oh, what’s she doing now?” Tony groaned.

Loki looked over to find Little Sigyn had climbed up a chair to look at a giant whiteboard where Tony had been working out an algorithm for the past four months. Little Sigyn looked at the equation for a moment then reached up, erased a number and then used the felt-tipped pen to write another in its place. Little Sigyn then nodded to herself happily before turning around to Loki with a bit, triumphant grin on her face.

“What the…” Tony began. “She messed it up!”

“Hold on,” Rhodey cautioned Tony. He walked over to the whiteboard, examined it and then turned back to Tony with a grin. “She fixed it!”

“What?” Tony groaned, going over. He read the whiteboard once, twice and then a third time before Little Sigyn giggled at him. He looked down at her, not impressed.

“Good job, dearest,” Loki said to Little Sigyn affectionately.

“I am not letting a toddler upstage me in my own lab!” Tony said angrily. “Why did you bring her down here?”

“Goat-faced man is mean,” Little Sigyn informed Loki.

“Well, perhaps you would have more fun with Thor and the other children,” Loki suggested.

“I am not goat-faced,” Tony argued with Little Sigyn.


“I like you better when you’re bigger,” Tony informed her. “Little you is mean.”

“least I’m nay ugly,” Sigyn hissed back.

“Sigyn,” Loki cautioned her before turning to Tony. “I apologize. Apparently politeness was something Sigyn learned when she was older. Then again, dwarves can be a brusque bunch and she would have had to develop a keen wit to deal with her myriad of sisters. Though I doubt your attempts to insult her make her feel kinder and more comfortable in your presence.”

“Yeah, well, insults hurt big people feelings just as much as little people feelings,” Tony said.

“Now, Sigyn,” Loki cautioned the tiny girl before him. “I am going to have to work, and so I will not be able to cater to your every whim.”

“But…” Sigyn said, seeming to make her eyes go impossibly big as she pouted.

“And you cannot disturb me while I am working,” Loki warned her. “It’s to make you grown up again, you see. Don’t you want that?”

“I guess,” Sigyn huffed, “but that’s bowing.”

“Then maybe you’d be happier with Thor and your friends,” Loki suggested.

“Fine,” Sigyn huffed before disappearing into thin air.
“What was…” Tony gawped.

“She still remembers teleporting magic, apparently,” Loki shrugged. “So, let’s get to work, shall we?”

While Loki found he immensely enjoyed working with Tony, Bruce and Rhodey in the labs - as long as Tony wasn’t being too obnoxious - the stress and pressure of the particular assignment didn’t make things easier. Loki had wanted to make those who had attempted to harm his wife severely pay as well as reverse whatever damage had been done. Certainly, Sigyn was adorable as a small child but he much preferred his adult wife to the miniature person he was having to deal with. Perhaps he wouldn’t mind a child of his and Sigyn’s own creation, even if said child were to behave like the little girl that was a shadow of his wife’s former self. But there was one thing in raising one’s child and a very different thing in the prospect that one might have to raise their spouse if certain actions couldn’t be reversed. Loki shuddered at the mere thought of what might be said about him if it were known he was currently married to what was basically a toddler. It had been one thing to be children at the same time, but now the age gap was terrible creepy. And while Sigyn was cute in her current state, he missed getting to have adult conversations with his grown wife. Among other things.

Tired from his day’s exertion, Loki had contributed all he could to the process. Rhodey had suggested Loki return to help Thor with the kids rather than stay around the lab and fret that Sigyn might have to age normally. Loki paused in the doorway, listening to his brother tell the small children tales Frigga had told them as boys. Thor wasn’t perhaps the best storyteller but his ability to exaggerate and passion in acting out the scenes certainly kept the attention of the three miniature people before him. This particular tale was one of Frigga’s favorite little moral fables to tell them called the Three Dwarves and the Dragon.

“So, the first dwarf, who wanted to play and sing and dance at the meadhall, constructed his hall out of straw and sod. He made it quickly and without care so he could go to the meadhall right away,” Thor said. “The second dwarf was not as lazy as his brother, but he also wanted to play and sing and dance at the meadhall. He built himself a house out of wood and though he did not finish it as quickly as the first dwarf, he finished it much earlier than the third dwarf.”

“Dwawves live undegwound,” Little Sigyn frowned, not sure where Thor was going with this story.

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “Which is why the third dwarf spent a great deal of time crafting his home from stone into the side of the mountain. While his brothers quickly finished their work so they could play and dance and sing at the meadhall, the third dwarf knew his home had to be good and sturdy and thus required hard work. Despite his brothers’ teasing, he constructed a fine, strong home from stone - even though he also would have rather been at the meadhall. However, he was dedicated to his craft and making sure his work was something to be proud of. He made sure his home was not only strong but beautiful, a place he could be proud of for years to come.”

“When’s the dragon coming?” Little Clint groaned.

“Well, it just so happened that the dragon is attacking the meadhall, which he burnt to a crisp,” Thor informed him. “All the dwarves fled back to their homes. The first dwarf fled back to his house of sod and straw, but the dragon quickly burned it too, giving the dwarf hardly any time to escape. He then ran to his brother’s house of wood and the two of them hid within it, hoping the dragon would not come. But the dragon did come, and the wood house burned just like the one of straw. The two dwarves then raced to their older brother’s house made of stone. The third dwarf was just putting the finishing touches on his dwelling with his brother’s arrived, telling him a dragon was coming.”
“Did he lock ‘em out?” Little Clint asked. “He shoulda locked ‘em out. Dragon food!”

“He was a kind brother,” Thor shook his head, “and let his brothers in. The three dwarves then waited, and certainly enough, the dragon came. But no matter how much fire the dragon blew, the house stayed still. Finally, when the dragon seemed he could blow no more, the three dwarven brothers emerged from the house with a spear and….” Thor looked up to see Loki frantically making a throat slashing motion. Thor frowned. Frigga had always spiced up the story for her sons by ending it with the three dwarves killing the dragon and then putting its head on a pike, but Thor realized his tiny audience might not be prepared for that.

“An’ then what?” Little Sigyn prompted.

“And then the dragon just keeled over from exhaustion and never bothered the lands again,” Thor said. “And the dwarf who built his house from stone taught his brothers and then the other dwarven villagers how to make their homes sturdy and from stone. And thus, when all worked together and took pride in their craftsmanship, they all had sturdy homes. Now, what do you think of that?”

“Дракон - символ господствующих классов, а дварфы - рабочий класс,” Little Natasha announced. “Пролетариат должен работать вместе, чтобы уничтожить диктатуру буржуазии.”

“Um, well, I suppose that is one way to...uh…” Thor frowned, confused.

“I liked the part where the dragon dies,” Little Clint said.

“Loki!” Little Sigyn shrieked, noticing him and running to him as fast as she could. Loki removed Little Sigyn from where she grabbed hold of his legs and picked her up, carrying her back over to where Thor and the others were.

“Well?” Thor asked Loki hopefully.

“Some minor breakthroughs, but nothing definite yet,” Loki sighed. “It might take longer than even previously expected.”

“It will work out, Brother,” Thor insisted. “I’m sure if it comes we can seek help elsewhere. Alfheim maybe. If anywhere, they might be able to help with a solution.”

“I suppose,” Loki said.

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It would be another twenty-four hours before the reverse engineering process was complete and Tony figured out a way to bring his friends back to their rightful ages. A bit of information Hill had garnered from interrogating the surviving scientists paired with a suggestion from Rhodey finally gave Tony the breakthrough he needed on the reverse engineering process, and after that it only took about half a day to get everything in order. Pleased with his progress, Tony headed up to Thor’s room to inform Loki and their childlike friends that everything was ready to go. Of course. Steve and Rhodey had gone with him, Bruce preferring to stay in the lab to make a few last minute calibrations and adjustments.

“We’ve cracked it!” Tony burst into the room excitedly.

Tony paused as Rhodey and Steve laughed from where they were standing behind him. Little Sigyn was sitting on Loki’s shoulders, holding onto his head while Little Clint and Little Natalia were clinging to opposite legs. Loki was tramping about the room, moaning about how mysteriously heavy he felt as the kids giggled. Thor was asleep on the floor, surrounded by half-eaten cookies and
juice boxes. It was hard to tell if the juice boxes and cookies had been left behind by the children or Thor himself.

“Um… is everything okay in here?” Tony asked worriedly. Loki stopped and turned around, the three children still clinging to him. Thor let out a snore so loud he woke himself up and, startled, jumped into a fighting pose.

“What news?” Thor asked Tony, calming down a bit.

“We’ve figured it out,” Tony said. “Rhodey and I have tested it with a plant and then a pair of lab rats. Don’t worry. The fern and both Alfrat Nobel and Alan Turat survived and are back to their normal ages.”

“Why do you always name the lab rats,” Rhodey groaned.

“So you think it is safe for use?” Loki asked.

“I’d volunteer to undergo it myself,” Tony said, “but I really doubt you could get younger me to stand still long enough to age me back up.”

“I will do it if it makes you confident in its abilities,” Thor volunteered.

“Alright,” Loki said. “A test if you will to prove it is safe for Sigyn’s… and I suppose the other’s use.”

The group began trekking down to the labs, all three children still clinging to Loki who transported them without bringing a sweat. Little Sigyn and Little Clint seemed to shiver at the sight of the ray gun Tony, Rhodey and Bruce had reverse engineered based on the plans and what information they had been given. Little Natalia just looked at it in disgust. Bruce was nervous about the crowd and backed into a corner of the room, still watching the machine and using a StarkPad to keep his eyes on some data. Thor dutifully went to stand in the allotted spot, Rhodey and Steve on either side in case there was trouble.

“So, is there anything we need to know about Thor being a kid before we do this?” Tony asked. “Like, did he have a hard time controlling his lightning powers or was he afraid of something totally innocuous?”

“I was a good child!” Thor thundered back.

“He did have a bit of a temper,” Loki snorted.

“Come Stark!” Thor ordered. “Perform the change!”

“I’m guessing he was a bit bossy as a kid, too,” Tony rolled his eyes.

“Stark!” Thor said.

“And impatient as well,” Loki nodded.

“Alright, Thor. We’re going to light ‘er up!” Tony said.

With some input from Bruce on the final calibrations, Tony blasted out an energy beam from his makeshift gun. Suddenly, Thor shrank down to when he and Loki had been rather small - a bit older than whatever age Natasha, Clint and Sigyn were currently at - but not quite school age. Little Thor’s clothing had somehow shrunk with him - just as Sigyn, Clint and Natasha’s had - making Tony even
more confused about how his new creation actually worked. The one thing that hadn’t shrunk was Thor was now sitting next to him. With a cry of joy, Little Thor picked up Mjolnir and hoisted it over his head.

“Look Loki!” Little Thor said excitedly. “I lift a hammer! Catch!”

“Change him back! Change him back! Change him back!” Loki shrieked as Little Thor moved to throw the hammer at his for once bigger brother. Tony hit the button just before Thor let the hammer slip from his hand. When the ray finished, Thor was back to his normal self and quickly recalled the hammer as it began to slip from his grasp.

“So, it works,” Steve said, relieved.

“Aye,” Thor said happily. “And I lifted Mjolnir as a youth!”

“Technically,” Loki rolled his eyes.

Alright, so which kid is going first?” Tony asked the three still miniature people before him. Little Clint and Little Sigyn looked at each other before Little Natalia whispered something in Little Sigyn’s ear.

“Natalia says she will go,” Sigyn repeated. “She says Widows do not feaw.”

As uncomfortable as that statement made the rest of the adults in the room, none of them bothered to stop Little Natalia as she stood in front of the same spot Thor had just vacated. A brave grimace on her face, Little Natalia looked straight at the weapon about to be fired at her. In fact, Tony was more nervous about firing the thing at her than she seemed to be about being shot full of rays that no one exactly understood. In a flash of light, she was back to her normal self. Only then did Natasha sigh and relax her shoulders as if she had been holding the stress in.

“You okay?” Steve asked her.

“Yeah, just remind me to never do that again,” Natasha said.

“You were a quiet kid,” Tony said.

“No,” Natasha shook her head. “The thing reverted me back to before I learned English. For some reason I could only understand Loki, Thor, and Sigyn - even when they were speaking English to you guys.”

“Allspeak is a wonderous thing,” Thor pronounced.

“After we’re all back to normal I think I need a debrief and then I need to tell you guys some information… if you haven’t figured it out already,” Natasha said. “And then I might have to clear out all the little weapons caches Little Me made.”

“Terrifying,” Tony said. “Okay, who’s next?”

“Clint,” Loki offered. “He’s doing his bathroom dance and I really am tired of helping him.”

“Barton must have developed his sense of aim later in life,” Thor agreed.

“Alright, Clint,” Steve said to the tot. “You ready?” Clint nodded, his eyes filled with tears and he stepped in front of the gun. Clint closed his eyes as the gun went off and when the lights stopped flashing, opened them again, this time in panic.
“Shit! Gotta pee!” Clint hissed before rushing out of the room.

“Alright, Sigyn dear,” Loki said, crouching down in front of his tiny wife. “It’s your turn.”

A bit nervous, Sigyn managed to give a regal nod and then step forward in front of the gun. Like Natasha, she put on a brave face, though it was Loki this time who couldn’t bear to watch, averting his eyes until the last of the flashing lights had disappeared. Before he could turn his head to make sure that his wife was back safe and sound, he felt Sigyn’s arms enveloping him and her hot breath against his neck as she laughed.

“I’m fine, silly,” Sigyn assured him with a brilliant grin. “Now, what have I missed?”

Chapter End Notes

What Natasha says following Thor’s story: The dragon is the symbol of the ruling classes, and the dwarves are the working class. The proletariat must work together to destroy the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.
Paddy’s Day

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, not everyone loves a parade*

Loki truly loved his wife, but he admitted there were some things she did that rattled his nerves. Other than maybe Thor, Sigyn knew how to tick him off better than anyone else in the universe. When they were children, he had been furious every time she haughtily corrected him during their lessons, though he had to admit he was just as snooty any time he corrected her. Eventually, they had both realized their independent desires to be the smartest one in the classroom was less about trying to impress their tutors and more about trying to impress one another. Nowadays, Sigyn was more likely to correct him with kisses than sharp barbs from her tongue, but when she did use her wicked wit Loki was more likely to find himself turned on instead of angered and humiliated. Still, there were some things about his wife annoyed Loki to no end.

He abhorred the way she sometimes clicked her tongue at him until he agreed to apologize to someone for something he’d done - even if it was justly deserved. More than once he had found himself at his wits end with her habit of forgetting to write potions ingredients on the shopping list after she’d used the last of them up, leaving Loki unable to finish a product because they were out of a needed ingredient. He never understood how she could manage to be so chipper early in the mornings when they were forced to be present for royal duties. Loki would find himself nearly falling asleep while his wife flitted around like a hummingbird with energy to spare. But the thing about his wife that annoyed Loki the most was when she teamed up with his brother to get him to do something he absolutely didn’t want to do.

And it seemed that both of them were keen on participating in the upcoming festival of some minor Midgardian religious figure.

To be fair, the Asgardians had gotten a mixed view of St. Patrick. Tony’s view of the day was that everyone got to pretend to be Irish and get drunk, leading to green barf and waste all around the city. There was also an aspect about pinching people for not wearing the saint’s traditional colors. Thor seemed eager for such a festival, but upon further questioning, Sigyn discovered that Tony might not be the ultimate authority on the day. Tony was, after all, the scion of Italian and Germanic/Polish/Ashkenazi heritage. And while his mother had been Catholic, he hadn’t been raised with any real sense of religion. In fact, the only trivia fact Tony knew about the real Saint Patrick was that the guy was the patron saint of engineers.

Steve, the son of actual Irish immigrants, was affronted the day had just become a drinking festival and instead insisted he would be coming to the city to do what real Irish people did on the day - namely go to church and feel guilty then go home and eat a nice meal with one’s family. Mainly, Steve said “Paddy’s Day” was a time for the folks at Tammany Hall to show how powerful the Irish vote could be and for his mother to lecture him about Irish heritage and the sufferings caused in her home country. While Steve could almost recite word-for-word the lecture his mother gave about the Easter Rising, he had to admit he missed her Irish lilt enough to hear it again. His Irish heritage well known, Steve had been invited to be a grand marshal in the Saturday parade but politely informed them he would wait until a year when all Irish people could march. Steve’s LGBT advocacy aside, he did want to watch the parade anonymously and extended to the rest of the denizens of the Tower
to accompany him. Pepper tried to refuse on Tony’s behalf. She was worried he would start drinking at the parade and not stop until the 18th.

Despite the internal debate over how the day was properly celebrated, both Sigyn and Thor wanted to participate in the festivities, especially since it was an all-out New York occasion. So, it was decided the best course of action would be to go to the parade followed by dinner and drinks at an Irish pub. The pair had discussed accompanying Steve to his liturgical service on Sunday, the actual Saint’s Day, but it was inevitably decided that two people professing to be gods showing up at a service might cause some complications for both themselves and the Catholic Church at large. It didn’t help matters that Thor was still convinced Christians ate a literal body and drank literal blood during their religious services because of Steve’s attempt at explaining Catholic philosophy regarding the eucharist and transubstantiation. The last thing anyone needed was Thor getting into a fight - metaphysical or physical - with a priest over his perception of religious cannibalism.

Even with Thor’s confusion about Catholicism and its practices, he didn’t want to disrespect his friend Steven’s deeply held religious beliefs and he thought a religious holiday where alcoholic consumption was encouraged seemed fine. Even with Thor’s confusion over Catholic ritual, he was not the Asgardian who proved to be the most difficult in coaxing into participating in the celebration. For a day that seemed to be filled with merriment and joviality - at least in Tony’s version - Loki seemed very indifferent. However, it was at Tony’s insistence that Sigyn and Thor had to bring Loki or someone had to stay home with him. If his tower was going to be destroyed in the midst of St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, Tony was going to do that himself.

“There is to be a parade! And beer! And candy!” Thor said. “And you enjoy wearing green!”

“It is a day involving luck and mischief,” Sigyn agreed. “I think you would feel most at home.”

“I thought this was some sort of dour religious ceremony,” Loki said. “I have no desire to participate in drab Midgardian liturgy.” Steve opened his mouth to defend his religion but Tony cut him off first.

“It’s not boring. Not the way I do it,” Tony said.

“There will be music!” Sigyn said. “And dancing!”

“And pirates!” Thor grinned.

“No, Thor,” Steve sighed. “St. Patrick was kidnapped by pirates. Pirates don’t typically show up to his festival.”

“Yeah, pirate day was back in September,” Tony pointed out.

“Why don’t you want to celebrate this feast?” Thor demanded.

“Well, I’m not sure I like this St. Patrick at all,” Loki shrugged.


“What don’t you like about St. Patrick?” Steve demanded, not hiding his offense.

“I think he and I would not get along,” Loki said. “After all, you said he never encouraged pinching.”

“Yeah...but…” Steve began.

“And you said he was celibate, which usually translates to no fun at all,” Loki said. “Furthermore, he
hated snakes, cursed kings who didn’t do what he said, and generally to me seems an allegory for colonialism. He comes in to this new country with established culture, religion and society, tells them they’re doing it wrong, and now he’s revered as their patron saint for destroying everything that made them unique so they could become part of a larger empire. And of course, he just happened to be from a culture that was a long-time rival of the place he conquered. Not to mention, as you alluded earlier Thor, his penchant of getting kidnapped by pirates.”

“He was only kidnapped by pirates twice,” Steve pointed out.

“I have never been kidnapped by pirates, and I daresay I look better in green” Loki said. “Perhaps I would be better to worship.”

“I can’t believe this!” Steve groaned.

“I’ll be sure to tell the Hulk you think you look better in green, oh godly-one,” Tony snorted.

“This is your argument against participating in this festival?” Sigyn frowned. “The fact that the man was captured by pirates?”

“And he hated snakes,” Loki pointed out. “I daresay your dear Jor wouldn’t have lasted long around the man.”

“But Loki! I wish to drink ale!” Thor moaned.

“You always wish to drink ale,” Loki said.

“You are going,” Sigyn informed him. “To make it up to Captain Rogers.”

“Make what up?” Loki said.

“Your reasoning has insulted his religion and cultural heritage,” Sigyn said. “How would you feel if someone said similar things when you wished to attend a Jotnar…”

“Sigyn!” Loki screeched, even though everyone in the room knew about his heritage and abilities. Loki himself still wasn’t keen on his birth nation, and didn’t want further lectures from his wife about how maybe he should start embracing his cultural heritage.

“Well?” Sigyn tapped her feet. Loki sighed, knowing his wife wasn’t going to let this go.

“I am sorry for insulting you Captain Rogers,” Loki gritted out as his wife stared him down, “and I would be honored to accompany you to your cultural celebration to learn more about your heritage.”

“Then it’s settled,” Steve said, smirking at Tony. “We’re doing Paddy’s Day my way.” Tony groaned.

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Despite the parade starting at 10 in the morning, Steve had insisted everyone grab a quick breakfast and then head down to get their spots on the parade line, indulging in some street food if they got hungry. Jane and Darcy were off at a conference in Connecticut that weekend, which was one of the reasons why Thor was third-wheeling it with his brother and sister-in-law. Natasha and Clint had decided to sleep in then join everyone for supper. Bruce decided to stay in the labs, citing the crowds and the fact he didn’t think green was the best color for him. Tony had shown up in an embarrassing array of previous years’ St. Patrick’s Day swag, only to for Pepper to make him change into something more respectful. When he came back down stairs wearing a “Kiss Me I’m Italian” shirt in
the colors of the Italian flag, she decided it was as good as things were going to get. The Asgardians did manage to turn up in green though unlike the kelly green Steve was sporting, Thor was in a lime color. Sigyn had managed a nice forest green outfit for herself but Loki was dressed all in black. Apparently, not even his wife’s instance he wear her favorite color could coax him out of the foul mood he was in.

Steve had tried to bring some cheer to the morning by teaching his Avenger’s friends some Irish, forgetting that Allspeak made learning languages lose some of its charm. Despite this, Thor had managed to misinterpret the phrase by not paying attention. Instead of the traditional Éirinn go Brách, Thor had begun shouting Éirinn go brád - literally Go Die Ireland. After trying to correct his pronunciation, Steve finally just asked Thor to start shouting it in English, to which he heartily obliged. Even Thor’s bumbling couldn’t bring Loki out of his misery at being awake early in the day, surrounded by already tipsy Midgardians and being forced to watch a cultural display from one of the planets he found least interesting. He also hated that he was having to stand among the unwashed masses to watch this parade rather than sitting from an enviable position in a royal box as he felt better befit his station. He also didn’t understand why he was the only person in the group who seemed to notice the awful smell the streets were already taking on.

Loki was also a bit unnerved by the massive amounts of law enforcement on display at the event. Apparently Midgardian police officers of Irish origin were so common they had become a stereotype, but this “fun” fact from Steve didn’t do much to quell Loki’s unease. Even in the clever disguise Sigyn had cast over him all those months before he was still concerned that one of them might recognize him as the being that had wrecked their city. For the first time, Loki also realized how many different types of Midgardian law enforcement there were. There were officers on horseback, on foot, in vehicles and on those carts used for golfing for some reason. A brigade of them with Irish wolfhounds even came parading forth, which caused Sigyn to squeal and then talk about how much she missed Fen.

Thor and Sigyn, as it turned out, developed a taste for the bagpipes. Steve himself enjoyed the music and told them everything he knew about the pipes. In an aside to Loki, Tony admitted that his non-Irish ears could only take so much of the bagpipes without another drink. Loki replied that the bagpipe sounded like the perfect instrument for dwarves, and so his new mission in life would be to make sure Sigyn and Thor never ever let anyone in Niðavellir catch wind of this instrument. It was one thing to have to listen to this instrument out in the open air. Loki could only shudder to think what it would sound like in the deep, cavernous environs of his wife’s native people. After about thirty minutes of incessant bagpipes, three versions of “Danny Boy,” and Thor postulating the pros and cons of wearing a kilt into battle, both Tony and Loki seemed to be at their wits’ end.

“How much longer is this event?” Loki asked.

“About four an’ a half more hours,” Steve shrugged. Loki wheezed in pain and Tony’s jaw dropped slightly before his wiped out his Stark phone and started typing.

“There’s a baked potato cart a few blocks that way,” Tony announced. “Lokes and I are hungry, and we’re going to go grab something to eat. Anybody want anything?”

“Maybe,” Steve shrugged. “What all do they put on them?”

“No booze, right?” Pepper pointed out

“No,” Tony rolled his eyes, “but we might pop in to the Golden Arches for a Shamrock shake apiece. It’s festive!”

“Fine,” Pepper sighed.
With orders for fully loaded baked potatoes for Steve and Thor and a loaded potato sans bacon for Sigyn, Tony and Loki headed off and away from the crowds to maneuver around to the cart’s location. Loki wasn’t terribly hungry, but he had a feeling Stark wasn’t either. Both of them needed an excuse to get away from the noise, and having to go the long way around to avoid parade crowds was just what both men needed. While Loki felt his social anxiety rearing its ugly head and the noise and throng of the crowd rattling his nerves and making him feel uneasy, Tony just couldn’t stand the loud marching bands that seemed to be giving him a headache. There was a reason he preferred to watch parades from penthouse windows and balconies rather than down on the ground.

“Thank you for never subjecting me to honorific events regarding your heritage,” Loki said once he and Tony were far enough away from the crowd to speak without shouting.

“It isn’t hard,” Tony shrugged. “I’m not really a practicing Jew and all of their events always felt like memorial services and funerals when Dad made me attend them as a kid. And the day this city chooses to celebrate Italian heritage is Columbus Day… which is kind of an odd day for it even without getting into the guy’s sociopolitical ramifications.”

“I find it odd how eager Midgardians from one place are to celebrate their origins from another place,” Loki said. “You would never hear of a Vanir Heritage Day on Asgard or Niðavellir. And the elves would be positively shocked if anyone tried to celebrate anything by elfin heritage in their realm. The closest things would probably be when Asgard puts on military parades in other realms to remind them of its might. Those are less about heritage, though. Although one could argue that Asgard’s only heritage is that of a colonial power.”

“I guess you’re not going to petition the AllDaddy to start Jotun Pride Day?” Tony smirked.

“Not unless you want me banished back to your realm for eternity,” Loki shrugged. “I am sure your descendants would just love having to feed and house a banished godling because of a promise you made eons ago.”

“If my descendants happen to share any DNA with Pepper’s descendants, then I think it’s you who’ll be in for it,” Tony shrugged. “Though, honestly, I’m not sure the Stark line should continue. I mean, we’re not the most stable family. I’d rank us somewhere between the Sheens and the Borgias. Mainly because Stark tech has definitely killed more people than the Sheen clan but the amount of illicit substances used might be somewhere around a tie.”

“Try belonging to the royal house of Asgard, and then we can talk about family dysfunction,” Loki snorted. “My alleged grandfather was so good at slaughtering Svartálfar there aren’t any left. So, naturally, Odin had to start slaughtering Jotnar to live up to his father’s name. Oh, and let’s not forget great-grandfather Buri who let one of his sons be decapitated so treaty negotiations would move forward. Apparently, executing your own children is somewhat of a family past time for Odin and his lot.”

“Jeez,” Tony said. “You’re right. You win the family dysfunction contest.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “It’s probably good there is no such things as Asgardian Heritage Day. It would probably be best celebrated by slaughtering pacifist cultures in their millions.”

“Alright,” Tony said as the baked potato food cart came into sight. “I challenge you to a ‘who can eat their potato the slowest contest.’”

“Certainly,” Loki agreed, “but shouldn’t we let these fair people into line before ourselves? It would only be the kind thing to do.”
“I like your thinking,” Tony said. “And we should probably just get our potatoes first. By the time we finish eating ours, everyone else’s orders will have gotten cold. We should just eat ours and then get back in line to order the rest.”

“A wise thought indeed,” Loki agreed.

“Where have the two of you been?” Pepper demanded when Tony and Loki finally arrived back where everyone else had been watching the parade. “It’s been an hour and a half!”

“Well, you see, the line for potatoes was long,” Tony began, handing off a fully-loaded baked potato to Steve.

“Very long,” Loki said, distributing his own potatoes to Thor and Sigyn, whose eyes had gone wide at the sheer size of the baked potatoes. Even Steve seemed impressed at the mountain of potato and toppings before him.

“And we were concerned that in the time it would take us to eat our potatoes, everyone else’s would grow cold,” Tony continued.

“Not to mention the difficulty of carrying back so many potatoes,” Loki agreed.

“So we waited in line, got our potatoes, ate our potatoes,” Tony said. “Walked a block to get milkshakes to wash those potatoes down. Drank our milkshakes. Walked back to the potato stand and then got back in line to order the other potatoes so they would be hot when we got back here.”

“If anything, you should find our concern for the happiness of others touching,” Loki nodded.

“Really?” Pepper snorted. “You expect me to believe that the two of you were gone that long and there isn’t going to be a story on the five o’clock news tonight involving billionaire Tony Stark and his unknown friend… I don’t know… mooning the Irish flag or setting loose zoo animals on an unsuspecting public.”

“There are going to be zoo animals?” Sigyn asked excitedly.

“Sigyn, don’t you think it’s strange how long Tony and Loki were gone to get snacks?” Pepper pointed out. Sigyn scrunched up her nose and narrowed her eyes before turning to glower at her husband.

“What were you doing?” Sigyn demanded to know.

“We got potatoes and milkshakes!” Loki replied.

“And what else?” Sigyn prompted.

“Nothing else!” Loki insisted.

“You know if you have done anything I will eventually find out about it,” Sigyn pointed out to him.

“As you always do,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I am not letting you ruin my weekend by doing something that requires me to call another meeting of the SI PR team,” Pepper warned Tony. “So help me, if you have gotten up to anything, I will lock you in a supply closet with only the bots for company for the next week. No suits. No tech. Just you, DUM-E and his fire extinguisher in the dark.”
“Like I couldn’t break out of there on my own,” Tony snorted.

“You are supposed to be learning more about our friend, the Captain’s, cultural heritage,” Sigyn continued to lecture Loki, “not gallivanting off to cause mischief.”

“I’m sorry,” Loki rolled his eyes. “I thought my main purpose in life was to gallivant off and cause mischief.”

“You are the one who defines yourself that way,” Sigyn pointed out, “and thereby allows others to define you that way as well.”

“That was one time!” Tony said to Pepper.

“That was not the only time it took me, Happy, and Rhodes to get you out of a drunk tank after getting into a physical fight with a police horse,” Pepper shot back.

“It was the only time it happened on St. Patrick’s Day!” Tony retorted.

“Huzzah!” Thor yelled. “More bagged piping! Tell me friend Steven, which song is this?”

“Don’t be overdramatic,” Sigyn accused her husband as he tried to conjure up some fake tears.

“This is all incredibly upsetting,” Loki feigned dramatically.

“I agree,” Tony nodded. “I think Loki and I need a break from this. Whadaya say we go get another baked potato?”

“Sounds lovely!” Loki said.

The two of them bounded off before anyone could respond.

“I apologize we could not keep Loki around to witness your cultural heritage display,” Sigyn apologized to Steve as they headed into the Irish-style pub they had reserved a spot at for dinner.

“And I’m sorry Tony was an ass, too,” Pepper nodded to Steve.

“I get it,” Steve shrugged. “Loki’s not big on crowds and Tony has the attention span of a gnat. Hey, at least they didn’t show up wearing orange.”

“What is offensive about this color again, Friend Steven?” Thor asked, prompting Steve to launch back into a discussion of English colonialism again. Heading up to the hostess, Pepper was informed part of her party had already arrived. Looking up, Tony and Loki waved from the booth they were sitting at.

“Please tell me you aren’t drunk,” Pepper said, noticing the wide variety of shot and whiskey glasses around the table.

“No,” Tony said, gesturing to the lemonade in front of him. “I’ve been a good boy. Lokes here has developed a taste for the Irish whiskey. And the beer the bar here makes itself.”

“Steven, why did you not inform me of the delightfulness of Irish food and drink?” Loki demanded to know as Sigyn slid into the booth beside him, Thor following her. “Certainly, this alcohol does not get me drunk, but the taste is greatly pleasant.”
“I didn’t know you were interested in that,” Steve admitted, following behind Pepper as she slid into the booth next to Tony.

“How did you guys end up here?” Pepper asked Tony.

“We thought it would be best to join where the rest of you would eventually meet up with us,” Loki replied.

“So, after getting our third baked potato….” Tony began.

“We tried the barbecue toppings! Most delicious!” Loki nodded.

“We decided to head over here and see if the booth was ready,” Tony said. “We’ve been watching the parade on that TV and then a soccer game on the other one.”

“The drink is most delightful,” Loki said. “And I must admit, the varieties of ‘wings’ served at this establishment have won me over. Much more delicious than those atrocities you forced us to ingest on your first day here, Thor.”

“I maintain that The Wings of Wild Buffalo was a marvelous experience,” Thor replied. “And I think their recipe for fried cheese curds should be brought back to Asgard as a testament to Midgardian success and culture.”

“Well, I’m glad you guys found a way to enjoy the parade,” Steve said to them. “Not everyone likes to stand outside in the elements.”

“We learned much more from your talking box than we would have standing out in the rain,” Loki informed Steve. “For example, did you know that blue is actually the official color of your Sainted Patrick?”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “Green only became associated with the day as part of the Irish independence movement. People who wanted Irish home rule would wear green while those who wanted Britain to remain in power wore orange.”

“And that the first parade in his honor was not held in Ireland but in Boston,” Tony said, making sure Pepper noticed he had learned a new fact.

“It has a huge Irish population,” Steve agreed. “Though it’s still Boston.”

“And that your famed general and king, Gorig of the Washing Town, even allowed his Irish soldiers to take the day off and celebrate during your War of Revolution,” Loki continued.

“I actually didn’t know that,” Steve said, impressed.

“The color commentators for the parade were good this year,” Tony shrugged.

“And they kept it to the highlights,” Loki agreed.

“And best of all, Pep,” Tony said. “No police horses got punched.”

“The night is still young,” Pepper shrugged.

“Well, since the two of you have already been taste-testing the menu,” Steve said. “What should we order?”

The Asgardian contingent seemed to thrive in the pub atmosphere, which Thor said was very
reminiscent of the taverns on Asgard and various other realms. The happy and slightly inebriated patrons, cheerful waitstaff, and timshel band performing off in a corner was reminiscent of any dining establishment one might find in Asgard, Vanaheim, Niðavellir or even Alfheim - though Loki added the one caveat is that in Alfheim one was more likely to be subjected to the pathetic intonations or nasally dramatics of elfin bards and their bad poetry. Apparently, the vast majority of elfish poetry involved complaining about lovers that were either dead or just not that into you. Occasionally, someone would liven up the atmosphere with a poem about the - usually tragic - feats of a long dead ancestor whose love was also either dead or just not that into them. While Dwarven traditional songs were all very similar - they all had to do with drinking, working in the mines or what one planned to do after they got off their shift at the mine - at least they weren’t painful to listen to. In fact, even the Allfather enjoyed a good dwarven drinking song and employed a traditional dwarven band in the palace whenever his need for one arose.

Steve admitted that the music of his motherland probably wasn’t much better. He said there were a great deal of Irish folk songs about dead or disinterested lovers, but there were also ones of the “English stole my land” variety and then “let’s make gibberish noises until the English go away so we can talk about revolution” variety. His person favorites were the ones about faeries stealing away children though there were some really interesting songs about bar fights and drunkenness. Steve said he was also partial to American-Irish songs with themes such as “I came to America for a better life and now my job is crap, but at least I’m not dying in the Potato Famine” and “I came to America for a better life but they aren’t hiring Irish people anymore.”

Thor then suggested Loki show off some of the music of the other realms on his fiddle and perhaps even learn a few Midgardian tunes to take home, leading Loki to give a quasi-truthful account of how he tricked a nokken into teaching him to play the fiddle. Loki even swore his own skillful use of fiddle playing and trickery were the origin of the axiom “played like a fiddle,” though eyerolls from both Thor and Sigyn indicated otherwise. As Tony tried to poke holes into Loki’s story about being taught violin skills by a merman, the food arrived at their table. Steve and Thor each got a pair of samplers of all the Irish fare offered at the restaurant while Tony optend for fish and chips. Sigyn ordered both the fish and chips and a salmon platter while Loki opted for a Shepherd's Pie and Bangers and Mash. Pepper ordered a California arugula salad, which earned her some gentle ribbing from Steve and Tony.

After finishing their meal and having another round of drinks and conversation, the group decided to head back to avoid the late night partiers and their rowdiness. After Pepper’s shoes were nearly puked out right outside the pub, Tony called Happy to bring around the car so they wouldn’t have to walk back to the Tower amid drunken crowds. Thor seemed a little disappointed that he couldn’t engage with the riotous, intoxicated crowd, but considering both the destructive tendencies of drunken New Yorkers and sober Thor, it was probably best he was hustled into the back of the limo with the rest of them. Still, Thor spent much of the ride looking out the window longingly as if he thought carousing in the crowd would be great fun. Perhaps he could find a way to bring Lady Sif and the Warriors Three down for next year’s celebration.

“Thank you for inviting us to your cultural heritage celebration,” Sigyn said to Steve cheerfully as the group got out of the car and into the elevator at the bottom of Stark Tower. “It was most enlightening!”

“I’m glad you all came,” Steve replied.

“I most enjoyed the bagged pipes,” Thor nodded. “Perhaps I shall learn to play them…” Seeing the fearful look on Loki and Sigyn’s faces, Steve decided to be nice and step in.

“It can take a lot of time and practice to learn the pipes,” Steve said. “It’s one of the more difficult
instruments to learn and most people I knew who learned them started by the time they were eight.” Thor was thoughtful for a moment, probably realizing he didn’t exactly have the patience for learning a musical instrument.

“Perhaps I shall just acquire some of your compressed sound files of bagged pipe music,” Thor shrugged.

“MP3, Thor,” Tony sighed. “They’re called MP3s. Or, you know, just music.”

“I will find you fiddle music to enjoy as well brother!” Thor announced, clapping Loki on the back so hard Loki let out a slight wheeze.

“I suppose I can play it on my handheld talking box,” Loki shrugged.

“Phone,” Tony groaned. “It’s called a phone.”

“Hey, let me know if you find anything good,” Steve smirked at Thor. “I’ve been meaning to add some more stuff to my music rectangle.”


“Alright, you trolls,” Pepper rolled her eyes. “I’m taking Tony to bed before he spontaneously combusts.”
It was around 8:30 in the morning the Monday after St. Patrick’s Day that the first delivery of flowers arrived at the Tower. As soon as Happy alerted Pepper to the fact that 5,000 flowers of different colors and varieties had been delivered to the Tower, she moved back the 9 a.m. board meeting and headed down to the lab to confront Tony. This was either part of his wild schemes, an apology for something he had done she didn’t know about yet, or both. Yet after confronting him, Pepper realized that Tony was completely ignorant of what was going on and just as confused as she was. Since Tony was not behind whatever was going on, that usually meant someone from the Asgardian contingent was. JARVIS happily informed Tony and Pepper that Darcy, Thor, Sigyn and Loki were all in Sigyn and Loki’s chambers working on a “special project” while Jane napped following a research bender.

The scene when Pepper and Tony entered into this chambers made it painfully apparent the flowers had been misdelivered to Pepper. With flower wreaths already adorning their heads, the foursome were at work making flower garlands as Jane loudly snored on the couch. Sigyn and Darcy were giggling as they worked while Loki was laughing at Thor. The thunder god found himself pestered by his sister-in-law’s beloved magpies who pecked at his hands or undid whatever work he had just accomplished on his garland when they found it unsatisfactory. Pepper had no idea where the alder, birch, and ash bows the group were weaving with had come from, but she had an inkling where all the spring flowers had come from. Various ribbons and glitter that had found their way to Sigyn and Loki’s rooms over the months were also being used as were fake birds, rabbits, eggs, and for some reason snakes. One of the snakes popped up out of Thor’s wreath, startling him briefly as Loki laughed. The snake - which was in fact Jor - then slithered over to his mistress and curled up around her wrist before fading back into his typical appearance as a harmless piece of jewelry.

“Greetings!” Sigyn said happily to Pepper and Tony. “Have you come to help us with the preparations for Ostara?”

“Um...uh…” Tony began.

“There was a massive flower delivery this morning that was brought to my office;” Pepper informed Sigyn. “I’m guessing it was meant for here?”

“Oh, yes! Thank you!” Sigyn smiled. “There simply wasn’t enough time to grow all of the flowers I needed in my own garden, so I hope you didn’t mind that ordered some. Fresh is best, after all.”

“What is going on exactly?” Tony frowned.


“And when is this festive occasion?” Pepper asked curiously.
“It begins tomorrow eve and lasts into the following evening,” Thor explained.

“How come we’re just finding out about Asgardian Easter now?” Pepper asked. Sigyn and Thor at least had the wherewithal to look sheepish. Loki continued sewing two birds into his garland in such a way that it looked as though they were mating.

“You have been busy as of late,” Sigyn said. “I thought it would be kind not to trouble you with the stress of planning the celebration. It was to be a surprise.”

“Well, I don’t know about Asgardian Easter,” Tony said. “In fact, I don’t really know about Midgardian Easter. I think we had a passover seder like twice when I was a kid and then Dad got too busy for functions that didn’t also double as fundraisers.”

“Midgardian Easter isn’t for another two weeks,” Pepper replied. “Which is why we’re a little surprised.”

“Oh,” Sigyn said.

“Sorry I didn’t say anything,” Darcy apologized. “I got too caught up in making flower crowns and garlands. And I guess I was a little overcome with excitement at being able to do something other than attempt to feed and water Jane while avoiding being accidentally portaled into another dimension.”

“Ah,” Thor agreed. “Jane’s intelligence is mighty, but it weakens without sleep.”

“Alright,” Pepper said. “How about we have a group meeting after dinner tonight to discuss Ostara plans?”

“Thank you!” Sigyn said to Pepper. “I promise, I will do all within my power to keep preparation for the festivities from interrupting your important tasks.”

“I have already instructed future flower deliveries to be rerouted here,” JARVIS intoned.

“So,” Tony said to Loki, snickering a little. “Is this one of Asgard’s ‘low-key’ festivals?”

“I’m afraid not,” Loki sighed. “At least not the way Sigyn does it. Be warned, Stark, there is nothing more fearsome than a Vanir woman in the midst of planning a spring festival.”

“You have my sympathy,” Tony nodded.

“Save it,” Loki shook his head. “I have a feeling you will need it more for yourself later on.”

As dishes were removed from the table and Sigyn rose to begin her introduction of the Midgardians to Ostara, Loki couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for the Midgardians as they had no idea what was about to be expected of them. It wasn’t that Loki didn’t like Ostara but rather that his wife enjoyed it so much she sometimes built the festival up in her head and was then disappointed when it didn’t measure up to her imaginative expectations. It was also Sigyn’s first time single-handedly planning an Ostara festival. She had helped his own mother plan Asgardians version of the celebration and occasionally lent a hand to her mother or Aunt Gerd in the Vanir celebrations - though Loki hated when Sigyn and her sisters were called on to do so. Gerd was the wife of the crown prince and therefore Ostara planning duties should have been her purview. However, Freyja hated anything that elevated anyone about her and had thrown a fit about being forced to give up her role planning the ceremonies to her brother’s new wife. As a result, a very stressed King Njord had allowed the two
women to trade off years with each festival being more over the top than the last as the sisters-in-law used the festival as a thinly-veiled facet of their feud.

Ostara was celebrated in Asgard, of course, because of cultural blending over the years and the need for a more well-defined spring festival in Asgard. However, there was no mistaking that Ostara was a quintessential Vanir festival - in fact it was the quintessential Vanir religious festival with the annual royal regatta serving as the quintessential Vanir secular festival. While the premise of the holiday was the welcoming of spring, the signal of planting and the hopefulness for a bountiful harvest to come, Ostara had a deeper connection in Vanaheim. Loki had overheard Tony and Steve in an argument over dinner about how Ostara was the name of a pagan goddess and the Midgardian traditions of bunnies and chocolates stemmed from pagan worship rituals. The Man of Iron had no idea how right he was.

The goddess in question was not Ostara as the Midgardians seemed to believe but in fact Óstarmânoth, the first Vanir queen to rule the realm in her own right and a fourth or fifth great-grandmother of Freya and Sigyn’s. Óstarmânoth’s reign had come at the end of a five-year-long famine - brought about largely in part by her older brother’s incompetence as king - and her time as Vanir’s ruler was allegedly marked with peace and prosperity. If one discounted the fact that she had most likely murdered her own brother to take the throne and set things to right. In fact, Óstarmânoth was what Pepper would have dubbed a “public relations guru” for the way the Vanir only seemed to remember her heroic attributes and looked to her with the same affection a child had for its mother. No one ever discussed the fact that Ostarmânoth’s ex-lovers, doubters, or courtiers that displeased her always disappeared without a trace and without any visible blood on Óstarmânoth’s hands.

The occasional secret assassination wasn’t the only thing about the queen the Vanir often pushed under the rug. Óstarmânoth was also known in Vanaheim as “the light bringer” because of how her spies stole artificial lighting technology from the Dwarves as well as the ability to magically reproduce light crystals from the light elves. She also had a vigorous sexual appetite and bore six children despite never marrying. While the Vanir could be fast and loose when it came to conventions about marriage, sex, childbirth and what order they could come in, Óstarmânoth was the first ruler of Vanaheim - male or female - who passed the throne to a child not born in traditional wedlock.

It was this legacy of fratricide, violent seizure of the throne, and theft of technology and ideas from other realms that Loki felt was the entire reason Asgard had begun celebrating the holiday. It had been the great Buri’s decision to accommodate some festivals from other neighboring realms into Asgard’s own calendar from the beginning of his reign, partially because he wanted to foster peace and unity and partially - at least Loki always thought - because Buri was lazy and coming up with new public and liturgical events was hard work. Certainly, Asgard had a typical spring festival beforehand, but nowhere as wild and bacchanalian as the Vanir celebrations in honor of their famed queen. Óstarmânoth’s reputation for fruitfulness was an excuse for all of Vanaheim to put flowers and foodstuffs in their hair, dress scantily, dance with abandon, drink like it was going out of style, and then fornicate rampantly. All in all, it wasn’t the worst celebration Asgard had ever adopted.

Of course, Loki had a feeling the Midgardians would react in their normal, terribly prudish manner when the celebration and its associated events were explained to them. For whatever reason, it didn’t quite dawn on him to share this feeling with Sigyn before she got a chance to launch into her plans for the day with the other denizens of the Tower, Thor nodding vigorously and interjecting with his own favorite parts of the festival from time to time. When Sigyn finished her long-winded explanation, out of breath, she was met by dumbstruck faces from everyone save Tony.

“So… you’re saying…” Bruce said as calmly as he could while Steve and Clint’s jaws remained dropped on either side of him, “that this festival ends with an orgy?”
“I’m in!” Tony announced loudly before being whacked on the back of the head by Pepper with a magazine.

“I am sorry, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said apologetically, “but this part of the event is typically reserved for those who are not yet mated in the hopes they may find a pleasing partner. Stirring up unnecessary jealousies is not in line with the festival...” Loki snorted at that, knowing full well the Östarmânoth wouldn’t have felt the same way. “Those who are already coupled are encouraged to make their own private time together, however.”

“So we have to...” Steve gulped.

“No one has to participate in it if they don’t want to,” Sigyn shook her head. “But traditionally, those that do wish to close the ceremony with one have the option to do so.”

Tony opened his mouth to say something but was again whacked over the head with Pepper’s magazine.

“Whatsoever you are going to say, don’t,” Pepper warned him. “It’ll only get you in trouble.”

“I… I don’t... understand,” Steve stuttered out finally.

“An orgy is when...” Thor began, only to be slapped on the back of the head by Loki.

“I am sure everyone in this room knows what an orgy is, Thor,” Loki rolled his eyes before turning to his wife. “Lykyng, don’t you think that this particular aspect of the festival might be a bit much for our Midgardian friends here? A more Asgardian-style festival might be more in line with what they can handle.”

“Lemme guess,” Tony sighed, “the Asgardian version doesn’t have any orgies?”

“And less nudity and no boat races,” Thor said dolefully before instantly cheering himself up. “But there is just as much food and drink to be had!”

“Why are you so disappointed about there not being an orgy if you’re not even allowed to participate in it in the first place?” Jane pointed out to Thor skeptically.

“Because it is a time in which friends and family find their true mates!” Thor said excitedly. “Is it not grand to see those you care about in the throes of love?”

“Gross, man, no,” Clint shook his head. “If you get off on watching that’s your own business!”

“Watching what?” Thor asked, confused.

“Oh, he knows what an orgy is but not voyeurism,” Clint snorted.

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll make you explain it to him,” Natasha warned Clint.

“If I promise to ensure nothing unseemly happens, can we hold the Ostara festivities?” Sigyn asked Pepper pleadingly. “I’ll do everything and clean everything up!”

“Of course you can!” Pepper assured her. “And I’m grateful that you are considerate enough to accommodate our...uh... sensibilities to fit your celebration.”

“Are you sure we can’t have an orgy, Pep? A small one?” Tony said, adopting a similar tone and facial expression to Sigyn’s.
“Just for that,” Pepper said, swatting at Tony with a magazine, “you get to clean everything up. Dishes, decor, whatever.”

“Damn it,” Tony groaned.

“Huzzah!” Thor thundered happily. “Come, Loki! We shall withdraw to hunt and slaughter the stag! I have heard there are such creatures in Bronck's Land!”

“What?” Jane gaped as Darcy shivered “Not Bambi!”

“No stag meat,” Sigyn cautioned Thor. “We are doing this my way!”

“Besides, I’m pretty sure hunting is illegal in the Bronx,” Steve nodded.

"Alright,” Loki huffed. “Now that this farce is over can we get back to making flower garlands?”

As usual, Sigyn had great fun in the kitchen pulling Darcy, Bruce and a still-sleepy Loki in as her kitchen assistants shortly after lunch before the evening festivities began. It amused both Bruce and Darcy to see how highly suggestible Loki was in his mid-day, sleep-deprived state. He shuffled along somewhat like a zombie, doing whatever his wife instructed and communicating in grunts and groans. The only thing that convinced them Sigyn hadn’t actually zombified him was the fact that Loki took a break now and then to down entire carafes of coffee Clint style. It was probably for the best as Loki would have definitely made more than a few rude comments about the large amount of Vanir-style fare at this supposedly Asgardian version of the celebration.

While lamb, stag, and rabbit were the go-to meats for an Asgardian Ostara celebration, Sigyn had opted for the more traditional fish of a Vanir celebration. In addition to half a dozen fish dishes, she prepared a baked chicken with Midgardian vegetables as an alternative. Like the Vanir celebration, her menu was also heavy on salad with a wide variety of salad greens and toppings that included a plethora of fruits, nuts, vegetables, and cheeses. She also whipped up a lemon raspberry vinaigrette and dandelion honey salad dressing. After helping Sigyn make eight different varieties of what appeared to be a traditional Vanir quiche, Darcy taught her how to make deviled eggs - much to Sigyn’s utter delight. Other sides included honey rolls, roasted rosemary new potatoes, some type of fern in lemon sauce, and green beans in a rosemary vinaigrette. For dessert, Sigyn helped Bruce make honey cakes, lemon bread, and instructed both him and Darcy in the art of candied flower blossoms.

Her kitchen helpers weren’t the only ones Sigyn put to work to help prepare for that evening’s celebration. Thor had been tasked to help the bots with putting up the garlands and wreaths that had been made - partially because the bots needed supervision and partially to get Thor out of Jane’s lab while she worked. Thor could be a good helper when needed - especially for fetching things Jane and Darcy were too short to reach - but his heightened enthusiasm for Jane’s work could make him a little overbearing and annoying. This had been driven home earlier in the week when Thor joined Darcy and Jane in jumping for joy at some new discovery and caused enough racket that several Stark Industries employees reported an earthquake in process. After an inquiry from the legal department about earthquake insurance on the building, Pepper had to send out a companywide press release about the noise coming from a top secret experiment while Tony had to talk to Thor about letting any of his weather-related powers get out of hand in moments of heightened emotions. Loki had watched the entire lecture with glee, only for Thor to send a static shock of electricity up Loki’s backside that kept the trickster god’s hair frighteningly curly the rest of the day.

Thor’s disappointment that he wasn’t allowed to help Jane was somewhat mitigated by the fact that
Sigyn had made him her official taste-tester for the upcoming meal. Despite there technically not being a genetic component relating all of them, Frigga had learned early that the way to Odin and his sons’ hearts were definitely through their stomachs, knowledge that Sigyn had learned on her own but Frigga had passed down just in case. While Thor was the type of man who preferred his red meat, Loki and Odin were both known for having a sweet tooth. Neither of them could pass up a good dessert, and both were sugar fiends. It was one of Frigga’s favorite jokes to ask both her husband and son if they would like some tea with their sugar. It was the making of the desserts that finally seemed to jar Loki awake. He began popping each candied flower petal in his mouth as soon as it was finished until Sigyn ordered him out of the kitchen. Begrudgingly, Loki found himself helping Thor hang up the rest of the decorations.

After the decorations were up and the food only needed its final touches, the Asgardians disappeared to dress for the festivities. They reappeared shortly afterwards dressed in Vanir-appropriate fashion for the holiday, which is to say not much at all. Jane had to admire the vest and harem pants Thor had donned, especially as the outfit left his chest bare and the pants hung low on his hips. Loki was donning similar pants but what appeared to be a button-down tank top with black pearl buttons, all in his signature black with gold accents. Sigyn’s traditional Vanir holiday ensemble wasn’t that different from the outfit her mother had worn for her tower “visit” back in the fall. The outfit consisted of a sparkly bandeau type top with a detached skirt made of a gossamer like material that managed to give the barest outline of leg in the right light despite the material looking practically see-through. Loki seemed particularly enamoured of his wife’s ensemble and had a hard time keeping his hands off of her throughout the evening.

“Alright,” Pepper said once the group was gathered. “First order of business?”

“Games, I think,” Sigyn said. “The food still needs some time to simmer. After we eat, we will have the dancing!”

“What kind of games are we talking about?” Steve asked curiously.

“There are typically feats of strength and contests as part of the festival,” Sigyn explained. “I have kept some of the traditional contests that I feel would be best for everyone to compete in. The first is a knot tying competition where contestants must tie a series of knots. The one who produces the best knots in the least amount of time wins. Then there is an egg toss. Teams pair up and toss an egg back and forth. The last pair with an unbroken egg wins.”

“We used to play that back in my day,” Steve mentioned. “Though we played with rotten eggs, which made it pretty bad if you lost.”

“I have modified some of the other skill contests to fit with the area,” Sigyn said. “Instead of a formal boat race, we have brought up the rowing machines from the gymnasium to compete with. And instead of the archery contests, we shall play darts.” Everyone in the group groaned save Clint, who did a fist pump.

“This sounds like my kind of festival,” Clint said.

“There are many archery contests in this celebration, Friend Barton,” Thor nodded. “Standing, blindfolded, horseback...”

“Horseback archery contest?” Clint asked, intrigued. “I used to do that in the circus.”

“Yes. The horseback contest is the most lauded of the archery competitions. It is to memorialize the famous time when the beloved Queen Östarmânoth was still yet a princess and won an archery contest in disguise,” Sigyn said. “There was much protest, and the men she had bested refused to
believe a woman had won.”

“So, in typical fashion,” Loki smirked, “Óstarmânoth repeated her feat. This time, however, she landed all the targets while completely naked atop her horse to prove she wasn’t using anything but her natural talent.”

“All right, is this a naked archery contest?” Tony asked.

“Typically,” Sigyn nodded.

“It is… a bit easier for the female competitors,” Thor said. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“Yeah,” Tony grimaced, “so, how about we not think about that.”

Mostly because Sigyn was most excited for them, the rowing and knot tying contests were held first. Since there were only two rowing machines, only two participants could row at a time. To make things seem more like a real competition, Sigyn had decided that whichever one of the two competitors reached 15 miles first would advance to the next stage of competition. The result was a rather heated battle between Steve and Thor where Thor nearly threw the rowing machine in celebration of his victory, and Tony whined about how he would have won if only he had been allowed to use the Iron Man gauntlets. Natasha and Clint wound up being the surprise standouts in the knot tying competition, Natasha because of some strange facet of Black Widow training and Clint because of his experience in the circus securing and moving various types of apparatus and tents. Jane had given up halfway through in frustration, and she and Darcy wound up in a corner of the room learning from Loki what types of knots one wanted to tie if they wanted to keep a large, super strong man tied to something - perhaps a headboard - for a long period of time.

In the interest of fairness to all the participants, Sigyn decided that Clint should be the judge of the dart throwing competition as he would undoubtedly beat everyone else. In addition to a regular-style dart contest, a second contest was held to see who could execute the best, most artistic throw and still manage to hit closest to the center of the target. Loki proved exceptionally adept at this contest because of his knife-throwing skills as did Natasha and perhaps not so surprisingly Steve, though he was used to throwing much larger objects. Thor threw a dart that not only missed the target but also with such force that it went completely threw the wall and into the next room, sticking into a leather chair. Tony also missed the dart board entirely, mainly because he was still laughing after Thor’s throw. Bruce was just happy he remained calm enough to hit the target. Pepper turned out to actually be a very decent dart player herself.

Technically, the egg toss was more of a children’s competition than one for adults, but it was one of the few Ostara competitions that could be safely done in the tower rooms. For the egg toss competition, Sigyn specifically chose the pairs knowing full well she couldn’t trust Thor and Loki to team up and not throw eggs at each other on purpose. When they were children, anytime Thor and Loki got to participate in an egg toss competition - even if they were paired up with other partners - the two brothers ended up chasing each other around and pelting eggs at each other. Frigga was always exasperated by the lack of decorum her sons always seemed to show during this competition, though she secretly found it funny. The Allfather, too, had found it hilarious to see his sons chasing each other around, throwing eggs at each other. But now that Sigyn looked back on it, the image of the jovial Allfather encouraging such competition between his sons seemed less like a happy family memory and more just one of many events that had set the stage for the issues her husband now faced.

Though she had debated pairing her husband and his brother up for old times sake, Sigyn decided in the end it might not be in the best interest of the cleanliness of the Tower. Therefore, Loki was paired with Tony, Pepper with Bruce, Clint with Natasha, Thor with Steve, and Darcy with Jane.
Surprisingly, Loki and Tony were the first ones out after Tony got distracted by Pepper’s butt in yoga pants as she threw her egg, and the egg Tony was supposed to catch hit him in the face. Loki then demanded everything start over and he be given a new, less easily distracted partner. This resulted in Tony being repaired with DUM-E and Sigyn stepping in to participate in the contest with her husband. Tony ended up being the first one kicked out again - not because DUM-E could catch an egg but rather because Pepper’s yoga pants were still proving too distracting for Tony to catch accurately. Thor accidently quashed his and Steve’s egg after underestimating his own strength and Darcy and Jane were out when Jane suddenly thought of something she needed to write down, abandoning her post and letting the egg Darcy had just thrown land right on the floor where Jane had been standing. Seeing this caused Clint to crack up and miss the egg Natasha had just thrown at him, and the literal egg on Clint’s face caused Loki to crack up to the point he missed the egg Sigyn had thrown toward him. Of course, upon realizing he wasn’t going to catch the egg, Loki deftly moved aside and allowed the egg to sail forward, and the egg ended up hitting Thor in the back where he was a foot or so away chatting with Tony. Bruce was so surprised that he and Pepper had actually won the egg toss that he ended up dropping the egg on his own shoes, breaking it open.

Once the games were cleared away - the ruined eggs with the aid of Sigyn’s seiðr - it was time for the meal. If Thor was still disappointed in the fact that there was no stag meat to be had but instead a wealth of fish dishes and roast chicken, he was smart enough not to make a comment about it. While he did like red meat, Thor liked making his sister-in-law happy more than he cared about what was going into his belly. He also liked not being stabbed by his brother more than he cared about meal times. Instead, Thor shot his younger brother a knowing smile as they both chose chicken as their first meat of the evening, a decidedly more Asgardian-style dish than any of the fish Sigyn had provided. By contrast, Sigyn had a hard time trying to figure out which one of the fish dishes she had cooked that she wanted to indulge in first.

“So, I’m guessing fishing is a big industry in Vanaheim?” Bruce ventured.

“One of the largest,” Sigyn nodded. “Vanaheim provides much of the fish to other realms, especially those like Niðavellir where there really is no agriculture to speak of and those like Asgard where there isn’t a large enough fish supply to feed the population.”

“Is overfishing a problem on Asgard?” Bruce asked.

“Asgardians aren’t particularly big fish eaters,” Loki said. “Fishing is more of a recreational sport there than something done for eating. Though because it is the capital of the Nine, Asgard draws residents from all over the realms and therefore must have enough fish to supply those Vanir, Elves, and others who do enjoy fish.”

“A fish dish doesn’t necessarily go awry in Asgard,” Thor said, a bit defensively, “but it is seen more as an appetizer course than real filling meat by most.”

“So, how does Vanaheim balance providing fish to all of these realms with its own overfishing concerns?” Pepper asked curiously.

“Seiðr,” Thor said.

“To a small extent,” Loki snorted.

“The Royal House of Vanaheim owns and operates many government fisheries, fish nurseries, and research centers dedicated to preserving the fish population,” Sigyn said. “If a population gets low, moratoriums on harvesting those fish are put into place and emphasis is put on harvesting more healthy or invasive populations.”
“I didn’t think invasive species would be an issue in Space Paradise,” Tony commented offhandedly.

“Unfortunately, Vanaheim’s love of learning about new fish species, crossbreeding, and importing fish from other realms as pets has backfired more than a few times,” Loki said. “And there was also the case of one nobleman who amassed a very large, very exotic aquarium at his seaside estate which was then ravaged by a hurricane that sent all of his pets out into the oceans.”

“Sounds like a real jerk,” Tony nodded.

“He was the Allmother’s grandfather,” Thor said, a bit annoyed. “Adelhild Neidmarr.”

“He was a bit of a crackpot,” Loki admitted. “Sware his mother was a selkie, even though there was plenty of evidence to the contrary. Drowned himself one night when he swam out in the ocean and tried to force himself to change into his ‘true form.’ Mother was but a babe when that happened.”

“I thought you said your world only had mermen,” Tony said.

“Selkies aren’t mermen, Tony,” Steve rolled his eyes. “They’re shapeshifters who live as seals in the ocean and then as humans on land. And you gotta be careful with their skins.”

“How are you an expert on selkies?” Tony asked.

“My ma used to tell me stories about them,” Steve shrugged.

“Lemme guess, there used to be selkies here in the times when Asgard intervened on earth?” Clint asked.

“Certainly,” Sigyn nodded. “Selkies are very personable creatures. They would most certainly delight in the companionship of humans. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if there were some who managed to stay here after Asgard’s forces had left.”

“But Thor’s not part selkie,” Darcy said.

“Not likely,” Thor nodded. “Though many thought Loki’s shapeshifting abilities may have lent more credence to the tale.”

“Really?” Tony said intrigued.

“Before my adoption was made known to me,” Loki said, a bit annoyed, “I was - painfully - always compared to members of Odin’s side of the family. It was a comfort to know that I might have something in common with Frigga’s relations. Other than seiðr, of course, which everyone thought I should be ashamed of. Not that anyone ever discouraged the seiðr Thor inherited from that side of the family.”

“Thor doesn’t have magic,” Darcy snorted. Thor blushed bright red.

“Everyone has a bit of seiðr in them,” Sigyn argued. “Actually, Thor has more than a bit. Where else does his lightning come from?”

“Your lightning is magic?” Steve asked, surprised.

“I thought the lightning came from the hammer,” Tony said confused.

“No,” Thor harrumphed. “The lightning is all me! I had it long before the hammer!”

“It’s true,” Loki nodded. “And you wouldn’t believe how many accidental fires he started while he
was trying to harness it. Not to mention that whole four decade period where he gave a static shock to everyone he touched. I wish I had one of your handheld talking boxes then to capture exactly how atrocious his hair looked.”

“Oh! Remember when he accidentally magnetized his opponent’s armor during that battle?” Sigyn laughed. Loki started laughing and while he was trying very hard to appear angry, Thor cracked a smile himself. It had been fun trying to fight a man whose armor kept trying to stick to itself.

“Okay, Hammer Time,” Tony said. “We are definitely doing some magnetic experiments with you just for fun later. Brucie Bear, Foster you in?”

“Definitely,” Jane said before poking Thor in the ribs. “And you definitely owe me for holding out your ability to magnetize things.”

“Hey, can you remagnetize stuff?” Darcy said. “Because I have this awesome magnet that’s losing its stickiness…”

“We should magnetize Cap’s Shield!” Tony announced out of nowhere.

“No,” Steve, Pepper, and Bruce said at the same time.

“The last thing I want is for the shield to pull me toward something I don’t want to get near,” Steve pointed out. “Or for it to attach someone after I throw it.”

“Is vibranium even magnetic?” Pepper asked.

“I’d rather not melt my shield trying to find out,” Steve cautioned.

“Shield’s a vibranium, steel, and adamantium alloy,” Tony corrected.

“From what we know of vibranium, it’s non-ferrous and therefore likely non-magnetic,” Bruce pointed out.

“But the steel and adamantium are ferrous,” Tony pointed out. “I’m sure some magnetic qualities of those aspects could be brought out.”

“Why are we still talking about magnetizing my shield?” Steve groaned.

“You know, I bet if we created the right electromagnet, it would be a lot easier for that shield to return to you rather than tossing it at people and just hoping it would bounce back,” Tony pointed out.

“Maybe like in a glove or wristband,” Bruce agreed. Steve pondered for a moment.

“I mean, that would be nice,” Steve admitted. “You know, so long as it doesn’t rip my arm off or something.”

“No more shop talk at the table,” Pepper warned.

“Fine, fine,” Tony sighed.

After the meal was finished, there was some traditional dancing with Sigyn teaching the Midgardains some of the more traditional Vanir steps. It was decided that Vanir dancing was easily more sensual than Asgardian dancing, which was more like country dances and square dancing than anything else. Midway through the dancing, Loki and Sigyn disappeared and it fell to Thor to conduct the ceremonial bonfire lighting by helping Tony light the fireplace. Thor then assured everyone that his
brother and sister-in-law most likely would not be returning to the festivities as this was usually the point in the celebration when they went off to conduct a private finale to the festival. After that, the dancing devolved into a typical Midgardian dance party with Steve attempting to teach everyone how to Lindy Hop while Tony tried to teach Steve and Thor the “dances of his people,” the Funky Chicken and the Robot. All in all, it was a great celebration for everyone save Thor, who wound up having to sleep on Jane and Darcy’s couch because of the loud noises coming from across the hall all evening.
It was the last Saturday in March when Stark Tower had been invaded by nine year olds. Rhodey’s niece Keisha was celebrating her ninth birthday, and, after telling all of her friends and classmates that Iron Man sometimes came to hang out with her family, she had begged her Uncle Rhodey to have Iron Man come to her birthday party. Keisha’s parents and even Rhodey himself had expected Tony to poo poo the idea, but instead, the billionaire had come back with a suggestion that all the kids take the train up from Philly and have the birthday party in Stark Tower. Rhodey had been taken aback, not sure that a place full of superheroes and experimental equipment was the best place to have 20 nine-year-olds running free. Steve and Natasha, perhaps the only two members of the Avengers who had the skill and authority to corral kids, were already back in D.C. to prep for an upcoming mission. Pepper, too, was a bit skeptical about the suggestion.

Tony had come back with an argument about encouraging STEM education among children, especially young girls, and how it could be a nice pilot program to see if maybe offering birthday celebrations would be a good idea for the Tower. School groups from local STEM schools and underprivileged public schools in the Greater New York area already toured some of the tower facilities and got to have a meal in the employee cafeteria as part of an outreach program Pepper had started. SI had also been looking into expanding its highly-rated and very competitive college internship program to high school students, especially those with promising STEM careers on the horizon who may need more than a leg up in the funding of their college or university education. Pepper relented, but cautioned that this occasion meant in no way that any future children’s birthday parties would be repeated in the Tower. Unfortunately for Pepper, this warning made Tony go all out with the planning of this possibly once-ever event.

Tony made sure he had both SI employees and interns on hand for the party to show off to the girls some of the latest innovations and products the company would soon be rolling out as well as educating them on how ideas got developed. The kids would get to do a walkthrough of creating their own project from the planning to the development to the creation stage thanks to a 3-D printer station. He had also set up a station where the kids could play with moldable materials like modelling clay and plastics, synthetic fibers, vinyl, styrofoam, metal clay, and an injection molding set-up to create things as a fun party activity. For the meal, he had the employee cafeteria set up a make-your-own pizza bar followed by a make-your-own ice cream and cupcake bar for dessert. Pepper was actually slightly impressed that Tony had found some fun, hands-on ways for the kids to enjoy themselves without injuring each other, though she had drawn the line at letting the kids up to the range to try their hands at shooting the Iron Man gauntlets. There apparently weren’t enough permission slips and waivers in the world for Pepper to allow that to happen.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly when fifteen minutes until the guests arrived Tony started to panic. This particularly seemed to rile Pepper since Tony was a lover of all things organized chaos - as children’s birthday parties usually were - and so the fact that he was freaking out about
something meant it was something that really should be freaked out about. She managed to catch him in the elevator about to head up to the residential floors and demanded he explain what was so terrifying that he had muttered “oh, fuck” under his breath and then taken off running like there was a call to assemble.

“The Mathemagician cancelled,” Tony explained, as Pepper ushered him out of the elevator.

“The magician cancelled?” Pepper asked, confused.

“Not a regular magician, Pep,” Tony rolled his eyes. “That would be too corny. A magician at a kid’s birthday party. No, this guy was a math -a-magician. He would do complicated math problems and then things like the kids could should out equations and stuff and he could solve them quickly. Like magic.”

“And how is that less corny than a magician?” Pepper asked confused.

“The point is, he cancelled at the last second,” Tony grumbled. “Something about a fight with the cabbie and now he’s not going to make it… something about a lawsuit…”

“Okay, well, then we just don’t have a magician,” Pepper shrugged.

“Math -a-magician,” Tony corrected, exasperated. “And without him we have a thirty-minute slot of time to fill between the anti-gravity bottle arts and crafts project and when the cafeteria is ready for the kids to do the make-your-own-pizza party. I mean, we could move the autonomous vehicle demonstration up, but we’d have to cut the time on it and then we’d have an hour of time…”

“Please tell me you are not taking these kids out for a spin in a car,” Pepper groaned.

“No,” Tony snorted. “It’s just a prototype on a toy car for now. We couldn’t get all the kids in and still have time for cake and ice cream anyway.”

“So, where were you going to find a replacement for this magician?” Pepper sighed.

“Math -a-magician,” Tony rolled his eyes, “and I mean, why not replace the math guy with someone who can do real magic tricks, right?”

“You are seriously considering having Sigyn entertain children at a birthday party with her magic tricks?” Pepper groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“What? No,” Tony said. “I was going to bring in Lokes and that magic kit Clint got him for his birthday. He’s apparently gotten really good at the card tricks and despite the fact that he thinks pulling a rabbit out of a top hat is ‘a useless waste of the time of everyone involved’ and ‘a pathetic, simplistic magical act so low it deserves being described as a trick’ he has gotten very good at it.”

“You might want to bring along Sigyn, just in case,” Pepper mentioned. “Having someone who possess both magic and is typically good intentioned might be nice to have around, especially considering Loki isn’t always very patient and he seems to resort to stabbing people or setting things on fire when stuff isn’t going his way.”

“But he’s great with kids, Pep,” Tony said. “Even you can’t deny that.”

“Go get your magician,” Pepper sighed.

“I wonder if I can make him wear a stupid pointed hat with stars on it,” Tony pondered as the elevator doors closed in front of him.
By now, Tony Stark had learned to be prepared for anything to be happening in Loki and Sigyn’s private quarters. Even those who were politely invited in rather than barging in on the couple had dealt with strange sights before them, and there was always a chance - even if they were expecting company - for either Loki or Sigyn to be in various states of undress when guests arrived. Tony wondered what strange thing he would burst in on this time, whether it be the two of them feeding each other lollipops and popsicles in an overly sensual manner or some other weird food-related situation that seemed more sexual than it probably should be. Most of the Tower’s residents still hadn’t personally forgiven Clint for introducing Loki and Sigyn to the concept of body shots.

Then again, it could be one of those weird scenarios like when Tony, Clint and Natasha had come in to find Sigyn making Loki help her reenact her favorite Vanir epic poem with her stuffed animals or the time she had been midway through braiding bells and ribbons into Loki’s hair only for Thor and Steve to come in, wanting to see if Loki wanted to join them in the training rooms. Then there was the time he and Bruce had walked in on Loki and Sigyn in the kitchen, dissecting some kind of weird alien plant that looked like a purple palmetto leaf, save that its leaves seemed to move of their own accord and each leaf had a rapidly blinking eyeball at its very top. Tony had barely enough time to process that the eye of each leaf seemed to be looking in a different direction before Loki cut one of the eyes off the top of the leaf and then proceeded to deftly pop the eyeball out of its socket. He and Bruce both agreed they probably would have rather walked in on the pair naked and making out.

Fortunately for Tony, this intrusion into their quarters was more run of the mill than anything. Sigyn was sitting on the floor in front of the couch in a couture gown, watching Animal Planet and eating pastries that looked like they were made by Marie Antoinette’s personal chef. There was a magpie sitting on each of her shoulders. Loki was behind her, slightly slumped on the couch as he braided flowers into his wife’s hair. Loki had donned his usual Asgardian black leather pants, a black t-shirt Thor had bought for him that said “Sorry I’m late. I didn’t want to come,” and black fuzzy cat slippers Sigyn had no doubt bought him. Despite how fastidious and finicky Loki could be about his appearance, he wore anything his wife gave to him whether it was a headband with cat ears, a puka shell necklace, or the t-shirts Darcy had made for them that said “If Lost Return to Sigyn” and “I am Sigyn” in both English and Asgardian runes.

“Hello, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said as Tony entered the room. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Yes,” Loki nodded, “what is so urgent it merits barging in on our rooms without so much as an alert from your talking building.”

“I told JARVIS to ping you guys in the elevator,” Tony said confused.

“And he did,” Sigyn said, scowling at her husband at the same time an annoyed JARVIS announced: “I did.”

“Ugh,” Loki moaned. “You and your automated assistant are no fun.”

“What is it you require?” Sigyn asked Tony happily.

“Lokes, I was just checking in to see if you still have that joke magic kit Clint got you for your birthday,” Tony said.

“He does,” Sigyn nodded. “It’s in the library next to the stack of the ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ novelty texts Sir Clint said we should acquire.”

“Can I borrow it?” Tony asked curiously.
“You want to use my present for your own gains? And then, in your carelessness and because it is my possession and not your own, most likely break it?” Loki huffed. “Who do you think you are? Thor?”

“What on earth is he talking about?” Tony asked Sigyn.

“Sometimes, Sir Stark,” Sigyn sighed, “it is obviously apparent you grew up without siblings.”

“Look, the mathemagician I hired for the birthday party bailed at the last minute,” Tony explained. “And so I need some magical entertainment for about half an hour to keep the kids occupied. I figured you wouldn’t want to degrade yourself by performing asinine and completely fake magic tricks, so I thought I could use the fake magic kit and do it myself.”

“You hired a what?” Sigyn asked, confused.

“A mathemagician,” Tony explained.

“You hired a tutor to entertain them?” Loki asked, bewildered. “It has been a while since I have attended a Name Day celebration for a child, but best I can recall tutors are not typically invited. Unless Thor has set them on fire, and it is his way of apologizing.”

“Maybe this tutor is an arithmancer,” Sigyn suggested. “Sir Stark did say he was educated in mathematics and seiðr.”

“A what?” Tony said.

“Arithmancy,” Loki explained, “is a highly convoluted type of seiðr where one uses various mathematical formulae and calculations to make predictions of the future as well as the study of numerology, the belief that numbers and magical events often coincide. These arts are typically used in astrological and astronomical magics.”


“Well, if you don’t need an arithmancer,” Loki huffed, “what kind of magister do you need?”


“Minor trickery at best,” Loki snorted. “One doesn’t need full-fledged seiðr to accomplish many of those acts. One doesn’t even require seiðr for several of them.”

“Well, you can bring the wife along, if you like,” Tony said. “You know, just in case you need some full-fledged magic. And magician’s assistants get to wear some hot outfits, if I do say so myself.”


“Us?” Sigyn snorted. “Perhaps I would like to be the mathemagician as I am the one in full possession of her seiðr. And I am well versed in arithmancy, even if you think it is a useless pursuit, husband.” Loki groaned. He would pay for that comment later.

“Yeah,” Tony pointed out. “It wouldn’t be good if you accidentally froze any of the kids in a giant block of ice.”
“Even if they are being disrespectful?” Loki huffed.

“Perhaps Sigyn…” Tony began.

“I shall be your… magician,” Loki announced before turning to his wife. “I do admire your considerable talent with seiðr, my love, but you must admit, which of the two of us is better at showmanship?”

“I suppose,” Sigyn sighed. “But I get to pick the outfits.”

“Great!” Tony said. “See you guys in a bit then!”

A few months ago, if anyone had approached Loki and asked him to help provide entertainment for a child’s Name Day party, scoffing at them was probably the least he would do. Even if it had been for Idis, his much beloved niece, Loki would have balked at being asked to perform magical acts for small children. Naturally, performing small acts of seiðr for children would probably be the most humiliating thing that a person could ask a magister with Loki’s reputation to do. Not that anyone on Asgard would ask for a magister to perform at Name Day celebrations for their children in the first place. Any trick that would probably delight these Midgardian children was something those Asgardian children with even a hint of seiðr had already mastered. Which is why, perhaps, most Asgardian magic-wielders would have found it insulting to be asked to not only perform at a Midgardian children’s Name Day celebration but to perform the level of seiðr that was considered so basic a child could do it.

However, the less emotionally stunted and more self-actualized Loki that now stood before the throng of third graders had learned that some of the things he used to balk at could actually prove quite entertaining if given a proper chance. In fact, Loki had already determined several things he liked about his eminent performance. While the magic being used wasn’t exactly his own, Loki did like being in a setting where at least some seiðr was taking place. Loki also had to admit he rather did like having the undivided attention of an entire room - even if those in attendance were primarily children. It was a while since he had such an apt audience, eager to watch his showcase of his skills - albeit it was technically Sigyn’s skills that were actually being showcased. Loki, of course, loved his wife, but she definitely did not have the flair for showmanship he possessed.

Of course, his favorite thing about performance was probably the immaculate costumes both he and his wife had donned for the demonstration. Loki had put on a green satin suit with black accents, which he felt rather powerful and cunning in despite Stark laughing and referring to him as some sort of comical villain known as the Riddler. Perhaps even more than his own attire, Loki enjoyed the green sequin dress his wife had donned to play the role of his assistant, complete with peacock feathers in her hair. She was a rather distracting creature even without the feathers fluttering whenever she moved her head. In truth, the pair had worked out it was probably best if Loki employed his showmanship to distract the audience while Sigyn stealthily employed her own seiðr for the tricks. Thankfully, the years of practice and tandem seiðr wielding between them meant that a few small party tricks would be terribly easy to do.

“Alright, everyone,” Tony introduced, “today we have a special treat for you. Performing for the first time on this planet are Mr. and Missus Mischief. They’ve got more than a few tricks up their sleeves. So let’s give them a round of applause.” Loki basked in the applause - even if most of the adults
were only doing so half-heartedly - for a moment before stepping forward.

“Thank you, Stark,” Loki said, giving an extravagant bow before turning back to the assembled crowd. “Now, I understand we are here today to celebrate one young lady in particular.”

“That’s me!” Keisha popped up excitedly. Rhodey seemed to go a little tense as Loki gently guided his niece up out of the crowd of children and over to the makeshift stage area.

“And your name, my dear, I understand is Keisha,” Loki said.

“It is,” she beamed.

“And I also understand, Miss Keisha,” Loki said pulling a light purple ribbon from the sleeve of his jacket, “that your favorite color is lilac.” Keisha’s parents let out a surprised gasp as Keisha herself squealed.

“How did you know that?” Keisha asked excitedly. With a smirk, Loki just laid a finger against his nose before taking the ribbon and wrapping it around Keisha’s wrist once, twice and then a third time.

“Yes, yes,” Loki nodded as he removed the ribbon from her wrist. “Just as I thought. Now, Miss Keisha, would you do me the honor of counting to three with me?”

Keisha nodded and counted along with him. As the pair said “three,” Loki snapped the lilac ribbon and it turned into a bouquet of lilac flowers, which he then presented to the birthday girl. Even the adults in the room were surprised and impressed with the trick and even Rhodey gave Loki some nice applause for it. Loki then thanked Keisha for her participation in the trick and guided her back to her seat before he and Sigyn moved forward with the rest of their act. He started out with basic card tricks, letting the children pick and choose cards then guessing them or having them shuffle the card back into the deck only for Loki to find it on the very top or its exact location within the deck. He had one adult name a card and then another name a suit before pulling said card out of Rhodey’s nose, which the children found delightful and Rhodey found a bit troubling. Finally, Loki made the cards spontaneously burst into flames that then produced a rain of confetti over the children.

Card tricks done, Loki and Sigyn moved on to other illusions. Loki proved rather adept with the linking rings without need for aid from Sigyn. He did a few of the other customary magicians tricks such as magically repairing a rope Sigyn cut in two for him and then using some sort of magical refilling pitcher to pour a glass of lemonade for everyone in the audience. He then had one of the children from the audience put their hand in the pitcher only to find sand in it instead of lemonade. Loki made several items float, including Tony, and then made various doves and rabbits appear out of various items. Afterwards, the animals seemed to congregate around Sigyn, who didn’t actually seem to be doing much other than handing Loki has equipment, showcasing him like a Barker Beauty, and then clapping enthusiastically for each trick. No one in the room had any idea that most of the magic - at least the parts that didn’t involve sleight of hand - were all her work.

As Loki drew to his grand finale, Tony was actually a little bit nervous. Right before he had led them into the room to set up, Pepper had asked to make sure they weren’t doing any sawing a person in half or escape illusion tricks that might be too frightening for the young audience. Loki at first seemed appalled at the thought he might harm his wife - even as an illusion - but then began regaling Pepper and Tony with tales of some of his most daring escapes and close calls. Sigyn interrupted her husband to assure their hosts that all of the tricks would be appropriate for a young audience, and while Loki remained contradictory about this request in Pepper and Tony’s presence, he was actually more than willing to work out a trick that would entrance but not terrify his young audience.
In the end, the pair resorted to good old teleportation - something that didn’t exactly wow on Asgard but would certainly stun a group of Midgardians. Loki roped Keisha’s parents in as his assistants for this trick, having them hold each end of a scarf on opposite sides of Sigyn. The couple were then instructed to use the scarf like a skipping room for Sigyn to jump over. The third time Sigyn went to jump over the scarf, a flare from Loki’s palms seemed to make her disappear into thin air, causing the adults on either side of her to drop the scarf in bewilderment. While the adults in the room seemed a bit concerned, the children went wild in excitement.

“Now, now,” Loki said. “We have to bring her back, don’t we? After all, it isn’t very polite to make someone disappear and then not help them reappear again. So, on the count of three, will you all please join me in saying ‘Please come back’ to bring my lovely assistant back to us?”

After Loki’s count off the children - and even a few of the still confused adults in the room - asked for Sigyn back only to be greeted by a knock on the door behind them. Tony opened the door to find Sigyn standing there this time in a completely different black sequin dress to the one she had been wearing throughout the entire performance, raven feathers in her hair instead of the peacocks she had left with. She rejoined her husband at his makeshift stage with a smile as the crowd marveled at her reappearance. With that, she and Loki took their bows and Tony announced it was time to head to the cafeteria for lunch. Loki found himself rather surprised when the birthday girl herself approached him and asked if he and his wife would like to join them for the meal. With a glance to Stark and a nod of approval, Loki agreed and thanked her for the invitation.

“You may have unleashed a monster here,” Rhodey informed Tony and Pepper as the guests poured over the make-your-own pizza bar.

“Why’s that?” Tony said, looking over to where Loki and Sigyn were chatting amiably with Keisha’s parents.

“That’s the best magic show everyone here has seen,” Rhodey said. “Even the adults are convinced that was real magic.”

“I’m pretty sure it was real magic,” Pepper pointed out.

“Magic is just…” Tony began.

“...science we can’t explain yet,” Pepper finished with a roll of her eyes.

“But seriously, how am I supposed to explain that?” Rhodey groaned. “All the other parents are wanting to know if Loki can do their kid’s birthday parties and over events. I’ve put them off by explaining that he’s prohibitively expensive for anyone whose not a billionaire and that he did today as a personal favor to you, but it’s not sticking.”

“Don’t worry Rhodey-bear,” Tony insisted. “He’s an attention seeker, but he knows when to draw the line. Too bad Odin didn’t banish him two years ago when all this started, though. I’m sure if we had given Loki his own one-man show on Broadway or a Las Vegas residency he probably would have worked through his issues sooner. Not being brainwashed by some weird ancient all-powerful being probably would have helped his penchant for mass murder as well.”

“This is exactly why I’m worried. He’s a mass murder...albeit a somewhat rehabilitated and reformed one… and he’s got a bunch of kids and adults thinking he’s the next Houdini,” Rhodey pointed out.

“Darby’s mom is a TV producer in Philly and she wants him to do a live audience special. You remember what happened the last time this guy had a large audience, right?”

“I’m pretty sure appearing on television kind of violates his whole keeping his identity a secret,
certain rules about using magic in front of us mere mortals, and not leaving the Tower without my permission and escorted by one or more Avengers,” Tony pointed out.

“You really think a guy who likes to show off like Loki is going to turn down the chance to be on TV?” Rhodey added. As Tony began to wheedle, Rhodey added: “When was the last time you turned down a chance to be on TV.”

“Hey! I turn down chances to be on TV all the time!” Tony huffed.

“I turn down chances for you to be on TV all the time,” Pepper pointed out. “Though, I have to admit, social media has had the advantage of allowing you to communicate with your legion of sycophants in real time rather than the old standby of doing something outrageous and hoping the paparazzi show up.”

“That was one time,” Tony said. “You weren’t returning my calls. I panicked. And I was only a little drunk.”

“You crashed a car into a mailbox and then went across the street to get a burger while you waited for the police and the paps to show up. And all because you misplaced your favorite tie pin, and I wasn’t answering my phone,” Pepper pointed out. “One day, I’m going to get so mad at you that I’m going to write a tell-all about my days as your assistant, and you aren’t going to come out looking good in it.”

“Duly noted,” Tony smirked before turning back to Rhodey. “But seriously, even with his love of drama and being the center of attention, Loki is not going to star in his own television special or start popping up as the entertainment for Saudi princes and the daughters of Russian oil billionaires.”

“And how do you know that?” Rhodey asked.

“One word,” Tony smirked. “Sigyn.”

“True,” Rhodey admitted. “She doesn’t let him get away with much if she doesn’t want to.”

“Not to mention he turns into a total five year old if he has to be apart from her for too long,” Tony nodded. “She puts her foot down and he might throw a fit, but he’ll do whatever she tells him.”

“Lucky her,” Pepper snorted.

“Hey, I do what you tell me to,” Tony said. “Most of the time. After I’ve already done the thing you told me not to and it turned out the exact way you said it would.”

“Well, Stark,” Loki said, having slunk over without alerting Rhodey, Tony or Pepper to his presence, “I have to say this is not the typical Name Day feast I am used to, but your tiny guests seem to be enjoying it immensely.”

“From anyone else, I would think that was a backhanded compliment rather than a straightforward one,” Tony snorted.

“You also do not have to worry about what to do with the vegetables the children have not placed on their creations,” Loki said. “Sigyn took most of them and has expressed her willingness to eat any that may go unused.”

“You’re not going to pull any more playing cards out of my nose are you?” Rhodey asked Loki, annoyed.
“Not unless you happen to be missing any,” Loki responded with a Cheshire cat grin.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said slowly backing away, “I’m gonna go see if my pizza is ready yet…”

“Come on now,” Tony said to Loki. “Be nice to Rhodey. He’s a sweetheart.”

“I apologize, but I can’t help it,” Loki said. “He reminds me too much of Thor.” Tony quirked a brow at that you. “You know, military background. Flies through the air. Not impressed with my tricks. Yells at sporting events on the talking box.”

“No offense, but Rhodey is much cooler than your brother,” Tony said, “who by the way was really put out that he couldn’t put in an appearance at the party today. He really wanted to see your illusion work.”

“I can’t decide if that is because he is so easily amused or if it is because he’s trying to act like he shows an interest in my seiðr after more than a millenia of mocking it,” Loki huffed.

“I think he was just trying to be supportive of your endeavors,” Tony shrugged. “People can change, Lokes. Look at what you’ve done. I’m sure Thor can come around, too. Anyway, I had Jarv film it for him to watch later.” Loki shot Tony an incredulous look. “Come on, man. Let him be supportive. If I’ve learned anything at my many attempts at rehab and recovery it’s that you have to hold on to the people who stay in your corner no matter what. Those are the people who really care about you.”

“It was mostly Sigyn’s work, anyway,” Loki said dismissively. “I mainly provided the distraction needed for her. She is marvelous, though, isn’t she? I do wish she got more appreciation for her talents, but Sigyn isn’t exactly one to take the spotlight.”

“You definitely lucked out there, Mr. Showmanship,” Tony nodded.

“Odin once said marrying her was the only worthwhile thing I ever managed to accomplish,” Loki said. “Though he did add I didn’t exactly accomplish it the right way. Still, I have to agree it was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.”

“Wow, you got your old man to admit you accomplished something?” Tony whistled. “That must have been some trick right there.”

“Alright,” Pepper sighed, “the two of you can stop comparing emotional baggage. That’s a game no one ever wins.”

“Still insulted about being asked to do ‘minor trickery’ for children?” Tony asked Loki.

“I am rarely wrong,” Loki began, “but I have to admit this endeavor turned out more pleasing than I expected. Your guests provided a most welcoming and enthusiastic audience. And, of course, I could never pass up a chance to see my beloved so delectably dressed. I am a bit surprised this type of fashion is not more common on Midgard.”

“You seriously can’t expect every woman on earth to dress up like a Vegas showgirl,” Pepper scoffed.

“Heels, feathers and sequins, man,” Tony said. “There’s just something about a woman in those…”

“I’m going to check on the cafeteria workers before I strangle you,” Pepper rolled her eyes.

“Come on, Pep, you know you look gorgeous in anything,” Tony said. “But if you ever did want to try…”
“Bye, Tony,” Pepper said before heading off.

“We do require rather a lot from those that love us,” Loki mused as Pepper sashayed off, stopping to chat with a few of the kids before heading over to the cafeteria manager.

“Eh, but we make up for it. Most of the time,” Tony shrugged. “Besides, their lives would probably be awfully dull without us around to keep them on their toes.”

“And what delightful toes,” Loki smirked as he saw Sigyn dancing toward them with plates in either hand.

“So, have you caught the show biz bug?” Tony asked him. “Once this punishment is up, do you plan on forgoing your princely duties and starting a career as a children’s party entertainer?”

“I enjoyed myself today, but not enough to make a career out of it,” Loki snorted. “Rabbits in hats and disappearing acts aside, seiðr is actually a very serious business, and I have my doubts Midgard is completely prepared for the revelations that come with its usage.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Tony rolled his eyes. “Still, if you ever find yourself short of cash, I’ve got some contacts in Vegas who would love to host a magician who doesn’t go by the nickname ‘Mindfreak’ or is basically trying to kill himself by outdoing his own stunts.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Stark,” Loki snorted.

“I have retrieved our meals!” Sigyn said, carrying over two the personal pan pizzas. One was covered in vegetables and a light dusting of cheese while the second was covered in as much meats and cheese that could fit and still cook.

“Thank you, lykyng,” Loki said, taking his plate from her. He seemed to notice something was off about his plate and from the bottom of it managed to produce a second plate covered in pepperoni and various slices of cheese.

“I persuaded the workers to get you a little something extra,” Sigyn beamed at him.

“Isn’t she magnificent,” Loki said to Stark before taking his wife’s plate as well, balancing all three dishes on one arm while using the other to guide his wife to a table for two in the corner. As they sat down together, Tony had to admit they were pretty damn adorable. Hopefully, their salacious way of feeding each other pizza wouldn’t cause him to ban the couple from the cafeteria until the children left.
April Fooled

Chapter Summary

Or, in which cultural holiday delights a certain mischievous godling

Being that mischief was one of the things he was god of, sensing when something mischievous was going on was part and parcel of Loki’s very inner nature. Like most creatures, Loki experienced that primeval tingling sensation to alert him to danger but in his particular case, there was also a unique tingling sensation anything Loki sensed some sort of prank or roguish behavior was taking place nearby. This sense of his was practically going haywire by the end of March, and eventually, he could not longer hide the urge to seek out what nefarious doings were at work. So, after lunch one day when Sigyn was preoccupied helping Jane and Darcy and their work, Loki headed out to find the source of the mischief he was seeking.

It had been a good three months since anyone in the Tower had found a firecracker in their toilet or served brussel sprouts covered in chocolate that looked like truffles, so perhaps some mischief was a bit overdue in the area. To Tony’s utter disgust and horror, Sigyn and Thor had devoured the chocolate covered sprouts as if they were in fact a rare Midgarian delicacy. While each members of the Avengers had their own strategy for livening things up when the Tower started to get dull, Barton and Stark were the only two who usually resorted to livening things up by use of the type of hijinks with which Loki was the most familiar.

The last prank war between the two had begun simply enough with beds being short sheeted and victims having accidentally slapped themselves in the face with handfuls of whipped cream during their sleep. It eventually escalated to a harmless but noxious smelling gas being released in the residential ventilation ducts followed by a rather inspired drawing of a piece of male anatomy on Tony’s bedroom window in bird feces. Loki had rather approved of that last prank, though Pepper had quickly put the mischief to an end after she had been forced to call for the Tower’s window washers to come and remove the offensive graffiti. Following both his senses for mischief and his suspicions surrounding the usual subjects, Loki decided to inspect what Barton and Stark were up to.

The first thing his senses brought him to was one of Barton’s caches tucked away in a random corner of the ventilation shafts. It consisted of a garbage bag full of bouncy balls, several dozen cartons of eggs that were being left to rot, and a quiver of arrows that had been modified to expel glitter and confetti once they hit their target. Loki knew equipment being used for some sort of prank or nefarious action when he saw it - albeit he felt Barton had resulted to some rather juvenile and amateurish items. However, Loki hadn’t yet puzzled out who might be the intended target for Barton’s machinations nor when Barton might be planning to unleash these items. Thor had backed off randomly eating things out of the communal fridge, which meant he and Barton were no longer quarrelling over missing varieties of pickled fish, and there weren’t any other residents Barton seemed to have a quarrel with. The one exception might be his friendly rivalry with Tony that had more than once erupted into a prank war between the two.
Loki sensed that Barton’s cache wasn’t the only one of hidden prank equipment in the Tower, and, hedging his bets, decided to head toward some of Stark’s hiding places to see if the engineer was building anything that could indicate he and Barton were again engaged in covert warfare of an increasingly ridiculous nature. Whereas Barton’s pranks were usually childish and fairly straightforward, Stark’s pranks always seemed to be in somewhat over-mechanized and elaborately convoluted to the point of being dysfunctional. The utter impracticality of Starks ploys often rendered them more annoying for the prankster than the prankee. Loki thought it was a bit unfortunate that Barton’s pranks, while practical, often lacked grand vision while Stark’s ploys had a great deal of vision but were always overly convoluted.

Par for the course, Loki found some interesting things hidden a few secret files tucked away on the StarkPad in Tony’s lab. He found schematics for motion sensor activated glitter and confetti bombs that would go off in the vents that mildly impressed him, some sort of contraption that could make toilets randomly overflow and shoot out water, and something that was either designed to lessen the water pressure in showerheads or overload them to the point of explosion. Loki also noticed that Stark had been tinkering with their joint project, SMEL-E the stink bomb robot. Loki wasn’t so miffed that Stark was again tinkering with the bot as he was that Stark had decided to without him present. The two of them had been in partnership with the creation, up until Pepper decided she didn’t like the the fruits that particular relationship seemed to bear.

After the incident, Pepper had suggested Tony recalibrate the automaton to instead spray pleasing scents in areas of the labs that were either recovering from a recent fire or that had developed an unnatural odor from some kind of experiment. Tony had outdone himself, creating specific odors the bot could generate to please those whose labs he was rescenting. For Bruce it was a nice blend of lavender, chamomile and patchouli. Jane received a blast of cinnamon, early morning dew, and lemon while Darcy’s was more coffee, chocolate, and strawberry. Tony’s own personal scent was oak, vetiver and a tinge of axle grease. If Pepper was in the labs, the bot tended to spray her with the signature perfume Tony had Dior create for Pepper’s birthday one year. Pepper had appreciated the effort, even if it had led to her being sprayed directly in the face once or twice.

However, Tony was now converting the bot back to its original purpose for some reason, and Loki was not pleased at all that he hadn’t at least been invited to help out. In Loki’s mind that was about as clear a sign as any that he might be a target for the bot’s next adventure. Loki decided then and there that if Stark and Barton were not going to make him privy to their machinations they should not be allowed to progress with such machinations at all. Which is why, when Sigyn returned from helping Jane and Darcy for the day to make some afternoon tea for herself and her husband, she found Loki sitting in his favorite chair and reading something on Stark’s personal StarkPad, surrounded by bags of bouncy balls, confetti, glitter, and machine parts as his feet rested upon SMEL-E as if the automaton were instead an ottoman.

“What have you done?” Sigyn demanded instantly.
“You should be proud, wife,” Loki replied. “I have prevented mischief rather than cause it.”

“Even when you prevent mischief you cause it,” Sigyn snorted. “Where did you get these things?”

“In various places in the Tower,” Loki said airily. Sigyn glared at him pointedly. “Dearest, if they were of great importance to their owners they would not have been left out and the open where anyone could stumble upon them.”

“When the owners of these items come to fetch them, I will not stand in their way to defend you,” Sigyn informed her husband.

“Nevermind you that, wife,” Loki said, beckoning her over. “Now, come sit upon my lap and tell me of your day.”

“You are not going to seduce your way out of this trouble,” Sigyn warned him. “I should make you return these items immediately.”

“I have a feeling their owners will be along to claim them shortly,” Loki assured her. “Now, come darling. Tell me of your day.”

“I will tell you,” Sigyn said, stepping into the kitchen, “but I will do it from here. You are not using me as a means to distract those who might come after you seeking their rightful property.”

“Fine, fine,” Loki sighed, before patting his lap, “though I do maintain you would be more comfortable telling your tale from here.”

Sigyn rolled her eyes and then launched into a description of the work Jane had focused on that day. As she talked, Sigyn set some scones baking and then began brewing water in the tea kettle before turning to focus on making the tea blend for their afternoon snack. While Jane hadn’t discovered anything unknown to Asgard as of yet, Sigyn was impressed with the strides she had made considering what little Midgardians knew about the surrounding universe. It was even more surprising that Jane had largely made these discoveries on her own - albeit with some help from Dr. Selvig. Asgard had vast knowledge about the universe and how to traverse it that had been well-known for millennia. However, those initial discoveries made in a time before the early ancestors of modern day humans had begun to develop stone tools had been a group effort, like much of science on various realms, with not one single person taking credit for the whole but rather building on the discoveries of other.
While Dr. Foster was building on previous theories, she had accomplished on her own in a few Midgardian years what had taken some of Asgard’s top researchers several millenia to do as a group. Then again, Asgard had never really been a scholarly world and one did tend to procrastinate more when they knew they had a few thousand years to live rather than a few dozen. Loki somewhat wondered if Sigyn’s thoughts on the laissez-faire attitude of Asgardians toward discovery was a quiet jab at the myriad unfinished projects of his own that were lying around. Of course, Loki himself thought the only reason why Asgard had even bothered to develop the technology to contact and travel between other realms in the first place was so that said realms could be conquered. Even science on Asgard always seemed to have an end goal of bashing someone else over the head.

Sigyn had nearly finished her tale by the time the tea and accompanying scones were complete. Now that they were done as she was bringing them over, Loki smirked, thinking that he was finally going to get a bit of cuddling in with his wife. However, the door was then thrown open and Clint and Tony both barged in at the same time. Had it been Sigyn’s hands rather than her seiðr balancing the tea tray with its side dishes, she probably would have dropped it at the intrusion. Thankfully, the tray magically levitated itself over to the table beside Loki’s chair. As Clint and Tony both blurted out accusations that Loki had been in their stuff, Loki daintily popped a raspberry lemon scone into his mouth.

“Dude! Do you know how many quarters all those bouncy balls cost me?” Clint moaned.

“You could have just bought them in bulk,” Tony said, confused, before turning back to Loki. “But seriously, what gives Reindeer Games? I know that you may have the right to seize whatever you want in the Alldaddy’s name on Asgard, but on earth we don’t take kindly to people taking our stuff.”

“I,” Loki informed them haughtily, “have done you both a favor.”

“Pardon me?” Tony snorted.

“Whatever mischief the two of you have planned is fine,” Loki said. “Not excellent. Not inspired. Not intelligent. Just fine.”

“And?” Clint yawned.

“I think it would be remiss in my duties as god of all things chaotic and mischievous if I allowed the two of you to continue planning rather blase one-off pranks when there is so much more potential for
“Potential?” Clint snorted. “No one’s ever accused me of having that before.”

“Hang on,” Tony said to Loki, “are you offering to tutor us in pranking? Because honestly, I kind of feel a little insulted.”

“I also feel the need to add that introducing our Midgardian friends to your personal brand of mischief might not be something the Allfather will look upon with kindness when it comes time to determine whether or not you have fulfilled your sentence as given,” Sigyn pointed out.

“I’m sure we could pass it off as some sort of ritual bonding activity,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Norns knows Old One-Eye loves those.”

“Perhaps,” Sigyn said thoughtfully. “Adding Thor to the mix might not help either.” Loki let out a pained sound. “The Allfather cannot punish you for something he isn’t punishing Thor for. Your mother and I will see to that.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed.

“Um… Barton and I aren’t exactly looking for pruning lessons,” Tony interjected.

“Yeah,” Barton said. “We were just gearing up for April Fools’ Day.”

“What,” Loki asked, intrigued, “is this absolutely delightful Midgardian holiday I have never heard of before?”

Barton and Stark exchanged knowing grins.
By the time supper was over and Loki had been corralled into helping Thor do the dishes - everyone was supposed to take different nights but Loki always seemed to finagle his way out of it - Loki was thoroughly convinced that April Fools Day must be some modern-day Midgardian interpretation of a festival to celebrate his own godhood. Barton and Stark had explained the pranking elements of the day, but Loki’s incessant questions meant the discussion had continued into the beginning of the group meal that evening. This allowed Jane to chime in with some of the more historical aspects of the day as it related to the changeover from the Gregorian calendar, ancient Celtic and Roman celebrations of the Vernal Equinox and a possible connection to the rook that returned to Noah’s ark with nothing in its beak. Darcy was happy to contribute that some areas of France used the day to throw raw fish at each other.

And while nowhere in Midgardian lore was there anything to explicitly associate the day with the Norse chaos god, both Sigyn and Thor had to agree with Loki’s assessment that the holiday was not unlike some sort of worshipful ritual Loki might demand from mortal followers. A day of creating mischief and causing havoc, largely at the expense of friends and family members, was one of Loki’s favorite pastimes. While Loki’s prankster activities could be entertaining, he did have certain favorite tricks that irked those closest to him. Thor tended to hate whenever Loki made inanimate objects dangerous or turned some innocuous happening into a chance to stab Thor in the gut. Sigyn had never really been on the receiving end of a truly malicious prank of her husband’s, but she did loathe when, before some important event or outing she had planned, he made all of her clothing disappear or turn invisible in the hopes it would coax her into abandoning her duties in favor of joining him on the bed, the sofa, in the bathing pool, a closet or wherever else he thought they could go to achieve coitus instead of their actual duties. And, of course, that usually led to Thor being sent to fetch one or both of them turning Loki’s prank of hiding Sigyn’s clothes into a prank of making his brother walk in on the pair of them naked. Loki could definitely multitask and achieve multiple aims when he wanted to.

As a result, Thor and Sigyn couldn’t help but feel a bit trepidatious when, dishes completed, Loki joined Barton and Stark in the communal living area to discuss the next phase into his induction in the Midgardian Day of Fools: a visit to a local pranking supply store. Leaving Loki to plot with Barton and Stark, Thor and Sigyn returned to the chambers Loki and Sigyn shared to discuss their own battle plans. Sigyn was mostly concerned that this might negatively impact Loki’s goals for his stay on Midgard and render him in trouble with the Allfather. There were many on Asgard who felt part of Sigyn’s loyalty stemmed from the fact that she never seemed to find any harm in his pranks, largely because the ones he played on her were more akin to sensual teasing than having outright malicious intent. However, this wasn’t so.

Sigyn had more than once scolded Loki for even thinking of playing a trick that could harm others. Of course, even Sigyn had to admit her attempts to stop her husband from playing ruthless tricks was often less routed in wanting to protect others - especially as, though Asgard refused to admit it, most of Loki’s victims were well-deserving and Loki was merely acting as karma in Asgardian form - and more about protecting her husband from the consequences of his actions. Even if the target of Loki’s machinations deserved some sort of comeuppance, it was always Loki who seemed to pay the price for not seeking justice through proper channels.
While Thor was also concerned that Loki’s return to trickery might hinder Loki’s hopes of returning to Asgard, Thor was more concerned for his own personal well-being if Loki decided to go on another spree of mischief. Thor had always been Loki’s favorite target. He had rarely been able to best his older brother in sparring or on the training ground, so often got his revenge in the form of replacing a dish being served to Thor at the evening meal with a live rat, summoning a rather large and angry pimple onto Thor’s face the day he finally got up the courage to talk to a certain tavern maiden he admired, or magically making the outhouse near the training grounds overflow when Thor was inside. And the time he had turned Thor into a frog, abandoning him in the kitchen. Or the time he had called Loki annoying to his face and so Loki had astral projected one of his doppelgangers to follow Thor around for three days asking “Am I annoying you?” Or that time Loki had accidentally trapped himself in a tree while trying to trap Thor in a tree and it had taken the combined powers of Sigyn and Frigga to free him. Or the time when Thor had gone fishing and Loki had turned himself into a salmon, allowing Thor to catch him. He had then transformed back into himself and stabbed Thor…

Of course, now that Thor thought about it, many of these actions could be construed as cries for help or attention. Lady Darcy had sent him an article to read about how often times children who were considered badly behaved only presented bad behavior because they had learned such behavior granted them attention, and children would rather have negative attention than none at all. If they were being punished at least someone was interacting with them. Frigga herself had often pushed the theory with Odin that Loki’s bad behavior was just as such - committing deeds he knew would get him some kind of attention from his father and brother, even if it was negative attention. Odin had taken no stock in such thoughts, and eventually Frigga quit bringing them up.

“What should we do?” Thor asked, having been nervously pacing the room since he had arrived. “We must find some way to stop this!”

“You know there is no stopping your brother when he has a project of this nature in mind.” Sigyn pointed out. “Standing in his way will just make him more eager to complete his mischief.”

“Then what can we do?” Thor said, wringing his hands.

“Simple,” Sigyn smiled. “You are going to insinuate yourself into the situation.”

“Pardon?” Thor asked, confused.

“You are going with them,” Sigyn said. “That way, you can keep up with Loki and also get to spend some quality time with him.”
“You don’t honestly think Loki is going to fall for that, do you?” Thor said incredulously.

“Do you mean to tell me you aren’t trying to better your relationship with him? And that you don’t think one of the best ways to show Loki you are earnestly trying to improve your relationship is by tagging along to do something he enjoys for a change?” Sigyn said. “Meanwhile, you can keep track of what he is doing and become privy to his machinations.”

“Under the guise of helping him with said machinations,” Thor said.

“So long as they aren’t harmful,” Sigyn shrugged. “If you do not feel anything he is plotting will get him into trouble on Asgard, then by all means report nothing back to me.”

“Why cannot you accompany him?” Thor pointed out.

“You really think Loki isn’t smart enough to see through that?” Sigyn snorted. “Besides, I have already expressed concern that he is up to something. If I ask to accompany him now, he will most certainly think it is to spy upon him.”

“Fine,” Thor said. “I will do as you ask and accompany him. But what do you suggest I do if I discover that he is up to nefarious actions that could cause him further punishment?”

“I suggest,” Sigyn replied, “you let me know, and I shall handle it.”

Loki woke up the following morning at an ungodly hour - the god in question being himself - but still managed to be cheerful because of the anticipation he had for his visit to the Midgardian pranking emporium. His exuberance for the trip to this so-called “joke shop” was lessened over breakfast when he learned that Thor had somehow blandished his way into the outing as well. Apparently, Thor’s love for all things Midgardian as well as a desire to better bond with his brother over Loki’s love of mischief had been enough to convince Barton and Stark to let the oaf in on their trip. Loki was not very pleased when he was informed that Thor would be accompanying him, though Barton and Stark tried to butter him up by pointing out how Thor was at least making an effort to not only spend time with him but also spend time with him by doing something Loki was actually interested in for once. Loki supposed there was a first time for everything.
When they arrived, they were greeted by a strange man wearing strange glasses with coils that had eyeballs attached hanging off of them. Loki felt a little disappointed, a bit underwhelmed at the simple-minded nature of the tried and true Midgardian methods of pranking. Fake bodily fluids, chattering teeth, and fake insects all seemed rather dull to Loki. He could, after all, manifest actual illusions when in full possession of his seiðr. Still, Loki tossed several packages of blood release capsules into the shopping basket Tony had handed him at the door. They could come in useful. Thor then buried them underneath his own selection of novelty bacon-flavored candies. The allure of the handbuzzer and related shock value toys were completely lost on both Thor and Loki, particularly as a similar shocking sensation had been thrust upon anyone who had come within Thor’s vicinity during his days as a pubescent godling trying to master his newfound lightning abilities. In addition to the occasional fire, Thor had managed to send a small static shock through anyone that touched him, and Thor’s hair had remained in a constant state of static frizz. Loki’s musings were interrupted as Thor pressed down on a whoopie cushion and then laughed loudly at the noise that ensued. Loki rolled his eyes. Of course, as childish as these Midgardian tools could be, Loki had to admit there was some subtle genius in their childishness. Loki knew there was a small hidden compartment in Hlíðskjálf that would be perfect for hiding the automaton that produced flatulence, and the mere thought of being able to remotely control farting noises to accentuate Odin’s blustery speeches would absolutely delight. Perhaps in expecting too much from Midgardians he had overlooked the pleasure simplicity could give. After all, there was something universally hilarious about people falling down or having some sort of pastry thrown in their face. Loki tumbled a few scent diffusers that allegedly smelled like bodily odors into his basket. They might come in handy for clearing a room if need be. Loki looked over to find Thor mesmerized by a desk toy that was essentially a heat engine making it look as though a bird was repeatedly drinking from a glass. Loki rolled his eyes again and then, after deducing the “surprise in side” the various cans of mixed nuts on display was most likely the rubber snake on the shelf next to them, tossed a few into his basket for Sigyn. She would find the toy snakes most delightful. “Finding some stuff you like, Lokes?” Tony asked curiously. “Well, some things I suppose will do,” Loki said. “I must admit, there isn’t much allure in ‘fake fingers’ or plastic insects when one has the ability to create actual insects that can crawl over a body before disappearing into thin air or make it seem as though one’s arm has been cut off and is dripping with blood.” “Yeah, will most of us don’t have magic to toss around, so we have to improvise,” Tony shrugged. “And I’m sure you’ve played one or more pranks in your day that didn’t involve magic. Seriously, you expect me to believe that you never short-sheeted Thor’s bed or dump water on him to make it look like he’d peed himself.” “Why dump water on him when I can actually make him urinate himself in front of everyone?” Loki
“You did that?” Tony said, not sure if he should be impressed or upset for Thor.

“Just once. On the training field,” Loki said. “After he’d broken my nose with the hilt of his sword and called me a yellow-livered hearth-tender for crying about it.”

“I’m not sure that translates?” Tony said.

“He basically said that I was so cowardly I would be better off tending the hearth like a woman rather than learning to fight like a man,” Loki said. “Of course, that was in the days before Sif roundly beat much of the toxic masculinity out of him.”

“Okay, so maybe Thor deserved that,” Tony reasoned. “And seriously, I will pay good money to watch you to take Widow and Cap back to Asgard to have them teach everyone about gender roles and their toxic warrior culture. But, focusing on the here and now I think it’s a shame that you have never done any magically unaided tricks in your life.”

“I have my verbal repartee,” Loki said.

“Yes, but there is just something about planting a whoopie cushion and then lying in wait for your dad to return to his office chair for a meeting with an important client,” Tony said. “Or the shriek from another room when someone found the fake spider you placed under their purse.”

“I have done pranks that have required me to lay in wait for the results,” Loki pointed out. “And I very much understand the thrill of trying to not get caught.”

“Yeah, but waving your hand and making something happens is so easy,” Tony shrugged. “It’s not really getting your hands dirty.”

“I have gotten my hands dirty,” Loki snorted. “I once poisoned an entire battalion of Fire Giants.”

“Um… okay…” Tony said. “Maybe that’s too dirty? I’m talking like medium dirty.”
“A single assassination?” Loki queried.

“Maybe just a laxative in someone’s coffee,” Tony said.

“I suppose that could be fun,” Loki said only to wince as he heard a heinous noise from across the room. Thor and Clint were giggling over the air that had just emanated from a plastic blow-up figurine Thor had let out on accident. Apparently, Thor had been questioning Barton what said these plastic humanoid figures were used for.

“You know,” Stark said to Loki with a smirk, “you’re a pretty lucky guy, growing up with the perfect patsy and all.”

“Yes,” Loki smirked in reply. “Thor does have his uses.”

Even if Jane Foster didn’t sleep like the dead - when she bothered to sleep at all - the mere fact that her olfactory glands were Midgardian in nature were enough to make sure that Thor was the one awoken by what smelled like musty garbage at three in the morning. Roused by the awful scent, Thor took a moment to lovingly gaze down at his paramour as she let out a huge snore. Jane was perhaps the only being in the Nine Worlds whose snores could rival Thor’s own. The scent catching his nose again, Thor focused on hunting down its source. He finally pinpointed it as coming from the restroom. To his disgust and horror, the water in the toilet bowl was a terrible brown color. Thor knew he himself had no issues when he last used the device, but Jane had been the last one to use the bathroom before bed. Not wanting to embarrass her more than necessary, Thor tried quietly flushing the liquid and then reached toward the air freshener spray she had bought him, hoping to alleviate the smell.

However, the air freshener only seemed to make the smell worse. As Thor realized this, he looked down to find that not only was the smell getting worse but the toilet seemed to be overflowing with a strange foamy substance coming out of it. In his attempt to find the plunger, Thor slipped on the floor and then hit the toilet seat hard with his arm. The impact of Thor’s godlike strength hitting the toilet bowl at full force led to a massive cracking sound. Just as Thor turned to see if he had in fact cracked the bowl, a few fire crackers seemed to go off. He winced and then waited for a moment, hoping he hadn’t woken Jane. He heard her snore and sighed, glad she was still sleeping through this.
Standing back up, Thor took the plunger in one hand and the air freshener in the other, spraying to reduce the scent while he tried his best to fix whatever was happening in the toilet. Despite his valiant attempts, Thor noticed the toilet just seemed to be overflowing more and the smell had increased. Frustrated, Thor wasn’t sure what to do. He tossed the can of air freshener in the trash since it wasn’t helping only to notice a second, different brand of air freshener hidden away just behind the toilet. Thor figured that perhaps this lavender scent would be better than the peony that only seemed to further stink up the place. The second Thor pressed this button he received not a nice scent but rather a loud, shrieking horn noise. The sound of a thumping indicated that not only had the air horn disguised as an air freshener woken Jane up but had also done so with such alarm she had fallen out of the bed. Soaked from falling in the toilet water and his attempts to plunge the problem away, Thor rushed into the bedroom to make sure his lady love was alright.

“What’s going on?” Jane asked, confused, standing up from the floor.

“Just a small calamity in the bathroom, dearest,” Thor insisted. “Nothing to trifle yourself about. Please return to bed.”

“Why does it smell like ass in here?” Jane frowned. “And why are you soaking wet?”

“Everything is under control,” Thor insisted. “Just return to bed.”

“Thor,” Jane said, putting on her glasses from where they had been resting on the bedside table and then looking around the room. “Hey, why have all your photos been replaced by pictures of Loki and Tony shooting finger guns?”

“They have what…?” Thor said, stepping forward. Certainly enough, the picture displays that Darcy and Jane had gifted him that had once contained various photos of both his Avengers friends and Lady Sif and the Warriors Three from their visits to Midgard now just contained Loki and Tony in a variety of increasingly ridiculous poses, obviously taken earlier that day in Tony’s labs.

“This picture,” Jane said, picking up one off of Thor’s coffee table, “shows them taping firecrackers under your toilet seat….”

“LOKI!!!!!!!!!”
Thor’s reaction to his and Stark’s rather childish but definitely hilarious pranks revived in Loki a sense of glee he had not felt in decades. The fact that Darcy had rescued the pictures Loki and Stark used to decorate Thor’s room from the trash compactor and then used them to redecorate Jane’s lab the following morning, sending Thor into a second tailspin only added to his delight. Once Thor had calmed down after his initial spurt of anger, he had apologized to Tony for breaking the bullet-and-Hulk-proof lab glass with Mjolnir, Jane for summoning a lightning blast that threw all of her equipment off calibration, and Darcy for the fact that said lightning blast left her hair unmanageably frizzy for the rest of the day. Thor had to admit he could sometimes be as quick to anger as the Hulk and promised to try to focus less on his anger at being fooled and more on his pride that Loki was at least back to some of his normal, not exactly harmful pranks. In fact, Loki found that his own pride in his new tricks were only dampened by the fact Thor seemed to be so supportive of them.

“You have bested me well, brother,” Thor said happily to Loki over lunch. “I am sure I would have figured out the first scent dispenser was what was actually making the stench worse, so providing a second that was in fact a miniature gjallarhorn was inspired.”

“Yes, well,” Loki huffed over the artful bento box Sigyn had set before him.

She had taken to learning things from Midgardians off of some sort of video website and had made every Tower resident a personal bento box for lunch that day. Natasha’s featured a spider catching things in its web while Clint’s had two of the main characters from “Dog Cops.” Tony’s featured his bots, Bruce’s an ocean scene, and Thor’s his hammer. Pepper had apparently been sent off to work with a caricature of herself - as had Happy - while Loki had what appeared to be an image of a shelf from his potions lab back on Asgard. He smirked at the fact that the red vial in the center was often used as a powerful aphrodisiac on Asgard despite the fact that it’s only real medical property was curing warts and as a main ingredient in the treatment for a rather virulent strain of STI that originated from Alfheim. Sigyn’s own bento box for herself featured a unicorn, and she was happily munching on it while having an animated discussion with Bruce about the wide varieties of Midgardian fruit.

“It is hard to believe all the equipment you and Stark needed for such an elaborate set up came from that delightful shop we visited yesterday,” Thor continued. “Well, and from your own imagination I suppose.”

“Indubitably,” Loki replied. Thor scrunched up his nose for a moment, trying to remember what that word meant.

“It is a shame we have no merchants of that kind on Asgard,” Thor said. “I think the populace might benefit from items that would alleviate the doldrums with brief moments of joy.”

“Yes, because the Allfather would be positively thrilled if more of his citizenry was just like me,”
Loki rolled his eyes. “Be sure to mention that before you bring up all your ideas for a Frost Giant-Aesir student exchange program or perhaps a proposition to prohibit all alcoholic beverages in the Realm Eternal. I’m sure all three such proposals will all go over equally well.”

“Peace brother,” Thor said. “I just thought such a thing might bring some much needed levity to the world.”

“And where would you even find someone on Asgard who would want to degrade themselves by opening up such a shop?” Loki snorted. Thor blushed and then looked down at his plate.

“Well, I did think this sort of enterprise was rather up your alley,” Thor admitted. “You could do… what is it the Midgardians call it? A yes, a celebrity endorsement for the products. And then get a percentage of the sales! I am sure many would flock to purchase supplies for playing tricks on others that had your seal of approval!”

“Your attempt to butter me up falls flat, brother,” Loki rolled his eyes. “And you know Odin hates for any member of the Royal Family to openly connect themselves with a commercial venture. Or have you forgotten how he made Uncle Vali spend a fortnight in the dungeons for attaching his royal name to a meadery?”

“I thought that was because the meadery had a wild boar as its mascot,” Thor said, “and the live boar they had at their grand opening escaped and caused calamity throughout the town.”

“By calamity you mean got loose and then had the audacity to shit upon a statute of Odin in a public square with hordes of unwashed masses watching,” Loki snorted. “Boar and Sons Ale stood no chance after that.”

“I am sorry brother,” Thor sighed. “I was only trying to do as Lady Darcy suggested and help you cultivate your interests.”

“I can cultivate my own interests without your help, thank you very much,” Loki snorted. Thor pulled a rather impressive pout that made Loki roll his eyes. “Are you going to give me advice on how to bed my wife next in hopes of ‘cultivating my interests,’ hmm?”

“I would never dream of giving you advice on that,” Thor coughed. “I just thought it would be a good enterprise for you. I am sorry. I was mistaken.”

“It’s not as if I need the money…” Loki began. “Unless Odin plans on cutting my allowance… What have you heard, Thor?”

“Nothing! If anyone, it’s my allowance that will be cut,” Thor said. “He is most displeased that I will not relinquish Jane nor that I will not abandon Midgard…. And, in the heat of the moment… I may have called him a ‘one-eyed hypocrite’ for spending his youth gallivanting around Midgard but then forbidding us to do the same. He then had the audacity to say I hadn’t learned as much on Midgard as he previously thought.”

“Good show, I would say,” Loki replied.

“He is most odious to argue with,” Thor muttered.

“At least he bothers to argue with you,” Loki snorted. “I am apparently not worth the effort. Whenever I have an issue, it seems like the Allfather suddenly gets the overwhelming urge to nap. Sigyn says there is a Midgardian disease called narcolepsy that makes people fall asleep at random intervals. I believe the Allfather must have developed a version of it. Either that, or he’s not very good at excuses.”
“I don’t know. It’s not one of his worst tactics,” Thor mused, “Go to sleep and let Mother handle things. Usually works out well enough.”

“By that logic, he should just put her in charge of everything,” Loki snorted. “If she has to deal with the most difficult things for him all the time, the rest should be easy for her. And Mother never makes convenient excuses so she doesn’t have to deal with her problems head on.”

“To the Allmother,” Thor smirked, raising his glass. “The backbone of Asgard.” Loki laughed and clinked his glass with his brothers.

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If Loki decided to spend his afternoon stocking up on pranking supplies at the store Stark had shown him, that was his own business. And it definitely wasn’t because Thor had mentioned the store or that Thor’s concept of bringing such a business to Midgard had enchanted or intrigued him in any way. After all, Thor wasn’t one to have good ideas. Even if Thor had slaughtered the Troll-King Hrungnir, it was only because it had been Thor’s had idea in the first place for himself, the Warrior Three, Sif and Loki to break into said Troll-King’s lair in the first place. It was Thor’s idea to go to Jotunheim (it wasn’t Loki’s fault Thor was easy to corral through reverse psychology). It was Thor’s idea to track down that monstrous villain whose surname was literally “the God Butcher” and then be surprised when it took all of their combined power to first defeat the creature and then his sword, which his soul fled into after his physical body was destroyed.

So, yes, Loki was in no way following any of Thor’s awful advice. He was just shopping.

Besides, Barton had wanted to go as well, and Loki reasoned it would just be kind of him to accompany Barton on this particular outing since it was a shared interest. If Barton hadn’t been willing, Loki wouldn’t have even gone. He just wasn’t totally invested in all this Midgardian pranking stuff. It had nothing to do with the fact that JARVIS locked down the entire building if Loki tried to leave it without an Avenger in tow, so Loki required a babysitter to visit a shop outside the Tower. Not in the least. He was just turning over a new leaf, trying to befriend Barton, and developing a shared interest. That was it. It had nothing to do with Thor or any interest Loki may or may not have in the business model of the Midgardian pranking shop. Not that Loki had any interest in such business. He was just being friendly with Barton.

“Hey, Loren, Clint,” Horace, the shop owner said as soon as the bell tinkled and the two of them entered into the basement level shop. “What can I do for you two fine gentleman today.”

Clint waved and then headed off to the magazine section of the store while Loki headed over to the counter to chat with the establishment’s owner. Horace Reichenbach, the owner and proprietor of the Gee-Willikers Joke Shop, was one of the most interesting Midgardians Loki had come across and he enjoyed getting to know more about the man each time he visited the shop. Horace was quick-witted, full of fun, and always looking to make new friends. The son of a factory worker, Horace had gotten involved in a sort of countercultural movement that had taken place in Midgard some fifty years before and wound up writing satires and comical articles from an underground fringe publication. He had parlayed his literary earnings into purchasing the pranking store with a friend, and then had purchased the friend’s half of the shop, becoming its sole proprietor after his business partner allegedly received some mystical advice from a higher plane that he needed to sell everything he owned, go off in the woods and eat berries.
Horace, meanwhile, continued to write his satires including a modestly successful novel, run the shop and invented and patented some sort new means of spraying seltzer water into peoples’ faces, which earned him enough money to raise his family and keep the shop afloat when times were tough. While his business ventures were successful, Horace had found that things with his family were harder. Somehow, Horace and his equally jovial wife who was the store’s accountant had produced a son who was twice as serious as his parents were comical. Newell Reichenbach thought his parents were laughingstocks and only took a teenage job minding the store as a way to earn some petty cash. He was now some Wall Street big shot who felt making money was much more important than having fun. Newell himself now had a teenage son named Phineas, who Horace and his wife adored. Phineas loved his grandparents as well, but once Newell got a whiff that his son was interested in his grandfather’s business, he had begun limiting the time and places the boy could spend with his grandfather.

“Told me he wants Phin to spend time around ‘real businesses,’” Horace snorted, spreading his arms open. “Like this isn’t a real business. He wants his son to learn about the real world. Well, what’s more real than an entrepreneur who started from the ground up? Maybe a joke shop isn’t as much of a ‘stable enterprise’ as selling toothbrushes or office supplies, but at least I get to go to work everyday and do something I love! Do you know what my son does?”

“No,” Loki shook his head.

“He trades and borrows other people’s’ money. What kind of a job is that?” Horace huffed. “I don’t know where I went wrong with that son of mine. His mother and I taught him to be open to new things, not to judge, and to spend his life doing things he loved, causes that made him passionate. Now he seems to think your job is no good if it doesn’t require you to show up everyday in a suite that costs more than most people’s houses! And if he has his way, my grandson’ll end up just the same.”

“What prompted this most recent insult upon your person?” Loki asked. Horace smiled. Another one of the things Loki particularly liked about Horace is that he didn’t point out that Loki’s grasp of the English vernacular was strange nor did he ask him a thousand questions about being a foreigner.

“Oh, Phin was talking about looking for a job this summer over dinner the other night,” Horace said. “And I may have mentioned the shop was taking on a few new assistants. Things have been doing well, after all. Apparently, offering my own grandson a leg up and a chance to earn some pocket money is ‘overstepping my bounds.’ Maybe I shouldn’t have ‘overstepped my bounds’ all those years ago when Newell wanted a summer job.”

“Well, I am probably the last person to seek out advice from regarding father-son relationships,” Loki said. “And both of my grandfathers were dead by the time I was school age. Based on my own experiences, my first inclination is you should tell your son to go rot and do whatever you want anyway. Of course, as I just said, familial relationships aren’t my forte.”

“No kidding,” Horace laughed.

“However, if think about those I know who are good at this sort of thing,” Loki said, “I imagine they might say something along the lines of trying to be respectful of each other’s opinions, not to force one’s own beliefs down another’s throat, and, above all, that sometimes we have to realize that we love people more than we hate the petty differences we have with them.”

“That’s a smart view of things,” Horace nodded, “though it really doesn’t help these old knees of mine lift up heavy packages from the stockroom.” Loki’s face lit up.
When they returned to the Tower, Clint and Loki found the rest of the Tower residents in a typical mid-Saturday afternoon repose. Sigyn, Jane and Darcy were sharing popcorn, watching some B-action thriller on cable while Natasha sat in front of them, sharpening her knives. Tony was halfway watching the movie with them, halfway trying to force his way through some documents Pepper wanted him to read and sign off on by the end of the day. Bruce, making sure he was out of site of the movie and Natasha’s knife sharpening, was reading a biography of the Dalai Lama. Thor sitting in the chair closest to Jane’s position on the couch and was reading a book entitled *Why Can't We Get Along?: Healing Adult Sibling Relationships*. There had a stack of similarly titled books next to him. He looked deep in concentration, but Loki was sure that was because Thor hadn’t read anything but a menu in the past 500 years. Barton had several instructional tomes titled “For Dummies” that might be more Thor’s speed, but then again Loki seriously doubted there was a Midgardian text titled *How to Mend Sibling Rivalry and Undo a Millennia of Psychological Familial Trauma For Dummies*.

“Well, I see you two had fun,” Stark said to Barton and Loki with mock offense, “without me.”

“Oh yeah,” Clint nodded, his mouth full of Pop Rocks. “I got some candy. And Loki got a job.”

“He did what?” Stark asked, surprised as Clint’s announcement drew the entire attention of the room.

“Well, you were supposed to find me a source of Midgardian employment so I could learn from my mistakes and pass my time, but you have come up lacking in such ventures as of late,” Loki replied. “So I took it upon myself to do so.”

“What is this job?” Natasha asked, her eyes narrowing.

“At the joke shop,” Clint shrugged. Natasha made some mental calculations, seemed to relax, and returned to her knife-sharpening.

“Well,” Bruce said carefully, “I think this is a good thing. And Loki has shown some real initiative in getting a job himself.”

“It does seem like a good fit,” Tony said. “Why didn’t I think of this first? You’ll probably be employee of the month within the first week!” Thor began flipping around in the book he was reading in a panic.

“Loki,” Thor said not looking up from his book, “you have done something brave and should be praised for it. I recognize your positive growth and am proud of you.”

“What in the Norns is he on about?” Loki asked no one in particular.

“Thor’s on a self-help kick,” Darcy explained to Loki. “My mom sent me a book basically alluding to the fact that she thinks I’m wasting my twenties, and instead of listening to me and Jane talk about how these books are all psycho-babble bunk, Thor had JARVIS order him every book on adult sibling relationships that’s still in print.”

“He even got one of those hokey ‘Chicken Soup for the Soul’ books,” Jane rolled her eyes. Tony’s eyes suddenly lit up.

“JARV, remind me to order Cap a boatload of those,” Tony said. “Especially any versions that have the words ‘America’ or ‘patriot’ in the title.”
“Would you like any versions for engineers for yourself, sir?” JARVIS asked tiredly.

“Do it, and I’ll rewire your mainframe to give you a Cockney accent,” Tony warned.

“Sir, I believe you swore off switching around my voice after the Great Miscommunication Incident of 2007,” JARVIS intoned. “I may play the memo Ms. Potts insisted you make yourself afterward to remind you of why doing so is a bad idea… if you so wish.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony frowned. “Nevermind.”

“Well, I hope your new employment is successful,” Sigyn said, as Loki snuck onto the couch with her. “When do you begin?”

“Tomorrow,” Loki said.

“I will have to prepare you a special meal for your first day,” Sigyn said. “I am eager to try out some new recipes from the instructional videos posted on Midgard’s international communication forums.”

“Is that Asgardian for internet?” Tony frowned.

“I look forward to enjoying your creations,” Loki said to his wife with a leer.

“If the two of you are going to start making out, can you at least take it to your own private rooms?” Tony asked with a raised brow.

“Fine,” Loki sniffed, taking his wife’s hand. Sigyn laughed and followed him out of the room, all the while asking questions about his new job.

Loki knew his new career probably wouldn’t be glamorous. He was certain there were plenty of people on Asgard who would have found it hilarious that one of his main duties consisted of lifting boxes as well as stocking and restocking shelves. It would be an utter delight for them to see him so humbly humiliated as having to fetch items for Midgardians. Despite knowing he would be ridiculed on his homeworld, Loki couldn’t help but feel some pride in his work. He had advanced enough in his knowledge of Midgardian currency that he could main the cash register. And his personal experimentation with various items on sale at the store meant that he was the best for giving customers pranking advice. Very quickly his guise of Loren became very popular among the largely teenage crowd of Midgardians that hung around the shop as well as three two other young men who worked in the store under Horace.

Loki’s fellow employees adored him in a way that both Clint and Tony felt bordered on actual religious worship when they saw the kids following Loki around the shop. All three teenage boys seemed to regard their older counterpart with a god-like reverence that Loki delighted in but, unlike what many on Asgard would have expected him to do, didn’t take advantage of. Instead, Loki took his three new disciples under his wing, serving as a mentor, sounding board, and source of encouragement. Seeing how Loki guided the youngsters while still managing to have a great deal of fun with them made Clint wonder if Loki might have been better in the older brother role than in the younger brother one. Tony just couldn’t believe that the same guy who was meticulous in the way he cared for and wore his suite as well as listened to classical music as he exactly measured out the ingredients for a cup of tea was also the same guy now hosting a seminar at the joke shop about the
use of fart noises in pranking. For all of his outward fastidiousness and occasionally annoying solemnity, it turned out that underneath Loki really was just a purveyor of chaos and calamity.

Horace himself was absolutely in stitches with the way Loki would help out customers looking to commit the perfect prank, giving them great ideas, and suggesting what products he thought would best meet their needs. While Loki had felt pride in his accomplishments and a sense of personal achievement in tasks both big and small he had completed before, there was something about having the approval from someone in a superior position to his own that made Loki feel even more satisfied with his job. Loki had always maintained a cool air of indifference when it came to being praised for his talents and abilities - save perhaps from his wife and mother - but Loki gladly took praise for his work from Horace. Loki and Horace got along swimmingly and so when Loki wasn’t helping customers create the perfect place, he was delighting his boss with ideas for promotions, events, and ways to improve the shop overall.

It was almost to the point Loki himself hoped that Odin would extend his banishment. Loki didn’t think he would mind at all spending the rest of his prolonged existence running the joke shop during the day and returning home to Sigyn at night to hear about her adventures with Jane and Darcy or Bruce in the labs. He knew he wasn’t earning much at the shop, but perhaps he could use his diplomatic skills to negotiate himself a stipend from SHIELD in exchange for the occasional freelance assignment and generally not blowing anything up. If worse came to worst and he and Sigyn had to move out of their current residence, Loki was sure he could finagle nice SHIELD monitored and financed apartment as well. Loki was deep into his idyll, sweeping up the floors, when the shop door opened. Unlike most Midgardian businesses that had bells alerting occupants to the arrival of a new customer, Horace had installed an air horn that let out a massive “AHOOGAAAAA” whenever someone walked in. Loki opened his mouth to offer the traditional greeting to customers when he noticed something. This new customer looked exactly like the picture Horace had of his grandson in the back office. Loki looked at the awkward teenager and smirked.

“Phineas Cole Reichenbach, I presume?”

“How do you know my name?” the young man replied, a bit concerned.

“Your grandfather speaks of you constantly,” Loki said. “He’s not here at the moment. Out picking up meatball subs for lunch. However, he will be back shortly and I’m sure delighted to see you.”

“Okay,” Phineas said, a bit nervously.

“If you would prefer, however, we have also recently received a shipment of joke gift boxes that disguise their true contents with misleading packaging,” Loki said. “I’m sure you would find perusing them delightful.”

“Thanks,” the kid said, a bit embarrassed but going off to look at the boxes anyway. Loki’s personal favorite was the fire pit for children cover while Tony preferred the cover that appeared to contain a video game that simulated the performing of typical Midgardian outdoor chores. Thor had been disappointed to learn that the “beer beard” was not, in fact, an actual product.

“I suppose your father doesn’t know you are here,” Loki mentioned as Phineas perused the new wares.

“No,” the kid admitted. “He thinks what Gramps does is a waste of time. Dad only cares about making money.”

“Financial security is important,” Loki acquiesced, “but your grandfather doesn’t seem to be in any dire financial straits. Were things different when your father was younger?”
“I mean, Dad says they always had enough, but just enough,” Phineas shrugged. “Dad always wanted more. He’s definitely got it now, but I don’t think he’s happy.”

“Perhaps that is his problem,” Loki suggested, “he can’t face the fact that what he thought would make him happy hasn’t, and what, by his accounting at least, should have made your grandfather a failure hasn’t. It can be very difficult for people to admit they are right about things, especially when they are very set in their ways and were so sure they were right in the first place.”

“A strong man is not one without a weakness, but rather one who is willing to admit to what makes him weak,” Horace said from where he had quietly entered the shop.

“Well,” Loki said, “I’ll take my sandwich and leave the two of you to catch up.”

Phineas continued to come into the shop to spend time with his grandfather after school, spending time learning some of the basics from running the shop from both him and Loki. While he wasn’t the most observant man, it only took five school days and one Saturday for Newell Reichenbach to realize that there was something fishy about his son’s sudden interest in his school’s Future Business Leaders of America organization. Certainly enough, a call to the school Monday confirmed that - while the organization did exist - not only did it only meet in the mornings on Mondays and Thursdays but also that Phineas Reichenbach was in no way enrolled in or affiliated with the group. Begrudgingly and for the first time in 20 years, Newell Reichenbach took the afternoon off to follow his son.

“I knew you were here!” Newell said, bursting through the doors of the shop and startling his father and son, who were chatting amiably at the cashier’s counter over a display of novelty gum dispensers that actually dispensed an electric shock. Loki, knowing there was about to be a fair amount of tension, just keep sweeping up. “How many times have I told you…”

“That you don’t want me to spend time with my grandfather?” Phineas huffed back at his father. “You know, I could be out doing drugs or stealing stuff. Do you know how many kids I go to school with have parents that would be ecstatic to find out their kid is spending time with his grandparents after school?”

“This isn’t about other people’s kids,” Newell said. “It’s about my kid.”

“Well, congrats, Dad,” Phineas snorted. “You’ve finally realized that. I bet you had to take off work to be here, huh?”

“As a matter of fact…” Newell began.

“As a matter of fact,” Phineas said, “it’s the first time in my entire life you’ve ever taken off work to do something with me.”

“That isn’t fair…” Newell began.

“It’s true,” Phineas pointed out.

“The boy isn’t causing any harm,” Horace said. “In fact, you might be surprised to know I’ve been teaching him a thing or two about the business.”
“What do you know about business?” Newell huffed.

“Enough that I’ve kept this place afloat for forty years, through ups, downs, recessions, and Reaganomics,” Newell snorted. “And managed to turn enough profit to send you to all those fancy business schools that got you that fancy job that makes all that money you don’t spend because you’re always working.”

“I work to take care of my family,” Newell said.

“Where’s mom right now then?” Phineas asked.

“She’s at home,” Newell said.

“She’s been with Aunt Margie in Colorado for the past three months,” Phineas retorted. “She left home and you didn’t even notice.”

“Well, I’m sorry that I wanted better for my family than all this,” Newell said, gesturing to the joke shop. As he did, he inadvertently knocked a whoopie cushion off a shelf that landed with a rather deflated sounding fart.

Loki couldn’t help but laugh.

“What about you?” Newell hissed at Loki. “I can’t imagine your father is pleased that you’re working here.”

“Well, my biological father is dead,” Loki said, pausing for impact. Newell spurted to apologize, but Loki continued. “As for my adoptive father… well, he and I aren’t particularly close. I mean, I was briefly presumed dead and then kidnapped and he never attempted to look for me. So, perhaps, bringing my familial relations into your own familial argument isn’t the best idea.”

“Look, I’m…” Newell began.

“But regardless of whether or not my fathers - living or dead - approve of what I’m doing, I think I shall keep on doing it,” Loki said. “After all, I’m not killing or maiming anyone. I’m not exploiting anyone for my own financial gain. And, unlike most positions I could have, I know working in my shop does bring joy to those around me. And at the end of the day, I think that matters more than anything else. After all, you can’t get buried with your money but you can die knowing you did well. Or that you regretted your entire life.”

“Hey, Loren, Thought I’d come pick you up from the old nine-to-five. I mean, mainly because I need help carrying all those curry orders we got from down the street,” Tony as he entered the shop and looked around. “Whoa… what is happening here?”

“A family confrontation, apparently,” Loki replied. “I will have to clock out.”

“You’re… you’re…” Newell sputtered at the billionaire.

“Yeah, I am,” Tony grinned. “Word must of have gotten out about how often I come here.”

“You… come here often…?” Newell sputtered. Tony sized him up and down.

“Well, not the first time nor the weirdest place I’ve ever been hit on by one of you Wall Street types,” Tony said. “But yeah. I find something relaxing about the old school joke shop atmosphere. You can’t replicate it by shopping online. I mean, half the fun is testing the products, right?”
“Right,” Newell said.

“And Horace is great,” Tony said, waving to the owner. “He always sets aside my monthly magazine orders and has the most realistic fake vomit in town.”

“Tony’s a good kid,” Horace agreed. “One of the shop’s first investors too.”

“Well, I gotta make sure this place stays up and running,” Tony said. “I met Tom Savini, Gregory Nicotero, and Gallagher here.”

“Tony Stark,” Newell said to his father in disbelief, “is an investor in this business?”

“We’re already got word from the New York International Fringe Festival we’ll be hosting some of the comedy acts again this summer,” Horace informed Tony. “I’ll save you a seat.”

“It’s what I like to hear, Horace,” Tony grinned.

“Have you given any thought to how you handle your investments?” Newell said to Tony, suddenly going into business-mode. “I’m in wealth management at…” Tony nodded politely as Newell gave the spiel about his big-named investment company.

“I have folks that do that,” Tony said, “though if the rumor mill I here is correct, you might want to get out of that firm before all the golden parachutes get used up. Rumor has it your CEO is about to get indicted for fraud.” Newell’s face fell as as Loki emerged from the back room. “Ready to head out?”

“As long as it can be guaranteed that no trouble happens in my absence,” Loki said, lowering his gaze at Newell. “I spent a great deal of time today straightening up this shop, and I will not have any thundering lummockes coming through like your proverbial bull in the fine dining shop.”

“China shop,” Tony said before turning to a puzzled Newell. “Loren’s here from Norway. Doesn’t get our American idioms.”

“I see,” Newell nodded. “And how do you two…”

“Well, toodles everyone!” Tony grinned before guiding Loki out of the store.

“I think we should go back and…” Loki began.

“Intrude on some more family drama?” Tony snorted. “I think things will be sorted out shortly.”

“The young Phineas only wishes to learn the ropes of his grandfather’s business,” Loki huffed. “You would think that maintaining a family legacy would be considered a good thing on Midgard.”

“I have a feeling that someone is about to find out a joke shop is a more financially sound investment than he previously thought,” Tony said.

Loki was greatly sorry that he hadn’t been on duty the next afternoon when Newell Reichenbach finally capitulated to his father. The retelling of Loki’s three fellow employees wasn’t particularly stellar or attentive to detail, but from what Loki had gathered, Newell had gone poking about and
asking some hard questions at work that morning after hearing Tony’s rumor. Realizing his company was probably soon going belly up and his job with it, Newell had quietly announced his resignation, negotiated a quality severance package in exchange for signing a company NDA, and returned to his father’s joke shop. Newell was extremely surprised that, after admitting his life hadn’t gone the way he had planned, that his father had been rather sympathetic to his cause. Horace had apparently even shared a heartfelt story about his own struggles in business before finding his niche with the joke shop.

And so, Horace hired his son as the company’s new business manager allowing Horace’s wife to happily retire as the store’s accountant and focus on what she really wanted to do with her time: making pottery shaped like genitalia to sell online. Sigyn ended up buying one of Mrs. Reichenbach’s first pieces as a Name Day gift for her mother, who was actually thrilled with it. Horace and Newell having buried their own hatchet, it was decided that letting Phineas work at the store might be a good way to not only get the boy some business experience but also help rebuild broken family bonds. The one concern was that they might not be able to afford five shop hands all at once. Loki gracefully bowed up, citing the fact he was returning home to Norway soon and his wife wanted to spend some time out together as tourists in the city. Despite only working with them briefly, no one in the Reichenbach family would forget the strange Norwegian man who had so briefly worked for them.

Decades later, when Phineas Reichenbach decided to redo the layout of the family store, he noticed some strange symbols had been etched into the underside of the desk in the old office. Thinking the desk must be some sort of antique, he had the owner of a local antique shop come in to see if the symbol was some sort of craftsman’s mark. Instead, the antique store owner suggested that his friend, a local professor, come analyze the script. The professor, it turned out, specialized in religious symbology and informed Phineas that the strange symbols were in fact a blessing most associated with Loki - the once mythological Norse god of chaos. Both the professor and antiquarian were curious as to how the joke shop had been blessed by the Norse god of pranks, but Phineas only smiled and thanked them for their time. From then on, whenever Phineas felt stressed, concerned, or had worries about the shop, he merely reached under the desk to touch the symbol. It reminded him he wasn’t alone.
After giving up his job at the joke shop, Loki decided almost instantly to revert back to what he was best at: endlessly annoying his fellow Tower residents. Loki wasted almost no time pestering the other denizens of the Tower and, a handful of hours after he had left his job, found himself kicked out from all three private science labs, the training rooms, common area, and Thor’s chambers. Feeling very pleased with himself - particularly after convincing Thor to make himself a rather atrocious vegetable smoothie in the “nutrient extracting blending machine” Cap swore by and had talked Thor into purchasing - Loki headed back to his own rooms to reflect on a day's worth of managed mischief and perhaps see if he could coax his wife out of her clothing before the evening meal.

When he arrived in his rooms, Loki found Sigyn sitting on the divan, a letter she was intently reading in one hand and the other hand absently twisting around a lock of her hair. The magpies were enjoying a new seed bell that had been delivered earlier that day and the talking box was not in use, so the room was relatively calm. That, perhaps, should have alerted Loki to the fact that something was amiss with his wife. Sigyn always enjoyed having a fair amount of background noise to anything she did - perhaps a side effect of her childhood surrounded by noisy sisters and clanging anvils - and so the fact that she had the room almost eerily quiet perhaps should have made her husband suspect. Loki, however, was still under the influence of the emotional high that always came after a good round of trickery and the pride he felt in being able to best others.

“What news from Asgard, wife?” Loki said sarcastically as he threw himself on the divan, stretching his legs out so they were in Sigyn’s lap but behind the letter she was reading. A plate of warm buns fresh from the oven were beside him and Loki began munching on one as Sigyn continued to read her letter. “I am guessing more tournaments were won, more ale was consumed, and a joyous time was had by all.” Loki fluffed the pillow behind his head and laid back on it only to see a sad look cross Sigyn’s face. “Is there something wrong my love?”

“Oh, no,” Sigyn said, composing her face into what might pass for a smile but Loki knew was entirely false. The slight upturn of the corners of her lip was the fake smile she always put on when something was bothering her. “Just a letter from Idunn. It seems Idis is to have a little brother or sister soon.” Loki said up as Sigyn folded the letter. “Idunn says she is thinking about naming the child Eyvindr if it is a boy and Viða if it is a girl, though she says Bragi likes the name Boði for a boy after his father.”

“Don’t know why Bragi wants to name his son after that old ass,” Loki huffed. “Never supported him and died decrepit in a prostitute’s bed. Not exactly the legacy one wants for their child.”

“Loki,” Sigyn said. “I think you are missing the point.”

“We should probably buy Idis a present,” Loki suggested.
“My sister and her husband are having a child and your reaction is to insult their choice of names and then buy their daughter a present?” Sigyn asked, slightly confused.

“Well, it can’t be an easy thing having a younger sibling,” Loki shrugged. “Thor was apparently very cross when he learned he was to have a new sibling and then even more upset when he found I was too little to play with him.”

“Yes,” Sigyn nodded. “Your mother once said she found him in your crib with his toy soldiers, trying to get you to play with him. You were asleep and he didn’t understand why you weren’t interested in his favorite toys. Thought you were mad at him because all you did was cry and sleep.”

“Idis is much older than Thor was when I came along,” Loki pointed out. “I daresay she will understand the concept of younger siblings better. It might be nice for her to know that, even with a new babe along the way, she’s still just as important, that she’ll always be our favorite eldest niece.”

“That is a marvelous idea, husband,” Sigyn smiled. “I suppose I should also make something for the new baby as well. Idunn is terribly excited, though she is a bit worried about telling Mother. You know how she was when she found out about Idis.”

“Yes, that she was too young to be a grandmother and that Idunn was utterly selfish bringing a new child into this world since it would make Freyja look old,” Loki rolled his eyes. “And then she made fun of a name. ‘How can you name your child something that means dignified if her father’s a skald.’ That coming from a woman who named most of her daughters after aspects of ‘love’ and then decided that one of her children should literally be named ‘refusal.’ Granted, Syn is rather willful, but it can’t be easy to have two sisters named ‘treasure,’ three sisters named ‘loving,’ one named ‘clever,’ one named ‘ever young,’ one named ‘victory’ and then you get stuck with ‘refusal.’ It’s enough to make one be contradictory on purpose.”

“Mother never has been fond of children,” Sigyn said.

“That is the understatement of the century,” Loki snorted. “She flinches every time Idis tries to hug her.”

“Yes,” Sigyn sighed, “She wasn’t fond of us as girls either. At least most of us were raised by Father and his sisters then your mother. Poor Hnoss and Gersemi were handed off to nursemaids as soon as they were born.”

“No wonder they’re so stuck up,” Loki said, getting up from the divan. “Well, I should be off.”

“Whatever for?” Sigyn asked, confused.

“I should see Thor, pick his brain about what sort of present softens the blow of a younger sibling,” Loki said. “After all, it’s not like either of us has experience in that.”

“I suppose,” Sigyn said, still seeming a little sad.

“I shall return soon, hykyn,” Loki smiled as he slipped out the door. Loki let out a heaving sigh when the door had shut behind him. Going by what had happened when Idis’ birth had been announced, Loki had a feeling he was in for a few weeks of Sigyn moping around. He straightened himself and headed toward Thor’s rooms, deciding to face the lesser of two dangers.
“LOKI!” Thor thundered as his younger brother attempted to slip into his chambers undetected. “You are banished from my chambers until further notice!”

“Come now, Thor,” Loki said. “You only asked for my help in concocting a healthy Midgardian tonic, not one that tasted good as well. And to be fair, I did try to explain to you that the addition of wheat germ - no matter how high in quantity - would not magically turn the mix alcoholic. That was your own fault.”

“Yes, well,” Thor huffed.

“Besides, I am here to bring you glad tidings from Asgard,” Loki said. “I am to be an uncle again.”

“Congratulations!” Thor said. “Idunn and Bragi again, I assume?”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “Though for the child’s sake I should hope it’s another girl. Bragi still thinks that old goat of a father of his deserves a namesake. Idunn is at least sensible about the whole thing.”

“I shall have to send them my congratulations,” Thor nodded.

“Sigyn and I wish to send Idis a present as well,” Loki mentioned. “While neither of us have any personal experience - being the youngest in our families - we both thought it would be nice to grant her some small boon to remind her that she will always be our favorite eldest niece. Knowing what it is like to be on the receiving end of a younger sibling, I suggested I consult with you on the matter.”

“I honestly don’t remember much about your arrival,” Thor said with a sad smile. “I do remember being told just after Father went off to war that I could expect a baby brother or sister soon. Mother and Fulla told me that you would be a playmate and friend for me, but that I would also have to help teach you important things and watch over you. I suppose that led me to think you would be my own age when you appeared, so I was a bit perplexed to find this tiny baby. Of course, from what Mother has told both of us that didn’t stop me from trying to involve you in my games.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “I have heard those tales as well.”

“I was a little upset - not at you - but at those who had made me think you would be older somehow,” Thor shrugged. “It wasn’t exactly their fault. I suppose they didn’t realize how my childlike mind would interpret their words. But I suppose Mother always made it out as though you were sort of my present, that I was being given the gift of a little brother. So, I don’t think I was too terribly jealous. Just a bit annoyed that I would have to wait for you to get older to do more than sleep and cry and wet yourself.”

“If we had been on Midgard, you perhaps could have asked for a refund,” Loki snorted. Thor grabbed him and, as he hadn’t done since they were much younger, trapped Loki in a headlock and ruffled his hair a bit. Loki pushed himself out and tried to straighten his hair best as he could.

“Ah, I think it worked out for the best,” Thor laughed. “After all, I got over it enough that I insisted on sharing a room with you.”

“I thought Mother did that to make it easier on Fulla,” Loki frowned, thinking of handmaiden that had originally served as their nurse until the boys had gotten old and rowdy enough to merit more than one full-time caretaker.

“No,” Thor said. “Not long after you were born, I started coming into your room at night. I started sleeping on the floor by your cradle, but eventually I pushed my way into the cradle as well. Mother
was terrified I was going to roll over on you and squash you. So, she decided that the best thing to do would be to bring my bed into the room as well.”

“Yes, right up until you decided you didn’t want to continue sharing a room with your little brother,” Loki snorted.

“It wasn’t me!” Thor pointed out. “You were the one whose seiðr caused his nightmares to physically manifest in the room. You made my bed come alive and nearly eat me! Besides, Mother thought that I was a bad influence for teaching you to sneak out at night and down to the kitchen for treats. And honestly, I think you were happier with the arrangement than I was. No one there to knock over your things or misplace them.”

“Yes ‘misplace,’ not ‘borrow without asking and then break,’” Loki snorted.

“I should have been more respectful of your things in the past,” Thor agreed. “It is something I am going to change in the future.”

“We’ll see,” Loki snorted.

“Hopefully, Idis will be as receptive to a new sibling,” Thor mused. “Though being much older and - let’s be honest - a bit spoiled by all her aunts and uncles, it might be harder. Perhaps something that will help ease her into her new role as a big sister?”

“Ah, yes! Why didn’t I think of that!” Loki said. “Something like a doll so she has her own little thing to fuss over. Norns know why, but Idis does like to imitate her mother, whether trying to help prune the apple trees or scrunching up her face and wagging her finger at her toys when she is cross with them.”

“And how is Sigyn reacting to the news?” Thor asked Loki, concerned.

“Ah, well, she’s thrilled, of course,” Loki said, hoping to evade the question. Unfortunately, Thor was not so swayed.

“Truly?” Thor mentioned, “For I remember she was a bit melancholy when Idunn announced Idis’ imminent arrival. Mother brushed it off as Sigyn coming to the realization that she was no longer the baby of her family, but I’m sure there was something more to it than that…”

“I am not discussing this with you, Thor,” Loki huffed, a bit annoyed that usually unobservant Thor had managed to notice what was a rather intimate issue.

“Because it’s too personal?” Thor asked. Loki only glared at him in response. “Fine, fine, but if you do feel a need to converse, you know I am always here to offer a sympathetic ear.”

“When I need to know what not to do,” Loki snorted, “I’ll be sure to ask for your opinion.”

By suppertime, Sigyn had again put back on her brave face and was all smiles as she announced to the assembled group that her sister was expecting another baby. Those present expressed their warm wishes and hopes for a safe delivery. Tony ordered up a bottle of champagne with dessert so they could toast to the health of the mother and future baby. Thor himself offered up traditional Asgardian
toast that went into more detail about Asgardian fertility rites than perhaps anyone at the table needed to know. Darcy’s recent discovery that Thor was also sometimes seen as a Norse fertility god had Jane a bit on edge where pregnancy was concerned. She was pretty sure that Thor’s head - even as an infant - was wider than her hips at present and, between fears of abnormally large half-Asgardian children as well as her own career ambitions, was nowhere near ready to be Thor’s baby mama.

“Do you guys do baby showers in Asgard?” Darcy asked thoughtfully.

“Yes, the babe is typically bathed after its birth,” Loki snorted. “Why wouldn’t you…” Sigyn elbowed him in the ribs, cutting him off.

“A baby shower isn’t a bath,” Pepper corrected politely. “It’s a term for a party thrown where friends, family and well-wishers give the parents-to-be supplies they will need to take care of the baby. I think they call it a shower because the recipients are ‘showered’ with gifts.”

“Name Day gifts are more traditional,” Sigyn explained. “When a child is born, gifts that could be of use to the child are typically presented then. I hope to be at such a ceremony.”

“I’m sure you’ll be in Asgard in time to see the kid be born,” Tony shrugged.

“I should say so,” Sigyn nodded.

“I don’t know,” Loki shrugged. “The Allfather is sometimes forgetful. And he may rather like having me close enough he can have me watched but far enough away I can’t cause mischief upon his person.”

“Yeah, but she’s due in what… like seven or eight months?” Clint said. “I mean, unless she’s further along.”

“What makes you say seven or eight months?” Sigyn asked curiously, wondering if Clint had developed some power of foresight.

“I takes nine months to make a baby, right?” Tony said. Loki and Sigyn looked at each other and laughed while Thor choked on his food.

“On Midgard, perhaps such a small amount of time,” Sigyn said, “The time on Asgard is close to three of your Midgardian years.”

“What?” Tony said, alarmed. “That’s… a long time for a bun to be cooking.”

“A blink of an eye to most in the other realms,” Loki said, “though it is why childbearing can be so difficult for some.”

“The Allmother lost many babes in the womb,” Sigyn nodded. “Thor was her first pregnancy to make it past the first year. There is also usually a good decade or so between births for most women of our realms. Syn and Snotra are the closest in age of my siblings - other than my twin sisters - and are only about twenty-five years apart.”

“Hang on,” Jane frowned, “you guys have some of the most advanced medical tech in the galaxy. How is childbirth still an issue?”

“It has more to do with physiology than technology,” Sigyn said. “The length of gestational periods combined with the fact that the genetics of the realms were largely isolated for so many millennia has made it harder for children to survive. In Alfheim alone, only one in every twenty pregnancies result in a live birth. And even then, many elvish children don’t make it past their first moon cycle. While it
might be callous to say, such things might be for the best. Elves are known to live an average of 10,000 years. If births were so frequent their realm would quickly become overpopulated. It’s one of the reasons they sometimes exchange their own children for those that take less time to raise as well.”

“But your mother had like ten kids,” Jane pointed out.

“Yes, but most with a Dwarvish husband,” Sigyn replied. “Vanir and Asgardian physiology are so similar they’re basically cousins, possibly closer than that in genetic terms. Dwarvish, genetics, however, offer some compensation for the lack of diversity in Vanir or Asgardian genes. It’s one of the reasons why the Allmother, a Vanir, and the Allfather, an Asgardian, had so few children yet Vanir and Asgardians who ally with other races are known to have several children.”

“So, it’s sort of like purebred dogs versus mutts,” Bruce said. “Vanir and Asgardian DNA have become so similar that it leads to genetic complications that makes it harder for babies to manifest and those that do probably have health issues. However, other groups have DNA that can mitigate those risks. A purebred dog has all of the characteristics that it’s breed is supposed to have, but also comes with a lot of genetic risks because of inbreeding. Mutts are healthier because they incorporate more varied DNA that can help overcome genetic issues and diseases.”

“Did you just refer to my wife as a mutt?” Loki huffed.

“Does she know if it’s a boy or a girl?” Darcy asked quickly, hoping to distract Loki from Bruce’s comparison.

“It is traditional not to ask,” Sigyn explained. “Perhaps you may think it a strange superstition, but many in the other realms believe that finding out too much about a child before it’s birth tempts the Norns to...terminate the pregnancy.”

“Does Asgard have a lot of superstitions surrounding childbirth?” Bruce asked curiously.

“Tons,” Thor nodded.

“I suppose when childbirth is so dangerous and rare, one develops many superstitions around it,” Sigyn shrugged.

“Like what?” Bruce asked, curiously.

“Some women carry around a silver key, believing it will help ease their labor pains,” Sigyn shrugged. “Others keep sacred herbs in their pillows during the course of pregnancy to protect themselves and the child. Some women carry around certain runes of protection and carve them into the cradle to be used by their child. Pregnant women typically do not visit the Halls of the Dead. Many women also think that carrying around a lock of hair from the child’s father will bring luck, but if it turns out to be a lock of hair from a man who is not the child’s father, the results are said to be disastrous.”

“Please tell me there is an Asgardian version of Maury,” Clint begged.

“Bjorn, you are not the father!” Tony snorted.

“Biological paternity isn’t chiefly important in Asgard,” Thor insisted. “It’s more about the man who claims the child during the Naming Ceremony.”

“Yes,” Loki huffed. “Odin claimed me during mine, so for all intents and legal purposes on Asgard, he is my father. Laufey’s biological contributions notwithstanding.”
“So, a guy can refuse to claim a kid that’s his?” Darcy pointed out.

“Yes,” Thor said. “But it’s typically uncommon. As Sigyn said, children are rare on Asgard. More likely the issue would be two men dueling over a child that could potentially belong to them. In that case, the winner gets to claim the right as father, even if it can be proven the child is not biologically his.”

“So… fathomly… if I were to go to Asgard and ask for some dude to claim me one could argue that Howard Stark is no longer my father?” Tony asked curiously.

“You are more than nine days old,” Loki said. “Once a child has reached that point, it is traditionally left exposed on a snowy cliff to die.”

“What?” most of the Midgardian exclaimed just as Thor huffed and said:

“Loki, you know that hasn’t happened in thousands of years,” Thor said. “The practice is practically outlawed across the realms.”

“But not actually outlawed,” Loki pointed out. “And not in Jotunheim, hmm? If not, Odin has made up quite a story to cover my being cradle-snatched.”

“Well,” Sigyn said, finishing up her dessert, “I suppose I should head back to our chambers. There is a book I have been reading that I cannot put down, and I would like to finish it as soon as possible… so if you don’t mind…” Before finishing, Sigyn simply disappeared into thin air.

“Is something wrong?” Pepper asked Loki, curiously.

“She’s fine,” Loki said. “Now, I have recently learned how to play one of your Midgardian board games. Who wishes for me to defeat them in a rousing round of backgammon?”

The truth was Loki knew his wife was far from alright, but he just didn’t think it was anyone else’s business prying into such a tender issue. In fact, Loki had become extremely knowledgeable about this side of his wife, and it was his over familiarity with the problem that led him to try and distance himself from Sigyn as much as he could before they eventually had it out. Since they had gotten married, each time one of the other ladies of the court announced an imminent arrival, Sigyn would become sullen and withdrawn. The first time this had happened, Loki had immediately tried to fix the situation only to end up fighting with his wife. Sigyn had been absolutely furious with him for a fortnight during which he found himself sleeping in his laboratory. Then, as if out of nowhere, Sigyn was immediately over it and acted as though nothing had happened. If Loki had thought about broaching the problem with anyone it would be his mother, but Loki didn’t want to share such an intimate marital issue with Frigga. That, and she would probably wallop him over the head for being an idiot.

The simple fact of the matter was that Sigyn wanted children whereas Loki was on the fence. Of course, since discovering his Frost Giant heritage, Loki had decided it would be best if he didn’t continue his personal line. It had proven a touchy subject for both of them, one they hadn’t discussed before their marriage and largely avoided since. And, Loki had to admit, part of the problem was him. Sigyn had wanted a large family. It had been about a hundred years into their marriage when, after another court lady had announced an eminent birth, Sigyn had broke down in tears and
confessed to Loki that she feared she was infertile. Then, Loki had made the mistake of informing his wife that he had, without her knowledge, been using Asgard’s male birth control. Sigyn had lashed out, furious that Loki had kept this from her while Loki himself had attacked back, pointing out he had no idea she would disapprove. It should have been a simple communication issue, but it billowed into Loki admitting he didn’t think he wanted children and Sigyn briefly taking it to mean he didn’t want her to mother any of his offspring.

Eventually, they had managed to talk thing out. Loki had laid out all of his concerns about his odd nature, gender fluidity, uneasy reputation, and overall status as the black sheep of Asgard. He had made it clear he couldn’t consider bringing a child into the world until he was on better terms with himself and in a better position to take care of a family. Sigyn had briefly acqueised, but it didn’t dampen her desire for motherhood. As the years wore on and Loki seemed no closer to coming around on the issue, Sigyn seemed to grow more depressed each time she saw another woman with child. Then, after discovering his Frost Giant heritage, Loki had pretty much decided it was out of the cards for him to reproduce. It was one thing for a child to have an embarrassment as a father; it was quite another for Loki to risk his wife’s life in the hopes of bringing an enormous Frost Giant baby into the world. Nevermind that the kid would have to deal with being the son of a traitor and source of embarrassment to two royal families on top of everything. Unfortunately, Sigyn didn’t see it that way.

It was nearing midnight when Thor had finally tired of learning how to play backgammon and Loki found himself with no excuse to not return to his rooms. Creeping toward them, he hoped that Sigyn had gone to sleep, thereby allowing him at least one more night of peace before what would ultimately result in a fight, his wife bursting into tears and him probably having to ask Thor if he could use his sofa for sleeping until things blew over. However, Loki’s luck seemed to run out as he entered the room to find his wife watching an infomercial for a weirdly shaped Midgardian device that promised to cut things easier and quicker than a regular knife. Sigyn was obviously not terribly interested in the product, so Loki could only conclude she had decided to stay up, thwarting his plan to avoid her.

“You didn’t expect me to have stayed up, did you?” Sigyn said, not turning to face him.

“It’s late,” Loki said, hoping to avoid what he knew would result in a fight. “We should both get some sleep.”

“You’re avoiding me,” Sigyn said.

“No, I’m avoiding an unpleasant topic of conversation that always upsets both of us,” Loki replied.

“We promised no secrets between us, Loki,” Sigyn pointed out as her husband ambled over onto a large wingback chair and slumped into it with a huff.

“It’s hardly a secret,” Loki snorted. “We both know how the other feels about the matter.”

“We also promised that we would discuss things, be honest and try to communicate better than we have been,” Sigyn reminded him. Loki knew he wasn’t getting out of this conversation lightly, so he did was he did best: acted like an asshole.

“Alright. I’ll be honest,” Loki huffed. “I’d honestly rather not have this conversation because it always ends up the same way: with both of us fuming at each other for weeks until we finally reach an uneasy, unhappy accord and continue to avoid the subject until we next fight about it.”

“Loki…” Sigyn began.
“Stop me if I’m wrong, but this is exactly what is going to happen,” Loki pointed out. “You get upset, I get upset, we fight and argue. You dissolve into tears because I’m acting like an ass. I avoid you because I hate making you upset. You avoid me because I’m avoiding you. Finally, we both get ourselves under some semblance of control and then go about acting like you’re not always on the precipice of admitting you never would have married me if you had known that, for whatever reason, I find the idea of continuing my cursed bloodline and bringing a child into the world that will ultimately have to deal with living in the shadow of an embarrassing failure of a father absolutely terrifying. Not to mention there is now the added pressure of the fact that angry Frost Giants or some Titanic being from the nether reaches of the universe swooping down at any moment to murder everyone close to me.” Sigyn was quiet for a minute and then, in a small voice, replied:

“Is that really what you think?”

“It’s bad enough you’re saddled with me as a husband, Sigyn,” Loki shook his head. “You don’t need the added pressure of raising a child who everyone will despise purely based on its relation to me.”

“That’s not true,” Sigyn huffed. “I’d never hate it. Neither would your mother or my sisters. And my father adores his grandchildren. And my grandfather adores his great-grandchildren. He likes you well enough, too.”

“Sigyn…” Loki said.

“I don’t think this has anything to do with you being a Frost Giant or being a second son or any of the shenanigans both legal and illegal you’ve gotten up to in your life,” Sigyn argued. “I think you’re just scared of the unknown. Scared of what being a father would mean for you. Scared that you’ll have another person in this world that will make you vulnerable. And you hate being vulnerable, Loki.”

“I don’t…” Loki tried to argue back.

“You can go on and on about how Laufey’s blood and Odin’s parenting makes you a terrible candidate for fatherhood, but one might argue that you’d be the perfect father since you’ve experienced everything a man shouldn’t do to his child,” Sigyn said.

“By the Norns, Sigyn if you want a baby I’ll just find you one somewhere,” Loki huffed. “I’m sure Odin has tons of tips and tricks about liberating infants from their biological families. We could get you one of those Elvish changelings even. I’m sure they’d have one just as troublesome as I am if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want just any baby,” Sigyn replied. “I want your baby.” It was Loki’s turn to be awkwardly silent for a bit.

“Oh,” he said.

“You think that because you have Frost Giant blood, two terrible fathers, and more than a lifetime of misdeeds to your name that I shouldn’t want to have children with you, but that’s exactly why I want to have children with you,” Sigyn said. “I love you so much Loki. So much you can’t even see it. You think that we shouldn’t consider bringing a baby into the world because it might turn out like you, but you don’t even see that the main reason I want one is because I want it to be just like you.”

“Are you mad, woman?” Loki huffed.

“I might be,” Sigyn teased him. “I did marry you, after all. Perhaps some of your madness has
rubbed off on me.”

“But Sigyn, I’ll be…” Loki began.

“A great father,” Sigyn interrupted him. “You’re wonderful with children. You adore Idis and, while you do spoil her rotten, neither Idunn nor Bragi have ever expressed that they felt she would be anything but safe in your hands.”

“I… I suppose you have given me a lot to think about,” Loki admitted. “Though, I think this is a conversation we should put on hold until all of this exile business is put behind us, and we can better plan our future. I wouldn’t want to plan any… collaborations until we are more secure in things.”

“Of course,” Sigyn nodded. “Besides, it would probably help to have your mother and my sisters around through everything.” Loki got up from the chair and finally joined his wife on the divan, embracing her as she reached for him. “I want you to know,” Sigyn said to him earnestly, “never once have I regretted marrying you. Oh, certainly there have been plenty of times I’ve been exasperated by you, afraid for you, and worried about you. But never have I once thought my life would be better off without you.”

“You might be the only one,” Loki pointed out.

“Let’s see,” Sigyn said as Loki better positioned her onto his lap facing him, “without you, I would probably have ended up marrying Theoric. So, right about now I would be tending his younger children from his first two marriages and avoiding those drunken older sons of his. Of course, that would be if he’d decided to keep me alive that long. More than likely I would have been pushed down a staircase the first time I inconvenienced him and then left there with a broken neck until there was no hope of even a Soul Forge bringing me back to life.”

“Well, when you put it that way,” Loki frowned. Sigyn could see the cogs turning in his head, as if he was figuring out a way he could resurrect Theoric and then kill him again.

“I am very lucky to have you,” Sigyn grinned before kissing her husband.

“Well,” Loki grinned at her lasciviously, “now that we have that settled, how about we have some time to ourselves before Thor bursts in here unannounced, hmm?”
Loki was severely beginning to regret his rehabilitation from super villain to quasi-heroic status when he found himself awoken at two in the morning to prepare for a briefing and possible mission from Fury. The group had been told to grab their suits and then huddled onto the quinjet where Widow and Cap were waiting, a hot breakfast prepared for the briefing as the quinjet flew off. While some of the others, like Sigyn, had changed into their clothes for the day, Loki was angrily still in his pajamas picking apart the plate of breakfast Sigyn had happily prepared for him before digging into her own giant bowl of fruit and oatmeal. Whatever was going on, Loki was certain it didn’t merit waking him up this early.

An AIM base had been found on a small, previously-believed-to-be uninhabited island off the coast of California that had actually briefly served as a nuclear waste dumping site from 1945 into the 1960s. AIM had been working to build an underground facility using the island as an above ground base, but presently, only their above ground facility was installed. The facility appeared to be some sort of ocean research facility, but it was actually masking the initial construction work being done to develop the underground base. As Fury explained all of this, Loki glared at the cup of coffee that had been placed before him, thinking about how unfair it was that villains were allowed to sleep in but heroes seemed to be on call whenever.

“We also believe they might be housing some objects of interest in the facility until the construction is complete,” Fury continued. “As we’ve tracked AIM down and found their different bases, they have been consolidating valuable assets like research and some more tangible products into what facilities they have remaining. Which is why we’d like Mr. and Mrs. Mischief to accompany us on this venture.”

“So there is a reason for me being dragged out of my bed at this disgusting hour,” Loki huffed.

“There is reason to believe that some of the artifacts AIM has acquired are, for lack of a better term, magical in nature,” Fury said, clearly not believing in the existence of such magical artifacts despite the two magic-wielding aliens before him. “If so, I think it would be wise to have a couple of people on hand who maybe know what the these things are and how dangerous they are.”

“Well, certainly you don’t need both of us for this mission,” Loki snorted. “I’m sure if anyone were to leave any artifact imbued with seiðr on Midgard it wouldn’t be one of real consequence. After all, no seiðr-wielders of note have been on this plane for centuries.”

“You’re right about one thing,” Fury said. “I certainly don’t need both you and the missus for this mission. I’d be fine with just her, but we can’t leave you behind without there being considerable risk of you getting up to your old tricks. So, since I can’t find you an appropriate babysitter, you’re coming along.”

Loki sputtered a bit at Fury’s pronouncement. Certainly, he appreciated someone else appreciating Sigyn’s magical talent, but he didn’t think such compliments needed to come at an insult to his own ability. Thor clapped his brother on the back to calm his frustrations as Fury went on answering
questions from Steve and Tony about the mission. Tony had barely been allowed out of the Tower by Pepper and only because she had checked over his suite and been given all of the override codes necessary to force Tony back to New York in it if necessary. JARVIS was also going to give Pepper updates on Tony’s situation at ten minute intervals. If anyone thought this was overkill, they were smart enough not to mention it.

“Alright,” Fury said once the debrief was finished. “Those of you who aren’t suited up better get that way. We’ll be over the drop site in fifteen.”

Changing clothes put different Avengers at different speeds. For those like Thor who could whorl around and get costumed or Tony whose suite did most of the work, it took maybe a few seconds tops. Steve and Clint had to physically put on their tac suits. Sigyn, it turned out, could also magically whorl on her battle armor - complete with a flower crown for some reason - but Loki was heard to be muttering from the other room about how long and bothersome it was to put on his own outfit without the aid of magic. Apparently, Loki had never realized how complicated intricate his battle armor was until he found himself without seiðr. The last to dress, Loki emerged in full regalia including his giant gold helmet.

“And that ugly thing doesn’t scream target at all,” Tony snorted.

“It’s majestic,” Loki snorted. “Of course, you wouldn’t know that.”

“And to think,” Sigyn sighed as Loki made some final adjustments to his helmet, “I thought you would have left that ridiculous thing back on Asgard, tucked away in a trunk where it belongs.”

“Now, now lykyng,” Loki said, “You wouldn’t have me head into battle unprotected now, would you?” Sigyn rolled her eyes as Loki inclined his head and thereby his helmet toward her. “You can rub a fang for good luck if you would like.”

“You are utterly obnoxious,” Sigyn snorted.

“I shall give it a rub for good luck brother!” Thor thundered, bouncing over to his brother. Loki immediately jerked his headgear away from Thor’s grasp.

“It...uh… only works for ladies,” Loki winced as Sigyn lost her battle with smothering her snorting laughter.

“Oh, I see,” Thor nodded, obviously not getting the euphemism. “Lady Widow! Would you like to rub my brother’s helm for good luck?”

“That’s gonna be a hard pass,” Widow replied, fitting a fifth or sixth gun into her suit.

“Alright,” Fury said. “Now that you’re ready. Let’s go over the game plan one more time. Bruce stays behind unless we need a Code Green…”

“Which we hopefully won’t,” Bruce groaned.

“You’ll split up into teams,” Fury said. “Barton, Romanoff, Sigyn, and Loki. Thor, Stark and Rogers. From there, we’ll assess the situation and decide the best course of action.”

“No, Sigyn stays on the ship,” Loki ordered.

“What makes you think…” Sigyn began to argue as Fury took a moment to realize someone had just
contradicted him.

“The first time you accompanied these so-called Avengers on an outing you were almost killed by the Other and then mauled by the Green Behemoth,” Loki pointed out as Bruce let out an annoyed “Hey!” in the background. “The second time you were attacked by snowbeasts, and the third you were reverted into childhood. If I were a betting man, I would venture this outing might turn disastrous for you as well. As a measure of not only your safety but also everyone else’s involved, perhaps staying on the ship would be the best case?”

“Do you really think it’s wise to leave her behind?” Steve asked Thor. “I mean, she can be pretty useful in a fight.”

“Disregard Loki’s threats,” Thor shook his head. “Sigyn can rarely keep herself out of a fight. Loki’s desire to have her safely coddled away somewhere will come to nothing. It never works out as he plans.”

“I will not stay behind!” Sigyn gritted out at her husband. “And do not expect me to save your whiny buttocks the second you find yourself amid some calamity for evening suggesting such a thing!”

“Of course, dearest,” Loki said, kissing his wife’s hand dramatically.

“She goes with you,” Fury informed Loki, finally recovering from his annoyance and overcoming the urge to pound Loki into the floor.

“But…” Loki sputtered.

“I’m not going with him,” Sigyn huffed. “I’ll go with the other team!”

“Fine,” Fury rolled his eyes. “Just all of you get your asses out of there!”

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There wasn’t much cover on the island but just enough for the team to split up into different areas of observation. Iron Man and Sigyn were on a cliff that offered the closest view of the facility so they could keep an eye out for magical and technological marvels. However, their position was also atop a sheer cliff that would take a hard scramble down the back of and then around several large boulders to actually get to the facility. Cap and Thor were in a copse of trees closest to the facility while Widow, Hawkeye, and Sigyn were in a small ditch midway between the cliff and the copse. Fury’s initial order was to observe and report then wait for orders once the situation had been fully assessed. Unfortunately, waiting wasn’t everyone’s strong suit.

“I am tired of waiting,” Thor announced from the position he had taken with Cap. “Fury is taking too long with his signaling. We should burst forth and take them now!”

“Thor I don’t think…” Cap began as Thor leapt up from his hiding place and charged forth into the fray of random henchpeople with an Asgardian battle cry.

Unfortunately for Thor, the element of surprise didn’t seem to bother the various henchpersons, who merely cocked their heads to the side at the appearance of this unexpected interloper. Thor was both
taken aback by the nonchalance these people seemed to have for his most hardened battle cry as well as the fact that none of the other Avengers had followed him into the fray as he expected. In mid-run, Thor decided to start backtracking, which led him to tripping over his cape and falling face first into a nearby mud puddle. The various minions regarded this display with little emotion and then returned to their business at hand. Cap, meanwhile, had pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance as Fury’s angry voice echoed into his earpiece.

“See,” Natasha said to Clint from their hiding space further down, “this is exactly why your costume doesn’t need a cape.”

“Lame,” Clint decided.

“Oh, no,” Loki said in a deadpan voice. “Thor has fallen and injured himself. If only there was some way we could help him without revealing our positions, but alas…”

“Go out there and get your brother or I’ll do it for you!” Sigyn’s voice suddenly yelled through the comms.

“What? No!” Loki huffed. “Thor can get himself out of his own mess!” There was a brief tussle followed by the voice of Tony hissing at Sigyn to get back into position.

“Well, Miss Mischief is coming down to show you how it’s done now,” Fury said. “And I don’t care who his father is, someone better tell Thor I am going to rip into his royal ass when he gets back about following orders!” Loki hit his face with his palm in frustration. He turned around to find Sigyn had teleported behind him, Tony trying to be as stealthy as possible while following behind her in the rather unstealthy Iron Man suit.

“Hold this,” Sigyn said with a grimace on her face, taking off her flower crown and thrusting it toward Loki. The prince of mischief happily took the adornment as Sigyn shoved up the sleeves on her flowing dress and headed into the fray.

“Why did your wife wear a flower crown into battle?” Clint asked Loki, who was trying to find a place to set the hairpiece down so he could follow after her.

“I think we have bigger problems,” Cap announced over the comms.

Seeing Sigyn coming out to help Thor, the AIM minions finally decided to call in some muscle. Thor was back up - albeit covered with mud - and wielding Mjolnir while Sigyn was throwing whatever magic she could at the minions in the meantime. As the group waivered over whether or not they should keep waiting for Fury’s signal, the director’s voice shouted “fuck the signal” over the comms, sending the rest of the dissembled Avengers into the fray. Though the Avengers were easily outnumbered, it soon became obvious that most of the AIM minions they were fighting hadn’t been trained much in combat and were probably more on the research side of things. The problem was that as soon as one minion was put down two more seemed to emerge from the shadow facility behind them.

“Maybe this is some kind of cloning facility,” Clint said, as he shot and arrow and then used his bow to knock out another opponent.

“Nah,” Tony said, shooting his blasters at the ground in front of a group that was attempting to sneak up on where Cap and Thor were fighting back together. “There’s too many variables in height, weight, and physical appearance.”

“Then what do you think they’re here for?” Steve asked, catching his shield as it bounced off a few
As if to answer his question, a group of AIM minions dressed in a slightly different school bus yellow uniform emerged from the facility. The one who seemed to be the head minion then came forth from the bowels of the facility, carrying in his hand a small box that seemed to be made of a strange metal curled around like the branches of a tree and polished stones or glass that seemed to change color in the sunlight. He held the box aloft and as he did so, the rest of the minions seemed to back away from the fight as if they thought this device would stop everything completely. The head minion then opened the box and waited.

It took a few moments of nothing happening before the lead minion brought the box back down and looked into it, seemingly confused. The rest of the AIM agents seemed just as confused a few began to take off, realizing that there wasn’t really anywhere to run or hide on a tiny island off the coast. As the remaining Avengers started to renew the fight, Sigyn summoned the seemingly unmagical box the AIM agent had just brought out to herself. Instantly, the AIM agents seemed to panic and rush toward her, giving Sigyn enough time to yell “catch!” at her husband before heading straight into the fray of men coming toward her.

Tony’s jaw slackened as Sigyn twisted around, kicking two separate underlings to the ground with opposite feet and then landing back on the ground as she blasted her seiðr at a third. When she landed, her dress remained untorn and not a single strand of her braided hair was out of place. Without pausing, she charged toward another group of attackers, knocking a group off to the side over like bowling pins with her seiðr as she did so. This seemed to signal to the rest of the Avengers to get back into the fight, though there weren’t that many minions left at this point.

“I mean, I’ve seen her do this before,” Tony remarked, still in awe, “but man ...”

“Yes,” Loki grinned lasciviously, patiently watching his wife take on multiple attackers at once. “She is most impressive.”

Looking around and seeing that there were still AIM agents in play despite their disastrous attempt at ending the fight, Sigyn finally just let down a final magic blast that leveled the rest of them. Amid cries from Clint and Tony asking why she hadn’t done that initially and Thor complaining about why she and Loki always tried to end fights early that way, Sigyn smoothed down her skirts and then turned toward Loki. As if she had not just committed a one-woman massacre of the AIM agents, Sigyn skipped back over to her husband and giggled as he produced her flower crown from where he had been holding it behind his back. Loki seemed to place the crown lopsided on her head on purpose, leading Sigyn to laugh, reach up, kiss him, and then pull back to adjust the headdress.

“Widow and I should probably go inside,” Tony said. “See if AIM is keeping any other fascinatingly useless objects inside.”

“Someone should probably get whatever that weird box is back to the quinjet so they can begin doing whatever they need to with it,” Steve said.

“As long as Sigyn and Loki didn’t misplace it when they started making out,” Clint observed. The group looked over and Thor let out a massive sigh.

“Must you always so publicly display your affections after battle?” Thor whined at his little brother.

“You have your post-battle rituals and I have mine,” Loki huffed.

“Come along, husband,” Sigyn said, taking Loki by the hand, “I am sure the Furious One wishes to know what we have recovered.”
“What the hell is this?” Fury asked furiously as the group sat around the table with the box placed in the center.

“Well, I believe AIM thought it was some kind of magic box,” Steve explained.

“It was a bit of a let down, though,” Tony shrugged. “I mean, unless it released some sort of unseen horror into the world we have yet to detect.”

“That is not the case,” Loki huffed.

“You know what this is?” Steve asked curiously.

“It’s a phylactery,” Sigyn said. “An empty one, of course.”

“A what?” Clint said.

“Do you not have phylacteries on Midgard?” Thor asked, confused.

“So, this is a common enough thing that Thor would know about it?” Tony surmised.

“What does that mean?” Thor asked, offended.

“What is a phylactery?” Steve asked, shooting Tony a glare.

“Essentially,” Loki said, pausing for dramatic effect. “It’s a magic box.”

“Um, what?” Tony asked.

“A phylactery is a device for holding very dangerous and potent spells, charms, hexes, and items of magical use,” Sigyn sighed. “They are imbued with properties that prevents the magic inside from escaping, say to prevent a powerful sorceress from accidentally using her own deadly spell against herself or to prevent others from accessing it. Sometimes they are used to store important spells away for later use or to contain deadly magics that could cause harm for all eternity, especially those spells and enchantments that are more dangerous if you attempt to destroy them than they are if you just let them sit around and not be used.”

“So, this box is basically a magical safe?” Tony said. “It stores away magic either for when it’s ready to be used or so that it’ll never be used again.”

“Exactly,” Sigyn nodded.

“So, how and why did AIM end up with this?” Fury demanded to know. “And what was inside of originally?”

“Well, based on my knowledge of Asgardian history and the phylactery's design,” Loki said, “I’m sure this phylactery was brought to Midgard sometime during the Aesir and Vanir tenure here. This style of phylactery and the design motifs on it were most common during that time period. When the Allfather recalled everyone from Midgard, they were supposed to take all magical and otherworldly items with them, and most were accounted for. My guess is whatever spell or enchantment housed in this particular phylactery was used eons ago, and the owner did not return it to its homeworld
because it was no longer of use. Sort of like the way you Midgardians so easily dispose of the bags your so-called ‘fast food’ bags in once the meal is consumed.”

“And how does this ‘used fast food bag’ wind up in AIM’s hands?” Fury asked.

“I would conjecture,” Loki said, “that someone who knew the purpose of phylacteries sold it claiming that inside was a dangerous magic that should only be used in dire situations. Those that were gullible enough to buy it did, and those that were smart enough to know better shystersed the others into purchasing it. Your AIM organization is probably one on a long list of Midgardian groups that were tricked into thinking this object actually held some power within it, when, in fact, it was just some discarded Asgardian refuse with no real purpose at all.”

“Let me get this straight,” Widow said. “Basically, someone sold AIM a piece of Asgardian garbage claiming it had magical powers.”

“And they fell for it!” Tony howled with laughter.

“I’m not surprised,” Steve admitted. “AIM has connections to the Red Skull and Nazis. Those guys were always trying to find mythological objects they thought would give them extreme powers and stuff. You could have sold them a stone cup with some weird markings, said it was the Holy Grail and some of them would have believed you. I mean, they were pretty easily spoonfed a lot of other nonsense anyway.”

“Wouldn’t we have noticed if there were magical items on our planet by now, though?” Widow argued.

“Oh, like you noticed the Tesseract?” Loki smirked.

“If it wouldn’t cause an intergalactic incident, I might slap that smug look off your face right now,” Fury informed Loki who only smirked even larger. “Was there anything else in there?”

“No,” Tony said. “Widow and I didn’t find anything but construction gear to try and build the underground facility. And Sigyn said she didn’t detect any other magical energies in the area.”

“I did find some mushrooms!” Sigyn announced happily.

“Just because you didn’t find anything down there doesn’t mean there aren’t other things like this floating around somewhere in the world,” Fury sighed.

“I think the task now is identifying how this object came into AIM’s possession,” Sigyn suggested. “While this object itself is not nefarious in anyway, whomever sold it to AIM might be in possession of other similar objects that are potentially dangerous.”

“Or they might be connected to a network of those who deal in similar goods,” Loki nodded. “While I don’t think anything inherently dangerous would have been allowed to remain on Midgard, there is a good chance a lot of harmless or useless objects with Aesir ties may have been left behind for Midgardians to fight and feud over.”

“A black market for abandoned outer space goods that may or may not be dangerous,” Fury groaned. “Great.”
The search for illicit Asgardian magical items was more of a tantalizing idea on paper than it turned out to be in real life. Returned to the soon-to-be-renamed Avengers Tower, the group found themselves in what more or less resembled a college cram session rather than the plot of an Indiana Jones movie. Steve put the final touches on the reports for the mission they had just completed while Clint and Thor shared a bag of potato chips, watching ESPN together. The rest of the group was focused on identifying anything that might be Asgardian in nature. Jane and Darcy took to searching the dark web for unique items while Bruce looked on more innocuous sites. After two and a half days of searching, Tony came the closest to hitting on anything when he discovered a strange ad on Craigslist. The thing being sold on the page turned out to be a new strain of marijuana, and following some additional research, Tony spend the rest of the day teasing Bruce about the fact that a strain of marijuana known to calm people down had been named in his honor.

“I don’t like this,” Steve frowned over supper that evening. “I don’t like the idea that we just have to sit around and wait for one of these items to crop up and be used before we can stop it.”

“I don’t like it either,” Tony agreed, “but two days of internet trolling and dark web inquiries have turned up nothing. If there is anything else out there, whoever has it is holding it close to their chests. Either that or they don’t even know what they have in the first place.”

“That’s what worries me,” Steve pointed out. “I mean, both Zola and SHIELD had the Tesseract and used it to develop weapons, even though they didn’t fully understand what it did.

“The Tesseract itself should have been on Asgard,” Thor agreed. “I would have thought it was locked away in Father’s vault with all of the other treasures that might be dangerous.”

“Sort of makes one wonder how many of the items in Odin’s old vault are fake,” Loki snorted. “My money’s on that stupid tuning fork. Of all the alleged magical items to be locked away! A tuning fork!”

“What is it? Some kind of magical piano tuner?” Tony snorted.

“It vibrates at a frequency that summons the Lurking Unknown from the netherworlds,” Sigyn explained.

“Yeah… I got maybe a third of that,” Clint said.

“Perhaps we’re thinking too big,” Natasha suggested. “The phylactery turned out to just be a piece of Asgardian garbage, right? Maybe instead of looking for particularly large, dangerous, and powerful items we should be looking for smaller, innocuous things. You know, magical knickknacks and oddities. Things that are typically harmless…”

“Unless they happen to fall into the hands of someone who doesn’t understand their use,” Sigyn finished.

“Which, knowing Midgardians, could be any of them,” Loki surmised.

“What if,” Bruce proposed, “the items we’re looking for aren’t just out in the public?”

“What do you mean?” Tony asked.

“Given that Asgardians stopped visiting earth in what… around 900 CE?” Bruce said.

“I believe that is correct,” Sigyn nodded.
“Then most of the things they left behind would date from around that period or earlier,” Bruce continued. “Meaning that they would be seen as historical artifacts. Maybe rather than looking around the Dark Web or eBay we should be checking out museum and private collections of artifacts, particularly those related to Vikings.”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “If they’re behind glass or in the archives of a museum, they aren’t exactly being used, are they? I mean, aren’t the kind of safer where they are with curators thinking it’s just some old artifact, not an object of mystical power?”

“But what if someone finds out that one of these objects has mystical powers?” Natasha pointed out. “What’s to stop them from robbing the museum for it?”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Someone bound on the destruction of the planet isn’t above a little museum theft. I mean, Lokes here tried to walk out with half the mineral collection at the natural history museum just because he thought they were pretty.”

“It was a few small pebbles at best,” Loki huffed before noticing his wife’s glare at him. “And I have learned from my mistakes…”

“Even without adding in the museum factor,” Bruce pointed out, “there are private collectors out there who could have these as well. Private collectors who may or may not know the actual purpose behind something in their collection.”

“So, what should we do?” Clint asked.

“I have an idea,” Tony grinned.

“This isn’t good,” Bruce groaned.

“Pepper’s always trying to get me into arts and culture-y stuff,” Tony said. “You know, get me out of the lab, expose me to thought-provoking art. Make me less of a philanderer.”

“I would suggest you mean Pepper’s trying to make you less of a Philistine, but the other word is pretty apropos,” Bruce said.

“You’re suggesting we use you as bait for one of these collectors?” Steve suggested.

“It’s plausible,” Natasha hummed. “Billionaire Tony Stark decides he wants to take up a new hobby: collecting ancient and possible magic artifacts left behind by ancient aliens. We’ll have to do some legwork weeding out the crazies, the con artists, and the idiots, but we might be able to pull something off.”

“It’ll just be like how SHIELD sets up meetings with terrorist cells or black market traders,” Clint nodded. “Gives you a chance to see if they have anything serious to offer, and if they do, you cuff ’em.”

“I’m not sure how we that would work,” Steve frowned. “Can you really just arrest someone on the suspicion of possessing a magical object?”

“You can arrest someone for having the equipment they need to make nuclear missiles if they don’t have permission to have those objects,” Natasha pointed out.

“Besides, which would you rather have to deal with? Someone who is just in possession of a magical object they could use to kill people or someone who has already used said magical object to kill people,” Tony pointed out.
“You can’t prove someone will actually use this object to do harm,” Steve said.

“Until they’ve already done it. Which I think is bullshit,” Tony said. “What’s so wrong with stopping something illegal and dangerous before it happens?”

“That fact that it infringes on people’s rights,” Steve said. “I don’t like it any more than you do that people do bad things, that they kill and hurt other people, but hurting and killing is a choice. And just because someone has the ability to do it doesn’t mean they will make that choice. You can’t punish something for something they haven’t done yet.”

“So you would rather someone lose their life rather than stop a person before they can take it?” Tony asked.

“By that logic, every single one of us Avengers has the ability to cause a great deal of damage, to kill and hurt people,” Steve said. “But we choose to use our talents to help rather than harm. If you judge people by what they have the potential to do rather than what they actually do, you’re setting a dangerous precedent. And in my experience, people live up to the expectations you set for them.”

“I’m surprised Asgard doesn’t have any opinion on this topic,” Tony said.

“Heimdall knows all,” Thor shrugged. “If someone is going to make a decision to hurt someone else, he can see it ahead of time.”

“Of course, he’s only obligated to see what decisions could impact Asgard and the Allfather, so really it’s sort of a great talent being used in an utterly useless way,” Loki said. “And there are some things even he can’t see.”

“Well, while you and Cap debate moral philosophy,” Natasha said. “I’m going to work with Darcy to set up some protocols and inquiries with museums to see if there is any object with the potential to become dangerous that we should be monitoring. After all, I don’t think it would hurt if SHIELD were to compile a list of potentially dangerous items they need to monitor or that might need to have better security because their abilities makes them a higher target of theft.”

“Hopefully, you guys won’t find anything,” Steve said.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath,” Natasha admitted.

“Yes, Asgardians aren’t a tidy breed,” Loki nodded. “You’ve seen how well Thor keeps house. I daresay there are a variety of useless Asgardian baubles that have been recovered from ancient trash heaps all over this planet. The best you can hope is that, like Thor, it’s useless garbage.”

“Hey!” Thor said, confused for a moment as to what he should be upset about, “I’m not that sloppy!”

“Yeah,” Tony sighed. “not holding my breath.”
“Alright,” Darcy announced after breakfast the following morning. “I’ve got some magical prospects for you guys to check out.”

“You made a power point?” Tony groaned as the screen flashed up.

“Yes. Shut up,” Darcy said. “I figured this was easier than fielding all of your questions.”

“Before you get started,” Steve said, “how sure are you that any of these objects are actually magical?”

“Being that I am not a wizard,” Darcy said, “not sure at all. But these items are magic according to myth and legend. And we previously thought three of the people sitting around this table were mythological…”

“Ergo, there are some odds that some of these allegedly magical objects might be more magic than previously thought,” Bruce concluded.

“How are we supposed to tell if something’s magic by just looking at it, though?” Steve asked.

“I figured I could tell you about the objects and if they ring any bells with our Asgardian friends, then maybe they’re worth looking into further,” Darcy said.

“Do you think there will be goblins afoot in these objects?” Thor asked worriedly.

“Um, what?” Tony asked.

“Goblins hate the shrill sounds of bells,” Sigyn said. “If you are venturing anywhere goblins might be present, ringing a bell is sure to ward them off.”

“Are you sure you’re talking about goblins and not bears?” Clint pointed out.

“Bears hate bells as well,” Thor said.

“I think ‘ring a bell’ means something on Midgard besides warding off goblins,” Loki pointed out. “Probably something to do with memory, if I understand the context correctly.

“You guys are from a weird place,” Tony informed them.

“You think ringing a bell will bring back your memories!” Thor shot back.

“Okay, before this ends up like every other breakfast here - with a fist fight,” Jane said, “how about we let Darcy do her presentation?”

“Thank you, Janie,” Darcy said. “Hit it Jarvis.”
An item appeared on the screen that looked like a weird amulet with several human figurines carved in the center. The Asgardians seemed a bit interested in it, but no more than they did any other sort of Midgardian curiosity. Tony seemed also curious, but more about how an ancient gemstone had such small yet detailed carvings. Sensing she was about to answer a question from Tony that was off topic, Darcy launched into the item’s description.

“This is the Crystal of Lothair,” Darcy said. “It was made sometime in the 800s in Germany for Lothair II, the grandson of Charlemagne, and is made of quartz crystal and gilt copper. The carvings depict the story of Susanna and the Elders from the book of Daniel from the Bible. The copper on the outside was added later, so the crystal is the oldest part. Most of what we know about the crystal comes from the 900s when it was pawned by some count to buy a cannon. He then had it housed in Waulsort Abbey after he realized war, what is it good for? It was thrown into the Meuse River during the French Revolution and eventually made its way to the British Museum. Some people believe Lothair had it made to show he was a just king. Others think it was to protect him from evil, particularly the evil that led him to accuse his wife of all sorts of heinous things only for the pope to call him a liar.”

“It is a nice piece,” Sigyn said. “Especially given the technology available on Midgard at the time, but I can’t see any magical purpose to it.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, clicking forward. “This is a hag stone, also known as an adder stone witch stone, or serpent's egg. It’s on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and is said to have been used commonly by magical practitioners in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Russia to cure diseases, block evil charms, and find traps laid by other witches and/or fairies. They are also said to float in water. It is believed the stones are formed by the dripping of the venom of powerful serpents.”

“Bollocks,” Loki snorted.

“Fine,” Darcy sighed, clicking through. “The Markgrafen Museum in Ansbach, Germany, is home to a collection of wolfssegen, ancient charms that people of Bavaria believed would ward off wolf attacks and protect from werewolves…”

“Preposterous,” Loki snorted.

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “Werewolves aren’t native to Midgard at all.”

“Please tell me you’re making some joke that earth-dwellers don’t understand,” Tony groaned. “I’m already dealing with mermaids, goblins, and half the characters from the Lord of the Rings here.”

“Well,” Darcy began, “this ritual Norwegian drinking cup featuring a two-headed dragon from the Horniman Museum in London…”

“Is just as useless as every other object you’ve shown us,” Loki snorted.

“Be kind, Loki,” Sigyn said, elbowing her husband in the rib cage. “Lady Darcy has worked quite hard and quite diligently to find us objects that could be of interest. It isn’t her fault if this endeavor yields no objects of magical value.”

“I don’t want to sit here and waste my time!” Loki huffed.

“Hey!” Darcy huffed. “I took out every object from the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall because you said everything there was a crock of shit!”

“It is!” Loki huffed. “I don’t know why Midgardians seem to think such ridiculous items are
magical!"

“You guys use crystals and herbs and all sorts of stuff all the time,” Bruce pointed out.

“Yes, items that come from magical places that have been imbued with magical properties,” Loki huffed. “Even if there were somewhere on this realm that had been imbued with magical properties, I doubt there is anyone with the knowledge to have kept it up this long.”

“Then what’s the point of even doing this?” Darcy huffed, clicking forward to the next object.

“What is that?” Sigyn asked, intrigued. Loki even seemed to look forward at the round ball sitting on a silver podium.”

“It’s a beryl gazing ball found in County Galway, Ireland, and is now on display at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin,” Darcy said. “Before it was donated to the museum in the 1870s, it was housed in St. Mary’s Cathedral in Tuam. The Catholics said it was an item that belonged to Saint Jarlath who founded the town, but a lot of people think its much older and dates from the days of folk religion. It’s also known as Finvarra’s Mirror and allegedly belonged to an ancient fairy king who used it to spy on people.”

“You mean Finn Bheara?” Steve interjected.

“Whomst?” Tony snorted.

“Finn Bheara, the High King of the Daoine Sidhe, Lord of the Dead, the Faerie King of Cnoc Meadha,” Steve said.

“Is this some sort of Catholic thing?” Clint asked.

“It’s an Irish thing. My ma used to tell me stories about him,” Steve replied with a roll of his eyes. “Finn Bheara lived in a castle on Cnoc Meadha in County Galway back in the early days. He was married to Oona, the last High Queen of the Daoine Sidhe. Finn Bheara was known to help humankind. If they did favors for him, he would make sure their crops grew, their horses were healthy, and they would earn great riches. He also liked to play chess for some reason? But if you crossed him, he could be quiet cruel. There was a lord who refused to pay him what he owed the Faerie King so Finn Bheara briefly kidnapped his sweetheart. It is said Finn Bheara died and was buried on Cnoc Meadha, and then his wife went to Ulster and then sailed off somewhere.”

“Are… are you quite sure his name was Finn Bheara?” Sigyn asked. “And not Alfionbharr?”

“Alfionbharr?” Steve asked.

“Alfionbharr, the legendary elvish prince…” Sigyn began.

“All the elvish princes think they’re legendary,” Thor muttered, “with their pointy ears and complex dialects and ridiculous etiquette rules…”

“Thor not a fan of elves?” Tony asked.

“They are a bit rude,” Loki said. “They possess an ancient seíðr they won’t teach anyone, and the royalty is a particular source of annoyance. There are more hereditary elvish princes and lords than there are elves without titles. Back when the elves were largely in charge, the elvish kings and high kings gave out titles for just about anything. Wiped the high king’s nose for him? Boom! You and all of your descendants are hereditary princes. Let the king use you as a footstool after a rather long battle? Boom! Hereditary princes! Held the royal chamber pot? Boom! Princes!”
“We get the picture,” Natasha interjected.

“And heaven forbid you forget if the one whose great-grandfather held the chamber pot is more or less important societally than the one who wiped the nose,” Thor snorted. “Most of these titles have no lands, properties, or even money to their name, but it’s still considered a heavy insult if you forget to do some intricate bow to honor one of them or remember exactly what period of Alfheim’s lunar cycle their house was pledged to.”

“Let’s just say its a good thing the elves tend to live about ten thousand years a piece,” Sigyn summarized. “It takes them the first thousand years or so just to learn all of the etiquette and rules it takes to operate in their own society.”

“So, back to Finn Bheara?” Steve asked curiously.

“If he is the elvish prince I’m thinking of, his real name was Alfionbharr the White,” Sigyn continued. “The elves lived in Midgard long before Asgard took over the ruling of the realms. Alfionbharr was one of the many old elvish princes who came to Midgard seeking his fortune. He met and fell in love with Onagh, a Midgardian witch - for Midgardians were still in touch with their natural seiðr then - and they married. They grew quite powerful, and for a while they ruled over a part of Midgard known as Īweriū. However, they grew more powerful than many of the other elvish rulers on Midgard. These leaders became jealous and then, to prevent an internal conflict, Alfionbharr’s family decided he should leave Midgard. He was called back to Alfheim, but he was told his wife would not be given the immortality afforded to elves and that she would have to remain on Midgard without him. Alfionbharr loved her too much to leave her, and so he was striped of his immortality, left to die on Midgard.”

“What makes you so sure that this… Finn Bheara and Alfionbharr are the same person?” Bruce asked.

“The mirror,” Sigyn said. “I have one of my own, as you know.”

“From your ridiculous mother,” Loki nodded.

“That’s not a mirror, though,” Jane pointed out. “It’s… some kind of crystal ball.”

“The elves developed the ability to create glass that could see other realms, other people, and even the future and the past,” Sigyn continued. “Some are, yes, crystal balls, while others are more traditional, flat mirrors. They are largely considered novelty items today, especially as few have great power. Mine, for example, can only show me my mother at this moment.”

“These mirrors are often used by lovers to keep in touch with one another across great expanses,” Loki nodded. “Or for parents to watch their far away children. If Alfionbharr had one, it might have been so he and his beloved could communicate easily, especially as it was impossible to communicate instantly on Midgard in those days.”

“I don’t think this is necessarily an evil thing,” Bruce pointed out. “Especially if it’s only ability is to see people who are long dead.”

“Unless you can change who it views,” Natasha pointed out.

“Seriously? Like a fairy tale magic mirror?” Tony snorted. “What would Fury want this for? Asking it who’s the fairest of them all?”

“Could someone use this mirror to spy on another person without them knowing it?” Natasha asked. “If it had a new owner, could they set it to view someone they wanted to?”
“Perhaps,” Sigyn frowned. “But it would take some elvish magic to do so. As I said, mine can only view my mother. If I decided I wanted the mirror to see someone else, it would take elvish magics. And elves don’t give their magic away freely.”

“So, for the right price, you could watch anyone through this thing,” Natasha surmised.

“I don’t think you’d want to do business with the faeries,” Steve asked. “They tend to ask for payment that always turns out to be more complicated than you think.”

“Yes,” Sigyn agreed “Elves are not ones to do business with. Even dwarves avoid it.”

“Even so,” Natasha said, “there are some people stupid enough to try. Which means Fury will want something done about this.”

“I don’t know how he plans to do it,” Loki huffed. “In my experience, your Midgardian museums are not very willing to give up their possessions, even to those more suited to them.”

“Wait,” Darcy said, vibrating with excitement, “does this mean we get to do a museum heist?”

“No,” Fury said adamantly. “I am not authorizing another museum heist. Especially not with Romanoff and Barton involved.”

“To be fair,” Natasha said, “Clint was the one who got stuck in the slide.”

“How was I supposed to know it wasn’t wide enough for both me and the bow?” Clint huffed. “Why would a modern art museum have a slide anyway. It’s weird.”

“Answered your own question, buddy,” Tony snorted.

“What was SHIELD stealing out of the Tate Modern?” Steve asked, a bit ruffled by the thought of art theft.

“We were switching out the items actually being stolen with a fake that had a tracker so we could find out where this illegal art ring was located,” Natasha explained. “Clint nearly compromised the whole mission when he decided to try out the slide before we were supposed to leave.”

“Tasha never lets me do anything fun on missions,” Clint frowned.

“Why would you bring a bow and arrow to an art museum anyway?” Bruce asked.

“Fit in with the whole Robin Hood theme we had going,” Clint shrugged. “Besides, how else am I supposed to shoot bad guys?”

“Guns are preferable in the modern age,” Natasha pointed out.

“Lame,” Clint pronounced.

“So, you are propositioning that we just leave this possible source of advanced alien technology lying around in a museum in Ireland in the hopes that no one else discovers its a source of advanced alien technology?” Tony asked Fury. “What happened to the whole finding magical weapons and
“I’m not saying we aren’t going to secure the item,” Fury said. “I’m just saying we aren’t going to steal it.”

“Come again?” Tony asked.

“I don’t want it getting out to anyone that this museum may have an object magical in nature,” Fury said. “It might make people who aren’t otherwise looking for magical objects start. And nothing draws attention to a particular item like when it gets stolen. If at all possible, I want to get this object stabilized without anyone being the wiser.”

“And how do you propose that?” Loki asked airily.

“I figured magic made this thing. Magic can fix it,” Fury said.

“Well, that shows how little you know about seiðr,” Loki snorted. Fury looked about ready to bash Loki’s head in when Sigyn interjected.

“Why my husband means is that, yes, there is a way to remove this seiðr from the mirror,” Sigyn said, “but it is not any seiðr he or I know. The elves are very protective of the seiðr they use. Only an elf would know how to undo this spell.”

“And, I’m guessing based on prior conversation,” Natasha said, “it might take a little more than asking nicely to get an elf to undo this spell for us.”

“Well that depends,” Loki said.

“On what?” Fury asked.

“On whether you think it’s a bigger security risk to have a magic mirror or have an elf running around your realm,” Loki said. “They’re worse than dwarves in the house guest department, and think the world owes them everything. Not to mention the complex deals they always want to make for services rendered. So, unless you’re willing to give up something like your first born, your sense of smell, your ability to feel cool breezes, or various other abstract concepts you don’t think you will miss but will end up missing terribly, I suggest we leave things as they are hope nothing bad happens.”

“Unless, that is, someone in this room is already owned a favor by an elf and could just cash it in,” Sigyn pointed out.

“When was the last time you saw old Eldred anyways?” Thor smirked.

“Loki, do you happen to know an elf that could help us out of this situation?” Steve asked. Loki let out a long, annoyed groan from where he was lounging.

“So, who is Eldred?” Tony asked.

“Eldred is a nickname,” Thor said. “His real name is Alfeldred and he was one of Loki’s seiðr tutors. Loki’s favorite tutor, as a matter of fact.”

“Even as a youth, Loki’s seiðr was so advanced that Frigga had to send away for a tutor from Alfheim,” Sigyn said. “We still go and see him now and again when we can.”

“If you like this guy so much, why are you so bent out of shape about bringing him here to help us?”
Steve asked Loki.

“Because,” Loki said dramatically, “I don’t want to waste my favor that I’m owed on your stupid mirror that might not even kill anyone! Do you know how hard it is to gain a favor from an elf? What sorts of things one can do with such a favor? I was saving that favor for me."

“To do exactly what with?” Natasha inquired.

“Haven’t quite made up my mind,” Loki shrugged. “Thought perhaps it could come in handy in some life or death situation.”

“Just call the guy up and get this mirror un-magicked,” Tony said.

“I don’t think you understand what you’re asking me to do,” Loki huffed. “Imagine you have been given a sack filled with the strongest wind in all the universe and someone wants you to use that powerful wind to blow out a candle!”

“You’re a strong sack of wind,” Clint muttered then stealthily received a high-five from Thor.

“No, I see what’s going on here,” Tony smirked. “You want a deal.”

“Oh, hell no,” Fury groaned as Loki smirked.

“We are not making him extreme emperor overlord of earth in exchange for disenchanting a mirror,” Clint announced.

“We aren’t killing anyone either,” Steve nodded.

“And we aren’t stealing anything that you’ve had your eye on from any museum or private person,” Natasha said.

“Ugh. You’re all no fun,” Loki pouted.

“How about you do it or Sigyn withholds sex for the next millennia?” Tony suggested.

“I’m sorry,” Sigyn huffed angrily, “why am I being punished for this?”

“Loki, ask Eldred to help and I will confess to Father about what happened the salamanders in his personal bathing chambers,” Thor sighed.

“Really?” Loki grinned. “Swear on Mjolnir?”

“Yes,” Thor sighed.

“What happened with the salamanders?” Clint asked, intrigued.

“The Allmother and Allfather were on one of their moons’ long trips across the realm,” Loki said. “When Thor developed an attachment to a pair of salamanders and began keeping them. However, he didn’t realize it was a male and female pair. Soon, the palace was over-run with the things.”

“It might help to mention Asgardian salamanders are about five times the size of your Midgardian ones,” Sigyn said. “And they breathe fire.”
“As a result of the infestation Thor caused, the Allfather nearly lost his other eye and a great deal of his hair,” Loki smirked, “both on his head and...elsewhere…”

“We had to spend a full moon cycle in Vanaheim so the palace could be exterminated,” Thor admitted. “The source of the issue was never found, though Loki could have told at any time.”

“Yes, well, odds were if I tattled I would not only get in trouble for telling of Thor’s misdeeds but also for not stopping his idiocy,” Loki said.

“Well, get Heimdall on the horn and get this elf guy down here,” Tony said to Loki.

“Yes,” Loki rolled his eyes. “It’s that simple.”

It took a day and a half for Eldred to be contacted and accept his invitation to Midgard. Apparently, he had been hard for even Heimdall to track down because of his traveling nature. When Eldred was located, he was in the midst of a very delicate crystal tuning exercise and therefore needed at least half a day to finish up. And then a full day to pack. It was soon apparent to the Midgardians that the references to the diva-like behavior of elves was not at all exaggerated. And, apparently, Eldred was one of the least snooty and demanding elves there was. Finally, the new visitor to the tower arrived, appearing on the Iron Man launching deck in what could only be described as a mist of glitter and light. Perhaps the only thing weirder than his appearance in a cloud of sparkles was the man himself.

Certainly, the specimen before them had the physical appearance of a Legolas or Thranduil, long white hair, sharply pointed ears and angular facial features that looked as though they were carved of marble. A general facade of disdain and ennui also seemed to emanate from this new personage. The only thing that seemed to jolt the Midgardians away from the man’s ethereal beauty is that his robes looked like something that had come out of Mrs. Frizzle’s spring wardrobe, and he appeared to have a glass cauldron on his head. None of this seemed to irk Thor, Loki, or Sigyn when the man came forward to greet each of them.

“There he is! My favorite pupil of all time!” Eldred said, extending his arms and gliding toward Loki like some sort of old Hollywood grand dame descending her spiral staircase in a marabou-feather lined robe.

“Eldred! It’s been too long,” Loki said, happily accepting his former teacher’s embrace.

“I can’t believe that father of yours sent you to Midgard of all places,” Eldred said, a bit disgusted before turning to Tony with a simpering grin. “Not that your home isn’t positively lovely.” He turned back to Loki. “Honestly, I’ve never understood how that gem of a mother you have puts up with him.”

“Me neither,” Loki agreed.

“I have to admit, everyone on Alfheim was surprised the Allfather came down so harshly on you,” Eldred admitted. “I mean, that was the sort of thing that Bor would have sent Odin to bed without supper for. But I suppose times have changed. World-conquering isn’t as glamorous as it used to be. Then again, have you seen the type of despots hanging around the universe these days? No sense of style. No sense of flamboyance. It seems to me if you’re going to destroy a planet, you should at least have a nice outfit for it. Oh, hello Sigyn, dear heart. How are you darling?”
“What the hell?” Tony whispered to the other Midgardians as Eldred and Sigyn air kissed and then delved into some conversation about the latest trends in elvish headgear.

“He’s like the elf version of John Waters,” Clint said. Natasha, Tony, and Bruce nodded as Steve tried not to fumble around as he added a new pop culture reference to his little to-do notebook.

“Ah, Thor,” Eldred tsked. “Still swinging that hammer around with reckless abandon?”

“I’ve gained much more control of it since we last met,” Thor insisted.

“Now, now, dear boy I don’t mean to scold,” Eldred said kindly. “Weather seiðr is rather unpredictable, after all. There’s no shame in having a totem to channel it. Why, I still remember dear little Fjörgynn when she was presented with her staff. Oh, I’m sure she would be mighty proud to see you today.”

“Fjörgynn?” Tony asked.

“Our grandmother,” Thor explained. “Mother’s mother.”

“Fjörgynn the Rainmaker,” Eldred said with a reminiscent sigh. “There aren’t many outside Alfheim who can rival our seiðr, but that Vanir sorceress came as close as anyone in an age. Until you, Loki, my dear. I suppose we all assumed that’s where you got it from.”

“Yes,” Loki grimaced, “the past few years have been full of surprises.”

“Well, let’s leave all that unpleasantness in the past where it belongs, shall we?” Eldred said soothingly. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Something from the past that might not stay there,” Tony said.

“An item from Alfheim has been found in an Midgardian museum,” Sigyn explained. “The majority of Midgardians don’t seem to have any sense of how to use it nor that it is indeed imbued with seiðr, but there are concerns that someone might find out its true purpose and use it for nefarious means.”

“What type of object?” Eldred asked, intrigued.

“It’s a mere looking glass orb,” Loki shrugged. “It was probably left behind in all the kerfuffle over Alfionbharr since it bears his name.”

“Ugh, Alfionbharr ,” Eldred rolled his eyes. “Knew him when we were both just lads. Not to speak ill of the dead, but he was the type of person who acted like he was a member of the First Order of the Silver and Celestine Sash when really he was no better than anyone in the First Order of the Septarian Sword and Garter.” Sigyn and Loki seemed to nod as though they understood what he was saying, but Thor was just as confused as the other Midgardians about the reference. “Well, what are we to do about all of this?”

“We were hoping you might be able to withdraw whatever magic is within it,” Steve explained. “Make it just an ordinary piece of crystal. Or, barring that, at least do something to make sure it can’t be used.”

“I must say, this might be the first time anyone from Alfheim has been asked to dis enchant a looking glass,” Eldred mused. “A rather unique feat, if I do say so myself.”

“Yes, very unique,” Loki agreed. “In fact, it is such a unique task that one could almost say that we’re doing you a favor by asking you to disenchant it rather than the other way round.”
“Nice try,” Eldred smirked at his former pupil, “but this is a bit different than trying to weasel your way out of an assignment.

“I’m guessing he tried this often?” Tony asked as Loki huffed.

“Let’s just say there was a reason Frigga needed tutors he couldn’t talk circles around,” Eldred winked at the engineer. “Now, where is this object?”

“It’s in Ireland,” Steve said. “We’ll get the quinjet ready and fly out. Unless you need some more rest from your travels?”

“Oh, Midgarians have developed flying machines,” Eldred said with a clap of his hands, “how droll.”

“So, wheels up in ten?” Tony suggested.

“I am greatly looking forward to this,” Eldred said happily. “I can already tell that the Midgarians have learned that bathing does not cause disease, but tell me, are they still building those delightful henges?”

“Come with me, old friend,” Loki instructed, “and prepare to be disappointed.”

Eldred, as it turned out and to Loki’s surprise, wasn’t that disappointed with the lack of progress Midgard had made in the years since Odin had ordered a cease to all outside influence and intervention. In fact, he seemed rather surprised to find Midgarians had come as far as they had in such a relatively short amount of time, and expressed no surprise whatsoever that the period after the exodus of the other realms had become known as the Dark Ages. Naturally, the Midgarians themselves, particularly those of the scientist persuasion, were not too keen on the fact Eldred thought the intervention of other species was necessary for Midgard to make any real progress. They definitely didn’t like the way when, after explaining their research to them, Eldred patted them atop the head and talked to them in a tone reminiscent of the way one might a child who failed to place in her first science fair or a dog that had just mastered a new command.

Even Thor was growing a little incensed at Eldred’s dismissive attitude toward his friends, and sensing the tension in the room, Sigyn tactfully changed the conversation to one of the high elvish languages. Then, as Thor had the benefit of Allspeak, she sent him to the other side of the quinjet to chat with Jane. Like her husband, Sigyn adored Eldred but she was also cognizant enough to realize how elitist and rude elves often came off to species they felt were lesser - which were basically all species and some contingents of other elves depending on their own clan and caste. And despite the fact that Eldred himself came off as seeming a bit superior - and usually left Loki with the same sense of puffed-up ego - Sigyn did like when the old elf came to visit.

Eldred had always regarded Loki as his favorite and one of his best pupils - even including fellow elves - and Eldred’s pride in Loki’s accomplishments as well as his tendency to brag about his former student’s magical ability always left Loki happy, even if a little smug. To tell the truth, Eldred was one of few that really understood the full range and capability of Loki’s seiðr and also felt that power was something beautiful and wonderful. He had, in many ways, been the perfect advanced teacher
for Loki. Eldred loved nothing more than stroking his own ego by telling everyone who he had mentored and guided the extremely magically powerful second son of the Allfather and the fact that someone used him as a means to brag did enormous things for Loki’s self-esteem. After all, Odin rarely bragged about his children and usually it was Thor upon whom he heaped praise. While the universe had given Loki two lackluster fathers, Eldred was the every embodiment of the father Loki wished he had. Eldred himself seemed to relish the pseudo-father role, even if he occasionally took it a bit further than he ought. Like now.

“So, when are the two of you finally going to give us all some happy news?” Eldred inquired. Even the sweetness and ethereal nature of the high elvish language couldn’t make Loki look less awkward at the question, Sigyn thought. “After all, I’m not getting any younger, and I would absolutely adore to tutor whatever magnificent magical offspring the two of you might produce.”

“You’re hardly ancient, Eldred,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Besides, I still have this banishment to contend with. And I won’t have any child of mine born on Midgard of all places.”

“Yes, there is that,” Eldred sighed. “Of course, if Odin isn’t ready to bring you back to Asgard just yet, I have plenty of villas you could stay in on Alfheim for the time being. I daresay your Uncle Ve and Aunt Alfryn would love to host you as well. Word has it he wants to retire soon. Not return to Asgard, per se, but not have to deal with his brother’s shenanigans either. I can’t help but think you and Sigyn would make charming replacements. You’re already vastly adored throughout the realm, anyway.”

“It is a tempting offer,” Loki admitted, “but as irksome as putting out Odin’s fires can be, I know Uncle Ve absolutely loves politics. And naturally, one cannot retire from or take a new position such as that without the express permission of the Allfather. I daresay if he had any inkling his little brother was thinking about retirement he would assign dear Uncle Ve to the post for another five thousand years. Tormenting younger siblings seems to be an artform among the family, after all.”

Loki and Eldred continued a discussion of the latest developments in elven politics while the rest of the Avengers slept to prevent jet lag upon their arrival. The group were about thirty minutes out from landing when Steve began waking everyone up - save Natasha who always seemed to know when she needed to be awake - to begin plotting how they were going to tackle the magical artifact. As Sigyn concocted them a hearty breakfast largely comprised of fruits, breads, and cheeses, Steve tried to call everyone to order so they could discuss their plan of how they were going to get into the museum and out without being detected.

“So, we might need a plan for when we get there,” Steve mentioned.

“Simple, you will create a distraction while Sigyn and I escort Eldred to the object so he can remove or bind its magical potential,” Loki explained.

“What about the security cameras?” Tony asked.

“You honestly think that between the three of us there is no one capable of making three people appear invisible?” Loki huffed.

“Midgardians certainly have become more skeptical in the past few centuries,” Eldred mentioned.

“You’d be skeptical too if you regularly found out everything you believed to be true was a lie,” Tony replied.

“He has a point,” Loki admitted.
“Wait, so is there anything you want the rest of us to do while the three of you handle this?” Tony asked, with a frown.

“Well, staying out of the way could be useful,” Loki suggested.

“Then why did you bring us all out here?” Clint asked, frustrated and tired.

“Midgardians are so charmingly entertaining,” Eldred admitted. “And I was afraid we might get bored on this journey without some entertainment. After all, flying machines are a good improvement but there really is nothing like instantaneous travel.”

“So, how much trouble would we be in with Elf-Land if we murdered this guy for being annoying?” Tony whispered under his breath to Thor.

“Believe it or not, it isn’t worth it,” Thor sighed.

“Well, if we aren’t going to be useful,” Steve suggested, making the best of things, “maybe the rest of us should just hang out in the local pub?”

“Finally,” Tony said. “A good idea. Let’s drink to forget this whole fucking mess.”

Despite having Tony’s credit card at his disposal, Steve insisted the group head to a pub not far from the National Museum of Ireland that was reputed for its music scene more than its grub and grog. While Tony initially pouted at not being given a chance to flash his cash, he had to smile at the fact that Irish whiskey and music seemed to bring out the mix of Brooklyn and Gaelic accent from Steve’s youth. And even if it would take an entire Midgardian distillery to get Steve or Thor even slightly buzzed, the two seemed to do a good impression of acting a bit drunk when the music started up. The raucous nature of an old-fashioned Irish pub was a decent imitation of a typically Asgardian mead hall, putting Thor right at home. Not one to be left in the background, Tony stayed with Steve and Thor near the band, and Clint, not one to pass up free drinks, accompanied him. It was apparent Tony and Clint couldn’t keep pace with Thor and Steve by how sloppy drunk they quickly became.

Natasha, meanwhile, was slunk in the back of the room, nursing a bottle of Russian vodka and keeping one ear on the comms. Bruce had decided to remain back at the quinjet parked outside the city to help monitor the museum break-in just in case Sigyn, Loki, and their elf friend needed any assistance. Natasha was using those comms to monitor as well since Bruce was still outside the city and having him go big and green wasn’t exactly the best way to de-escalate an already escalated situation. Loki had begrudgingly agreed to wear a comm unit only after Eldred agreed to wear one - though Eldred had only acquiesced after describing the device as “little and quaint,” which nearly set Tony off. Sigyn had also taken one and somehow between being given it and exiting the quinjet had managed to bedazzle it with rhinestones.

Only thirty minutes after the trio had been sent toward the museum, Natasha was really beginning to regret giving them comm units in the first place. Instead of vital communications, Loki’s comm unit was only transmitting his various attempts to verbally seduce his wife while Sigyn’s was only sending out the giggles she made in response. Eldred, seemingly oblivious to the rampant flirting between his former pupil and said pupil’s wife, was obnoxiously humming to himself. In fact, Natasha found it odd that the past two songs he had hummed were similar to the past two songs
played in the pub. It was only when he began humming the song the band was currently playing that she looked up and noticed the old elf in his flamboyant robes at the bar, drinking one of the fruitiest concoctions of alcohol she had ever seen. In typical fashion, Natasha sauntered toward the man as silently as possible to find out what his game was.

“Oh, hello dear,” Eldred said without looking up from his drink. The Black Widow was momentarily startled. It was rare that anyone detected her so easily.

“I thought you were supposed to be at the museum pulling a job,” Natasha said, sliding into the seat next to him.

“Told all of five minutes,” Eldred said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an amethyst-colored crystal with something swirling inside of it. “Pulled the seiðr out of that crystal and pulled it into this one. Cloaking spell worked wonderfully. Thought I would join the rest of you here since Loki and Sigyn are otherwise occupied.”

“Where, exactly, are they occupied?” Natasha asked.

“Not exactly sure,” Eldred admitted, “though Sigyn made sure to get him in and out of that antiquity collection as quickly as possible. Apparently, he’s developed a reputation for borrowing things from collections from time to time.”

“If you mean robbing museums, yes,” Natasha huffed.

“Eldred?” Thor said, confused. “But where are…”

“If my guess is correct,” Tony said, following Thor to the bar, “they’re probably breaking public decency laws somewhere.”

“What happened to Midgard?” Eldred said sorrowfully. “You all used to be so much more in tune with your sexuality. Why, I remember evenings with those wonderful druids were no one wore a stitch of clothing and we all went out under the fool mooon and ate those delicious mushrooms that…”

“We aren’t supposed to leave Loki alone,” Steve pointed out.

“He’s with Sigyn,” Thor said.

“For all intents and purposes, him being with Sigyn is very akin to him being alone,” Tony said. “Unmonitored, anyways.”

“Oh, posh,” Eldred said. “Whatever happened to giving a young couple a bit of alone time?”

“They have plenty of alone time,” Tony pointed out. “And honestly, after months of experience, I’m not entirely sure they prefer to be alone when engaged in…”

“Sigyn has sent me a message via the handheld cellular telephone,” Thor said happily. “They are at a library at some sort of institute of higher learning…”

“Oh, so they’re at Trinity College?” Tony said. “Tell them to say ‘hi’ to the Book of Kells for me.”

“Isn’t the library closed by now?” Steve said confused.

“If Loki robs an Irish national literary treasure from a museum, we might not be able to stop Steve from killing him,” Tony said.
“Whom is your captain killing?” Loki said, having materialized behind Thor with the aid of his wife.

“I thought you were in the library,” Tony said.

“We made a slight detour,” Sigyn said. “But everything is taken care of now. We can return to the Furious One… unless everyone would rather spend some time here?”

Steve obviously wanted to say yes, but the part of him that wanted the mission complete won out. The Avengers piled back toward the quinjet where Bruce was now napping and headed back. Eldred, rather than accompany the rest back to New York, took the magical crystal with him as he was magically transported back to Alfheim, another storm of rainbow light and glitter left in his wake. Loki now seemed morose that his former tutor and current friend was gone, leaving Sigyn to coax him into the private rooms of the quinjet to cheer him up. With a sigh, Tony plopped down next to Thor as Clint and Natasha prepared the quinjet for takeoff. After watching the lights of Dublin fade away, Steve joined them.

“I have to admit, I think I understand a little bit more about your brother now that I’ve met his mentor,” Tony said to Thor. “I’ve never met too many people who were best friends with their teacher.”

“Loki always had a hard time making friends his own age,” Thor admitted. “Much of that was probably because of his intelligence. He always seemed to have more to say to those older than him. And while Eldred was never my particular cup of tea… he did give Loki the ego boost he needed.”

“I don’t think your brother needs ego boosting,” Tony snorted.

“Said the pot to the kettle,” Steve retorted. “Nah, I can see how it might have been nice for Loki to have someone to encourage him, make him feel special. I mean, besides your Ma. I know my Ma was always trying to boost me up, but sometimes it felt better to have someone else say something nice. Ya know, ma’s are supposed to love you and all no matter what. Other adults however…”

“Perhaps it would do Loki some good to spend time with people who bolster him rather than returning to Asgard immediately,” Thor mused. “Naturally, I would have to make sure it was what Loki and Sigyn wanted. And then the Allfather would have to think he came up with the idea himself… Mother could certainly help accomplish that…”

“How about we finish this plot before we start more plotting?” Tony suggested. “I’m bushed and full of whiskey. We can regroup after my hangover and plot your brother’s triumphant return to whatever realm isn’t this one.”

“Hey guys,” Bruce said, embarrassedly emerging from the hall behind him. “Uh… maybe no one try to use the quinjet bathroom for a bit. It seems to be occupied… loudly occupied.”

“Yes,” Thor sighed, “Loki may have had enough ego boosting for the time being.”
Despite all the trouble that recent discoveries of magical items on Midgard had caused, Tony seemed more interested than ever in finding out what he could that connected otherworldly magic to modern science. After pouring over all the notes Jane had taken on the Asgardian Soul Forge from her conversations with Sigyn and then interrogating Sigyn on three separate occasions about Asgardian healing devices and the similarities to the one being developed in Korea by Dr. Cho, Loki decided to save his wife some trouble and offer Tony a selection of books from his personal library on the of Asgardian magic. In a manner of speaking.

While Tony was a bit eager to get his hands on whatever books he could in Loki and Sigyn’s personal library, he soon learned it wouldn’t be as easy as he thought. The first obstacle Tony encountered was that none of the books were written in a language he could remotely understand. This obstacle seemed easily remedied when he brought the books to Sigyn who then cast a spell on them that translated them into a language Tony could read. Sigyn asked to talk with him further about the books, but Tony waved her off. About thirty minutes later, he realized exactly what Sigyn was trying to communicate to him. Tony burst back into Loki and Sigyn’s rooms, finding Loki nowhere to be found but Jane, Darcy, Thor and Sigyn playing one of Loki’s weird Asgardian board games.

“Your husband bamboozled me!” Tony said toward Sigyn accusingly.


“Did you know he was giving me the Asgardian version of a ‘Dick and Jane’ book?” Tony huffed.

“What??” Thor hissed, having only learned the word in Midgardian slang terms.

“Dick is also a nickname for Richard,” Darcy explained, calming Thor down immensely.

“And what is this Richard doing with my Jane?” Thor demanded to know.

“It’s a series of children’s books,” Jane soothed Thor. “Dick and Jane are the main characters.”

“I think they’re like brother and sister,” Darcy nodded. “They have a dog named Spot.”

“Yes, I knew they were tomes for children,” Sigyn said to Tony, “but you hardly gave me any time to tell you that.”

“I’m sure they’re not that bad,” Jane insisted.

“Oh, really? Let me read you a bit!” Tony snorted. “‘See the witch. See the witch’s wand. See the witch wave the wand. See the witch cast a spell. See the wand cast a spell…’ and it goes on like
“Oh! I remember these books!” Thor said happily, taking from the stack Tony had just dropped off. “Anja and the Huldufólk, The Spell of Gróa, Songs of the Nightingale … oh the Gullveig series! Loki did so love these as a boy! Let’s see… Gullveig and the Galdr, Gullveig and the Distaff, Gullveig and the Rune Spell … When it was Loki’s turn to select a bedtime story, he always wanted one of these.”

“Sounds like Asgardian Harry Potter,” Darcy said.

“What are they about?” Jane asked.

“Gullveig is an orphaned servant girl with raven black hair and a strange scar she doesn’t remember getting who discovers a talent for seiðr,” Sigyn explained. “She then uses those powers to go on a series of adventures and defeat an ancient evil.”

“So, just like Asgardian Harry Potter,” Darcy agreed.

“I remember you loved them as well, Sigyn,” Thor smirked. “Loki always did hate it that you always got to play Gullveig and he had to play her wise but non-magical friend Kvasir.”

“Yes, but he delighted that you got to play the villain Harr,” Sigyn remembered.

“I fail to see how Asgardian bedtime stories are going to help me learn anything about bridging the gap between Asgardian knowledge and Earth tech,” Tony huffed.

“I’m surprised at you, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said. “I would think making those discoveries yourself would be your greatest challenge and that you would not seek such an easy route as using knowledge others have already acquired.”

“Why should we sit around and wait to discover stuff other people already know?” Tony snorted. “Knowledge is useless if it isn’t shared.”

“He has a point,” Jane said.

“Unfortunately, we are not at liberty to disclose much of Asgard’s closely guarded secrets,” Thor admitted. “The Allfather has put certain prohibitions in place…”

“That’s stupid,” Tony snorted.

“Didn’t you tell Jane a bunch of stuff about the Nine Realms when we first met though?” Darcy asked, causing Thor to blush a bit. “How did you avoid getting into trouble for that?”

“Well...um…” Thor blushed.

“I think the Allfather dismissed it as Thor thinking with parts of his anatomy other than those in his head, Sigyn explained. “Besides, Thor didn’t technically tell Jane anything Asgard hadn’t previously shared with Midgard. The knowledge had just been lost or turned into mythology in the interceding time between when it was first shared and Thor spoke with Jane.”

“Are there other things Asgard has told Midgard that we - meaning me personally - could received renewed hints on?” Tony suggested.

“I’m afraid not,” Thor shook his head.

“Lame,” Tony pronounced.”
“I’m sure it will be of greater reward to Midgardians when they make these discoveries themselves,” Sigyn said. “After all, your unique Midgardian perspective may unlock secrets that are not even known to Asgard.

“Unlikely,” Tony huffed. “Would it really be such a crime if one of you smuggled out a book about the theoretics behind magic and how it actually works where you’re from?”

“There really isn’t one,” Sigyn said. “Though there have been many attempts to write such a volume. However, I don’t think a single text could explain it all.”

“Loki’s been working on one on and off for the past four hundred years,” Thor said. “But I don’t think it’s finished.”

“It’s a thousand pages, and he insists he isn’t even halfway through,” Sigyn nodded. “Of course, that might be because about every fifty years or so he decides whatever he’s already written is rubbish and starts over. You have no idea how many manuscripts I have had to save from the fire because I knew he would want it back immediately after he was finished burning it.”

“Look, I’m sure if you just let me into the library I could find something useful,” Tony insisted. “It’s not like Reindeer Games will find out.” Thor and Sigyn exchanged a knowing look.

“There is something you may underestimate about my brother,” Thor explained. “Loki is very strict about who he let’s into his personal library. I barely merit entrance and am usually rushed out after ten minutes or less.”

“Sigyn invited Darcy and me to look at some of her astronomical devices,” Jane nodded, “but we didn’t stay long. Loki was nervously towering over us and wringing his hands in fear we might break some valuable the entire time.”

“Sir Bruce has come in to see the picture books, but he preferred to actually read them outside the library,” Sigyn nodded. “And you and the Captain have been in the library, but Sir Stark, no one is permitted into the library without me or my husband, usually my husband present. And Loki will not be pleased to have you poking about with him.”

“And then there is his security system,” Thor sighed.


After waffling back and forth about Tony’s question, Thor had to admit there was a reason why Loki’s protection of his books and sensitivity to those in his library wasn’t particularly discussed. Fandral had a dirty joke or two relating to Loki’s inability to let anyone meander his library unsupervised. The punchline was usually about how Loki was just as possessive of his books as he was certain parts of his wife’s anatomy and whether, if it came down to it, he would be more likely to let someone traipse around his library or those private parts of his wife. Unfortunately, for both Fandral and two unsuspecting palace guards, the joke has caught on among the einherjar.

When Loki overheard a couple of guards cracking wise about whether it would be easier to get into said library or Sigyn’s proverbial pants, it had taken Thor, Sif, the Warriors Three, two other members of the einherjar, and a palace serving boy to pull Loki off the warrior in question. And they managed just in time to stop Loki from disemboweling the man with his bare hands. In his rage, Loki had forgotten to even summon one of his knives. Odin had sent the guards for a three-century long mission to some forgotten Asgardian lunar outpost, and all library-related jokes - told by Fandral or otherwise - had ceased. Oddly enough, Odin hadn’t punished Loki for the incident, and, much later, Uncle Vali would regale the Odinsons with the tale of the palace guard who had slapped Odin’s new
wife on the ass, mistaking Frigga for a random gardeners’ apprentice while out working in one of her drab gardening dresses shortly after the pair were married. According to rumor, a good portion of the guard’s nervous system was still floating around in the space above Asgard after Odin had completely ripped it from its body.

“And so, you see, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said, “it might be hazardous to your health to venture into the library without my husband’s presence and consent.”

“Ridiculous,” Tony snorted. “I let him into my library all the time!”

“Half the books in your library are fake,” Jane pointed out. “Used to cover up all the booze hidden in there.”

“Or really out-of-date editions of World Book,” Darcy nodded. “With mustaches drawn on pictures of your Dad in them.”

“Where is your hubs, Siggy Stardust?” Tony asked. “I’d like to have a word with him.”

“I believe he is off with Sir Clint reading to the children,” Sigyn said, “but he should be back in due course.”

“I can wait,” Tony said.

After an afternoon of reading with the children at the center, Loki and Clint hit up a nearby frozen yogurt bar and then eat their treats on the walk back to the Tower. They walked into one of the secret bottom floors to take the elevator up to the living quarters only to find Tony, in a crisp bespoke suit, tapping his foot angrily at them with his arms crossed over his chest. Clint only needed to look between Tony and Loki once before he threw Loki a peace symbol and then alley-ooped himself into the rafters, deciding it was better to scale his way up to the top of the building - or at least another floor with elevator access - rather than get stuck in the middle of whatever was about to go down.

“You gave me children’s books,” Tony said accusingly.

“You did request for me to start you out with the very basic beginnings of the art of seiðr,” Loki shrugged.

“That’s now what I meant, and you know it,” Tony argued.

“Tell me, Stark,” Loki said airily, “how I am to know what you mean if you don’t communicate what you mean clearly?”

“Well, let me clearly communicate this,” Tony huffed, “you’re totally annoying.”

“Yes, I have oft been accused of such,” Loki said. glancing at his nails to see if the needed filing or repainting.

“I would think that you, of all people, would want to work toward the goal of scientific advancement,” Tony said. “After all, isn’t that what a magister on Asgard basically is? A fancy
pseudo-Viking word for scientists?"

“You aren’t really going the whole ‘for the intellectual good of the realms’ way with me, are you?”
Loki huffed. “I mean, it’s obvious you don’t know how things actually work in Asgard if you think
they are keen to share their technological and intellectual bounty with others.”

“I thought Asgard had introduced its tech to other realms,” Tony pointed out.

“Yes, other realms that it has conquered and subjugated,” Loki snorted. “Oh certainly, there has
been a fair amount of stealing technology from Alfheim, Vanaheim and Niðavellir that has proven
useful, but Asgard only shares what it develops independently with those who are its subjects. It’s a
very useful political tool, actually. Rebel and we take away all of the technology and knowledge that
allows for your everyday existence. And that tactic was put into practice when the denizens of
Svartalfheim decided they would rather remain independent and keep what knowledge that had
rather than bow before Allfather Bor. Naturally, Bor used Svartalfheim’s policy of occasionally
committing genocide against its own people to justify invading, but we all know the real cause. It’s
why Jotunheim is in such a technological Dark Age. They didn’t want to kneel either but they knew
if they ever developed a technology or power that Asgard wanted they would be made to.”

“And Earth hasn’t made one single technology that Asgard would want,” Tony said, unimpressed
with Loki’s assessment. “Not even the Internet?”

“I dare say if the Allfather enjoys moving pictorial depictions of felines in odd situations he keeps it to
himself,” Loki replied. “And being an autocrat, I’m sure he could bring cats into play for his pleasure
if he wanted to see such a thing.”


“You really think Asgard hasn’t invented any of that already?” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Come on, clap-on, clap off lights?” Tony continued. “The OvGlove? Snuggies? The Bacon Wave?
The AK-47? I mean, you guys still fight with swords and shit…”

“You almost sound as if you want Odin to conquer your measly planet,” Loki snorted. “Even after I
would have been so much better at it.”

“You know, I get Sigyn and Thor not wanting to explain this stuff to me,” Tony admitted. “Thor
barely admits his magical rainstorm summoning is magic, and Sigyn’s sensible enough not to violate
your country’s laws about sharing sensitive information, but I would have thought you at least would
get some glee out of unveiling the mysteries of the universe to people he has specifically been told
not to unveil them to.”

“Hmm, let’s test that hypothesis shall we?” Loki snorted. “Even in your human mythology, every
time a god gives knowledge to human kind they aren’t ready for it ends up badly for everyone. Your
Greek Prometheus was tied to a rock with an eagle plucking out his innards daily all for teaching
Midgardians about fire. The Coyote of your native lands was punished for doing the same. Your
Polynesian Maui was killed for attempting to steal immortality for humans. I am not sacrificing
myself for your quest for knowledge. Learn it on your own.”

“What’s so wrong with wanting to learn how your technology works?” Tony huffed.

“Look, Stark,” Loki said tiredly, “there is no nice way to put this, so I’m just going to be blunt about
it. There is no possible way in which I can teach you seiðr. Whatever little amount of seiðr was
granted to you Midgardians was obviously lost through your species own lack of practice, history of
witch hunts, and general suspicion of anyone with any sort of preternatural abilities whatsoever. And
even if there was still some twinkling of magical talent imbued in you, the laws of Asgard and all
associated realms forbid the teaching of such arts to Midgardians, especially since it worked out oh
so well last time. Old One-Eyed Odin already has enough reasons to put my head on a pike, and trust
me, doing something as fruitless as attempting to bring out the dormant-possibly-extinct potential of a
Midgardian is not exactly a task I think worthy of losing my head over.”

“But…” Tony began.

“Not even Thor can talk me out of this one,” Loki shook his head.

“I don’t want to learn to use magic,” Tony insisted. “I just want to bridge the gap between
Midgardian technology and Asgardian hocus pocus.”

“I do not understand your gibberish,” Loki said. “And I think there is much more of a bridge than
you might think.”

“It’s not so different,” Tony shook his head. “I mean, Foster already figured out that your Soul
Forges are just quantum field generators and have genetic reconstruction components similar to those
Dr. Cho has with her Cradle. And the Bifrost is just the clever and very directed use of wormholes.
We already know so much. And I really can’t believe you buy Odin’s hullabaloo about us having to
learn things in our own time and our own way to appreciate it better. I mean, if we here on Earth
waited for every country in the world to develop technology on their own instead of sharing things
like penicillin, the Internet, the polio vaccine, air flight… I’d hate to think of what the world would
be like.”

“You have all these technological developments and yet many in your world refuse to utilize them,”
Loki snorted. “I am I to believe a people who still allow pockets of their population to believe the
planet is flat or that inoculation is a risk not worth the rewards are the intellectual equals of the rest of
the Nine Realms?”

“We believe in freedom of choice,” Tony shrugged. “Sometimes that comes with a side of idiocy.”

“And that idiocy is simply why Asgard cannot trust you with her technology,” Loki reasoned. “You
come from a culture that learned to split the atom and immediately used it destroy entire cities. Albeit
Asgard has some dangerous technology, but nothing of that sort has ever been used in the Nine
Realms. There is considerable fear that giving Midgard access to such power would inevitably
destroy not only your realm but all the others.”

“So, you won’t teach me basic magical principles because you think I’m going to use the atom bomb
to blow you up?” Tony snorted.

“Says the man whose father helped create such a weapon,” Loki said.

“Jeez, first Cap, now you,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I’d think the two people who’d understand Dad
working with the Manhattan Project would be the World War II soldier and the guy who sent a giant
destructive robot to demolish a small town.”

“I refuse to dignify that with comment,” Loki huffed, “now, if you aren’t going to put any effort into
reading them, I would like my books back.”

“No,” Tony said. “Gullveig just met the witch in the woods, and she has to somehow dig up the
mandrake out of the castle garden without getting caught.”

“Fine,” Loki huffed, “but if you rip any of the pages there will be trouble.”
After spending all night reading the *Gulleveig* series instead of doing his actual work, Tony returned the collection of books back to Loki and Sigyn’s chambers the following morning. He was glad to see that Loki was still sleeping in at the moment, so he only had to deal with Sigyn and her magical magpies fluttering around as she worked on baking what appeared to be a Battenberg cake using the colors of Vanaheim’s royal house. Sigyn’s love of YouTube cooking tutorials and the Food Network were not only piquing her curiosity into various types of Midgardian food but also making it to where the team was getting a little pudgy. Only Asgardians could eat so many calories without gaining weight and, as things were, Tony was afraid he was going to have to add another gym session to her daily schedule.

“Just so you know,” Tony informed Sigyn, “your husband is insufferable.”

“I’m quite aware,” Sigyn nodded. “In fact, I believe one of the Kings of Alfheim awarded him the honorific of Loki the Insufferable after my husband performed a service for him by quite literally annoying some of the king’s enemies to death. It’s a title Loki’s actually rather proud of.”

“That is probably the least surprising thing I’ve ever learned about anyone,” Tony admitted.

“I do understand your quest for knowledge, Sir Stark,” Sigyn said. “And, believe it or not, the fact that he cannot help you may frustrate Loki more than he lets on.”

“Can’t or won’t,” Tony huffed.

“Can’t,” Sigyn insisted. “Just in the same way I can’t really help Lady Jane with her work. It’s incredibly frustrating to know how close she is and not being able to outright tell her she is on the right path. I can only guide, poke, prod, and give vague answers I hope she will correctly interpret. I would love to be able to sit her down and educate her on the mysteries of the universe in the same way they were taught to me, but frankly it’s impossible.”

“I don’t believe anything is impossible.”

“It takes a minimum of two hundred of your Midgardian years to consume all of the basic knowledge Asgard has discovered,” Sigyn pointed out. “Thor was taught for three because of the added burden of interrealm politics. Loki and I spent nearly five hundred trying to achieve a mastery of seiðr, and - though Loki would be loathe to admit it - there are still things about it we don’t know.”

“Okay, maybe I don’t have five hundred years. Or even fifty considering my past lifestyle choices,” Tony shrugged. “But maybe I could get the Cliff Notes version?”

“Unfortunately, Sir Stark, there is a reason why the prohibition of sharing technology and ideas with Midgard is in place,” Sigyn said. “As much as I would like to, one of the things we were taught is how disastrous it has been every time the other realms have attempted to introduce their abilities and knowledge to Midgard. The Midgardians almost immediately abused their newfound powers, used it to subjugate and kill each other. Those that had shared this knowledge became easily disillusioned and many were punished, held responsible for the chaos caused when they shared outside knowledge. It was discovered that Midgardians seemed much more thoughtful and appreciative of knowledge when they earned it themselves.”

“The old if I buy it for you then you won’t appreciate it as much as if you had earned the money and
bought it yourself schtick?” Tony groaned. “Howard was always trying to pull that one, but in the end, it turned out would always shell out if I promised not to tell Mom how black out drunk I found him. Of course, my family probably isn’t a great role model in this scenario.”

“I just want you to know that - for once in his life - Loki isn’t being difficult on purpose,” Sigyn explained. “Oddly enough for him, he’s trying to do the right thing. I know that’s poor compensation for the knowledge you wish to learn, but it does mean a lot to me that, when faced with such a great temptation as being able to be the smartest person in a room, Loki has chosen not to bring more trouble upon himself. It’s a very big step.”

“So, if I had come to him like a year ago and asked for all this he might have cracked and told me everything?” Tony groaned.

“Probably not,” Sigyn shrugged. “I don’t think he trusted Midgardians enough back then to share any information with them.”

“Point taken,” Tony agreed. “So, what I’m hearing is you asking me to not lead your husband into temptation?”

“I would appreciate it very much,” Sigyn said, “and though he would never admit it to anyone outright, I know it frustrates Loki that he cannot share what knowledge he does have with you. Loki is a researcher himself. He and I both think it’s ridiculous how strict the prohibitions on the transferal of knowledge reach, but there is little we can do. And we understand how frustrating it can be when someone has answers and won’t share them.”

“Plus, I’m sure Loki likes to hear himself speak and to be the smartest person in the room,” Tony said. “He’d probably be the ideal college professor. Get tenure lickety-split then proceed to annoy all of his students and his entire department with his far-reaching knowledge and smugness about being in possession of that knowledge.”

“Loki would have loved to go to the university on Asgard,” Sigyn sighed. “Unfortunately, no member of the royal family has ever attended despite the royal family being patrons of the entire institution. Frigga thought he should go and Odin was almost convinced until certain royal advisers thought it might stain the name of the royal family to have a prince mixing among the ‘common rabble’ who were also attending the university on scholarship. Of course, being told he couldn’t attend as a fully enrolled student has never stopped Loki from changing forms and attending lectures from time to time. He particularly likes to pick fights with the professors over semantics, cause a stir, and then never show up to the class in the same form again.”

“I’m guessing the same advisers that didn’t like the idea of Loki going to a public school didn’t take too well to you, either,” Tony said.

“No, but fortunately they liked not being at war with Vanaheim and Niðavellir more than they disliked me,” Sigyn shrugged.

“You know, one day the Allfather’s whole no-sharing policy might come back to bite him in the ass,” Tony said.

“Yes,” Sigyn agreed. “He has a lot of ideas that will probably do so, if they haven’t already.”
Later that afternoon, Tony was in his lab working on tying up a few project loose ends while JARVIS and the bots worked on inventory, cataloging how many tools, parts, and other supplies Tony’s lab needed. The bots and JARVIS usually took a daily inventory of what Tony had used and what needed to be ordered based on his usage, but Tony always set aside at least one day a month for a major inventory overall of his lab just to make sure things were in running order. And there was always the occasional explosion that demolished things he hadn’t accounted for or cases of things being “borrowed” out of his lab by a forgetful Jane Foster or a sneaky Darcy Lewis that needed replacing from time to time.

It didn’t really bug Tony that the two women often borrowed without asking or returning. Pepper liked to remind him that he had told them they could use anything in his lab whenever they wanted when they first arrived, and the annoyance of a misplaced socket wrench or unexpectedly running out of a specific size of bolt was nowhere near as annoying as facing down an angry thunder god demanding to know why his beloved was not allowed to use the flex cables for her needs. Especially since Thor’s power over lightning was somewhat also a power over electricity and he had more than once accidentally fried all the wiring in the labs when overloaded with danger. Luckily, Tony had gotten an electricians certification along with his four other doctorates and could do all the rewiring himself with the help of the bots, JARVIS, and a very apologetic Thor who Jane and Darcy always sent to help him to apologize. Besides, if Jane and Darcy borrowed stuff from his lab there was a large drop in the odds Bruce was going to hulk out after not being able to find something in his lab.

“How do we run out of of M3-12 millimeter hex bolts so quickly every time?” Tony groaned as JARVIS placed the order. “Someone must be using them other than me.”

“I can start doubling the monthly order if you would like, Sir,” JARVIS suggested.

“I guess that’ll have to do in the meantime,” Tony shrugged. “Still doesn’t make sense that we always run out of those bolts but there are nuts to spare. Usually it’s the other way around.”

“I could tell Thor to stop eating less of them,” a voice said from directly behind Tony, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“JARV, I thought I told you to announce the Prince of Darkness when he came into the labs,” Tony huffed.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” JARVIS apologized. “I was answering your question about the disappearing nature of hex bolts.”

“You realize hex nuts aren’t an actual food right? I mean, Thor isn’t actually eating them is he?” Tony asked Loki, who shrugged boredly in response. Tony sighed. One never knew with Asgardians. “What brings you to the lab today? Seeking bonding time with Thor? Not been near enough explosions lately? Want to see if you could bring the Hulk out to play?”

“If you must know,” Loki said, irritably, “I have been kicked out of my own laboratory. Apparently, spending time outside of the lab for meals and sleep is not constituted as ‘fresh air’ in Sigyn’s opinion, and therefore I am banned from further discovery until I have spent the Midgardian equivalent of a day outside of my research facilities. I mean, I just accompanied Barton on his weekly reading event yesterday. What more can she want?”

“Ugh, I hate when Pepper does that,” Tony groaned. “She’s always all ‘Tony, you’re too sleep-deprived to be operating a blow torch’ or ‘Tony, you need to eat something before your blood sugar crashes’ or ‘Tony, compact fluorescent lighting does not compensate for the natural sunlight your body requires to function.’ As if she doesn’t work tons of overtime and bring her spreadsheets and whatnot on vacation with us all the time.”
“And naturally, Sigyn never bothers to check in on me when things are going well,” Loki harrumphed.

“Oh no,” Tony agreed, “Pep always waits until something is on fire…”

“…or until you’ve accidentally opened a portal to the nether-realms,” Loki agreed.

“Yeah. Hate when that happens,” Tony snorted. “I’d ask what you were working on, but I guess you can’t really tell me.”

“No, but I can tell you I have a sneaking suspicion Sigyn kicked me out of the laboratory so she could work on some sort of insecticide to protect her plants from harmful species she has recently encountered on Midgard,” Loki grimaced. “You would think she would want my expert knowledge of poisons, but apparently I have an innate desire to always be in charge.”

“One day I’ll have to tell you about the time Pepper and I bought a bunch of furniture from IKEA for her old apartment, and then she kicked me and changed the locks on her doors so I would stop trying to help her assemble said furniture,” Tony said. “She said I was making things overly complicated. I almost got a master’s degree in furniture engineering and design to show her I knew what I was doing, but then I thought it might prove her overly complicated point.”

“It is nice to see at least some things are universal,” Loki said. Tony gave Loki the once over as the godling rocked back and forth on his heels.

“So, what’s your ulterior motive for being down here?” Tony said, “because I know putting robots back together and taking an inventory of my workshop is beneath you, and that when you get kicked out of your rooms - as much as you loathe to admit it - annoying Thor is always your first choice of activity.”

“Thor is helping with some heavy lifting in the other lab,” Loki shrugged. “Besides, I found a loophole regarding teaching you seiðr.”

“Really?” Tony said, instantly setting down what he was working on.

“Yes, the Allfather’s prohibition is on teaching Midgardians seiðr from the other realms. However,” Loki said, seeming to produce a pack of playing cards out of thin air, “there is no prohibition against teaching Midgardians their own native magic.”

“You’re going to teach me card tricks?” Tony snorted.


“Oh, hell, why not,” Tony said. “Just know I’m already proficient at counting them.”

“Quite,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Now, Stark, prepare to be amazed.”
Allmother’s Day

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, Thor and Loki are totally mama’s boys*

It was just after lunch that the golden falcon that the residents of the Tower learned always brought dispatches from the Allmother arrived. The creature dropped a parcel in Sigyn’s lap then sat on her shoulder. Before opening the parcels, Sigyn gave the bird a gentle scratch and then conjured it up a treat as a reward for its service. Both Loki and Thor seemed very interested in what this latest missive from their mother had to say and both leaned forward toward Sigyn as she opened up her own letter and began to read. Sensing the eyes of both men upon her, Sigyn looked up, rolled her eyes, and then sorted through the rest of the parcel for the individual letters the Allmother had undoubtedly sent her sons.

“Good news?” Steve asked Sigyn hopefully.

“The Allmother’s Name Day is soon,” Sigyn said. “She has received the presents we have sent and wanted to thank us for them. She also wanted to let us know she has made sure our rooms are clean and welcoming for our return to Asgard. Save of course Loki’s laboratory, which he magically locks.”

“I’m surprised you don’t let Mother in there,” Thor huffed at his brother. “If anyone, I would think you can trust her.”

“He barely lets me in there,” Sigyn pointed out.

“You never let Mother into your little personal armory,” Loki pointed out.

“I’m sure Mother has no interest in my weapons collections,” Thor shrugged.

“Actually, she is very interested in the strange mushrooms that are apparently growing in the floor there,” Sigyn said, looking up from the letters. “She apparently figured out your passcode to the room and decided to shine things up for you since you’ve been away. There is a roof leak that apparently created some fungi that may or may not be sentient. She’s curious when the last time you cleaned the room was. She is guessing it has been a while. Also, the boar’s head on display in the room is infested with moths…” Thor snatched the letter from his sister-in-law and began to read.

“Thor!” Loki hissed at him.

“It’s fine,” Sigyn waved Thor off. “He obviously has bigger concerns than upsetting me at the moment. The Allmother wants some of your cleaning recipes for Thor’s rooms. I’ll head downstairs and see if I can find some that might be appropriate.”

“The water rusted some of my axes!” Thor announced mournfully as Sigyn got up from the table.

“Yes,” Loki huffed. “Bigger concerns indeed.” Sigyn kissed the top of her husband’s head, receiving a loving pat in turn as Loki sipped his coffee, and then headed down to their chambers to begin composing her letter to the Allmother.
“How did this room get this bad?” Jane asked.

“Thor never lets anyone into it,” Loki replied. “Believe me, if he won’t let Mother into it, he won’t let anyone into it.”

“So, is this like the room where he keeps his Asgardian porn stash or something?” Tony asked.

“Do you guys have porn? Like holograms of naked ladies or something?” Clint asked curiously.

“This is hardly appropriate mealtime conversation,” Pepper said.

“I agree,” Steve said, hoping no one noticed the red tips of his ears.

“We’re just trying to learn about another culture Pep!” Tony moaned.

“Okay, Thor,” Bruce said, “I’m not trying to be mean here, but we all know you aren’t big on cleaning things up. So why would you expect this room to stay clean if you never let anyone into it?”

“I don’t know,” Thor replied, tossing the letter aside only for Loki to retrieve it. “I do send the weapons down for the squires to clean every once in a while, but I haven’t been on Asgard very often or very long as of late.”

“And you wonder why I’m Mother’s favorite,” Loki huffed, scanning the letter Thor had just discarded.

“Rubbish,” Thor snorted. “Mother loves us both equally and has always said so. She always insists she cannot choose between her two favorite boys, and would never want to,” Thor strode from the room, annoyed that Loki would even think their mother capable of choosing one of them over the other.

“Thor thinks that,” Loki announced to the room once he was sure Thor was gone, “but it isn’t the truth. I’m Mother’s favorite and always have been. We share a bond through seiðr, a love of learning, and deep understanding of divine mysteries Thor can never hope to comprehend. I suppose Mother is just too kind to tell him otherwise. After all, it might be embarrassing to admit one loves their adopted child much more than the disappointing one they birthed naturally.” With that, Loki took a final sip of his coffee and then he too strode from the rooms, still holding the letter.

“I kind of get the feeling Thor and Loki are mama’s boys,” Tony said once the Asgardians were out of earshot.

“What gave it away?” Pepper asked dryly, “That they fight over who she loves more, the fact they battle it out over who gave her the best present, or the fact that they both unironically got ‘I love my mom’ t-shirts to wear back on Asgard?”

“I thought it was that they both sometimes slip up and refer to her as ‘Mumsy,’” Clint mentioned. “Or that they occasionally remind each other to dress weather appropriately because their mom apparently has Heimdall keeping track of them to make sure they are taking care of themselves?”

“No,” Steve contributed, “I’m pretty sure it was that time Natasha and I had to explain to them why some guys were using the phrase ‘mama’s boy’ as an insult and then we had to stop them from committing a murder in broad daylight. Apparently, daring to think that caring for one’s mother is unmasculine is a murderable offense in Asgard.”

“Yeah,” Tony shook his head. “Total mama’s boys.”
A few days later, Tony had gathered everyone into the communal room for an afternoon of Wii Sports after reading an article about how such games helped the elderly retain their hand-eye coordination. If Steve was in anyway insulted by Tony’s subtle jab, he was channeling all of that energy into wiping the floor with Tony at Wii Bowling. Tony himself had to admit that he maybe hadn’t picked the best opponents to deal with. Steve always had to be mentally calculating angles for his shield, Clint never missed a throw, and Loki and Sigyn both had godlike hand-eye coordination - even if they both took forever creating character avatars.

Bruce, Natasha, and Thor had opted just to watch and cheer on their compatriots from the sidelines. Bruce wasn’t competitive by nature and felt more useful making sure snack bowls were refilled, allowing him time to putter around in the kitchen on his own. Natasha wasn’t a big fan of team-building activities but found watching others engage in them could be a valuable source of information on personality types and group dynamics. Thor was banned from using Wii remotes until further notice. It wasn’t exactly Thor’s fault that he had sent one of the remote straight into the center of a new flat screen when Tony first introduced him to device. The remote was just about as light and easy to throw as Mjolnir felt in his hands. What Thor forgot was that same lightness made it easy for him to misjudge how hard he was actually throwing things and, unlike Mjolnir, Wii remotes did not return to one’s hands when summoned to do so.

Two games in, and Tony realized that challenging a bunch of super-powered people and spy assassins to a video game still wasn’t a good idea. Unfortunately, it wasn’t an engineering game and while Tony did play a friendly game of bowling with Rhodey from time to time at the in-home alley at his pad out in California, virtual bowling turned out to not be his forte. With Thor obviously pouty at not being able to participate and Tony loosing to everyone - including Sigyn who had no form for bowling but still managed to score strikes with her weird little twirls - Tony was glad to see the strange mixture of now familiar rainbow colored storm clouds swirling above the Iron Man launching pad.

“Yo,” Tony said, drawing everyone’s attention out the window. “We expecting anyone from Asgard?”

“No,” Thor said, approaching the window a bit nervously before turning to Loki. “Is your sentence at an end?”

“I seriously doubt the Allfather has found it in his oh-so infinite wisdom and mercy to bring me home early,” Loki snorted.

There were the usual fireworks and light shows indicating someone from Asgard was about to drop down and, after the lights flickered on and off a bit, Frigga was standing before the group. Naturally, the Allmother didn’t have a hair out of place and looked as if she had just been relaxing in her garden, not magically beamed down from another planet. Not questioning her sudden appearance, Thor gave a shout of “Mumsy!” and rushed forward, embracing his mother in a strong hug. Frigga was apparently made of stronger stuff than the other Avengers had expected, easily able to take Thor’s boundless energy and tight squeeze. Thor gave his mother a sweet peck on the cheek before pulling back so she could see the others in the room.
“M...mother!” Loki said surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Your father asked me what I wanted for my Name Day. I said I would like to spend a day with my sons,” Frigga replied.

“He’s not my father,” Loki huffed. “And Sigyn and I will be back in a matter of weeks…”

“Don’t argue, Loki,” Frigga rolled her eyes. “Just come, give me a kiss.” Instead of continuing to argue - like he would have done with just about anyone else - Loki stepped forward and kissed his mother’s cheek, embracing her as she snuck her arms around him.

“We have missed you much!” Sigyn said, joining her husband in hugging the Allmother. “There is so much to tell you! Oh, and I must show you my garden!”

“I am very eager to see what all of you have been getting up to in Midgard,” Frigga said happily, embracing her daughter-in-law.

“Mother! I must show you my rooms! And Jane’s laboratory! And the most Central of Parks!” Thor said happily.

“And what am I supposed to do in that time?” Loki snorted. “Besides, Mother has seen the state of your rooms on Asgard. No need to show her you are just as slovenly here.”

“But…” Thor began.

“Boys,” Frigga said, instantly silencing the two, “since the two of you are going to argue, I am going to let Sigyn show me her garden and the other things she has been up to while her. Perhaps when she is finished the two of you will have politely decided where I should go next?”

“But Mother!” Thor protested, a little storm brewing in his eyes.

“Now, Rymr,” Frigga cautioned him, “I will have plenty of time to spend time with all of you and see all of the things you wish to show me. Come, Sigyn. I am eager to learn of the new plants you have been experimenting with.”

Sigyn instantly led the Allmother to the elevator, jabbering the entire time about her Midgardian garden and all of the plant substitutions she had discovered while on Midgard. The elevator closed, Loki and Thor ceased the somewhat resigned poses they had adopted at their mother’s chastisement and looked ready to head into a no-holes-barred fight over who had the right to give their mother a tour of Midgard first. Before any fists could fly, however, Clint asked the question on everyone else’s minds.

“Why did she call you Rymr?” Clint asked Thor, confused. Tony did his best to choke back a joke he knew would lead to Thor strangling him as Thor himself muttered a reply to Clint’s question. Clint smirked: “Didn’t quite catch that, Thor.”

“It’s a childhood nickname,” Loki offered, causing Thor to blush and stare down at his feet. “It means ‘noisy one.’ Very apt for Thor when he was young. And now.”

“It was mother’s pet name for me,” Thor admitted. “She meant it affectionately.”

“Yes,” Loki snorted. “Which is why she always uses it to bring you down a peg. Even from a young age, Mother knew that Thor’s ego had to be tempered somehow.”

“That’s pretty rich coming from you,” Thor snorted, “Lo-Lo.”
“YOU ARE NEVER TO CALL ME THAT IN PUBLIC!” Loki hissed, launching himself at his brother.

The two began tussling around the room, forcing Clint, Bruce and Tony to back up to the wall. Steve momentarily stepped forward, as if thinking he might intervene, and then seemed to reconsider and step back. Natasha was watching the altercation with a bemused glance as Clint attempted to film the fighting brothers on his phone. The noise from the two of them wrestling around drew Frigga and Sigyn back into the room. Sigyn sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose with two fingers as Frigga let out a beleaguered sigh, putting her hands on her hips as she looked down at her sons yet again engaging in a petty skirmish.

“What is happening?” Frigga demanded in her authoritative Allmother voice. Thor and Loki both froze in mid-fight, looked up to find their mother and then instantly sprang apart, trying their best to explain their own lack of fault at the same time.

“It’s fine,” Tony smirked. “Rymr and Lo-Lo were just having a brotherly tiff.”

“I wasn’t even away for a moment and the two of you were at it,” Frigga said to Loki and Thor, who both hung their heads and mumbled an embarrassed “sorry.” “Now, are the two of you going to behave like civilized gentlemen or do I need to start putting noses in corners again like when you were small?”

“We’ll be good,” Thor insisted.

“Yes,” Loki said, “so long as Thor minds his own business.”

“And Loki stops causing trouble,” Thor countered.

“I am seeing two corners that look very interesting to stare at,” Frigga said slightly threateningly.

“We’ll behave,” both brothers said at the same time.

“Now, Sigyn and I are going to her garden,” Frigga said, “and the two of you are going to behave while we’re gone.” Before her sons could respond, Frigga again swept out of the room, a grinning Sigyn hot on her heels.

“Man, we should’ve picked up some tips from her on keeping these two in line when we were on Asgard,” Tony sighed.

“I don’t think anything she would have taught you would have worked,” Steve shook his head. “I think only someone’s ma can give them orders like that.”

In the end, Loki decided to let Thor have the first go at escorting Frigga around the Tower. Thor seemed touched by the gesture, though Sigyn - and most likely Frigga - realized that this was probably nicety being used to disguise Loki’s ulterior motives. And those ulterior motives were that Thor would inevitably be so excited in showing their mother around that he would rush through everything, thereby giving Loki as much time as he wanted to spend with Frigga and showing her...
around. However, Thor’s short attention span was legendary and Loki had only had custody of his mother’s attentions for five minutes before his brother burst into his room demanding that their Mother come see his collection of Midgardian doo-dads he had forgotten to bring out for her to see. Loki had calculated this might happen, interrupting his time with his mother, but he also knew that what patience Thor seemed to lack Frigga always had in spades.

“Mother can return to your rooms when I am done showing her around,” Loki hissed back at his brother.

“But you take forever!” Thor lamented.

“Well, then you should have used your time more wisely,” Loki huffed.

“It will only take a moment!” Thor insisted.

“You had your turn!”

“Boys!” Frigga chastised them.

A chorus of “sorry, Mother” answered her.

“You know,” Frigga observed. “Sigyn has twelve siblings and none of them bicker the way the two of you do.”

“She has twelve siblings,” Thor scoffed. “They don’t bicker because I doubt any of them can ever get a word in edgewise.”

“I would like it state for the record that Thor made that pronouncement, not me,” Loki said.

“Thor, when Loki is finished I will come see your collection,” Frigga assured him.

“And you must meet Jane!” Thor continued. “She will be back from her conference this evening!”

“I look forward to doing so,” Frigga nodded.

“But Mother…” Loki protested, calculating how this was going to cut in on his time with his mother.

“It’s not fair! Thor has been back to Asgard to see you! I haven’t had the chance!”

“Boys, do you really think I’m only staying here for one day?” Frigga smiled. “I will spend as much time with both of you as I can, and once the two of you are sick of me, I’ll return to Asgard.”

Thor and Loki both protested how they could never be sick of their Mother’s presence, causing Frigga to laugh. She would never tell them, but her boys were always so adorable when they agreed on such things. The way they implored her to stay reminded her of when they were children and would team up, using their adorableness and a faux sense of innocence to get out of trouble or ask for something they wanted. She sometimes wondered if her husband still had the ability to see that the two young men that had caused him such exasperation in the past few years still had plenty of the sweet young boys they had been within them.

“Alright,” Thor acquiesced. “But I want to show mother the laboratories!”

“Fine,” Loki agreed, “now leave.” Thor opened his mouth to argue, but then decided not to make any more trouble in front of his mother. With Thor gone, Loki decided to show his mother some of the things he had learned while on Midgard.

First, he made Frigga one of the rather intricate coffee creations he had learned during his brief
barista employment. While she enjoyed the drink and one of the scones that Sigyn had made earlier that day, Loki regaled her with tales of his adventures in his many occupations and also brought out some of the items from his magical kit and that he had acquired from the prank shop to show her. Frigga seemed thrilled that her younger son had managed to fit in well on Midgard and use his talents in such a variety of ways. The Midgardians, it seemed, had warmed to him once they learned of his abilities, for which Frigga was very grateful. Loki also seemed to have warmed to them as well, though one had to see past his aloof nature to tell.

“You’ve certainly learned quite a lot,” Frigga said as Loki took her now empty coffee cup to the sink. “And I love what you and Sigyn have done with your rooms. I can see that you’ve really adapted to Midgard.”

“It has been an adjustment,” Loki admitted. “Naturally, Sigyn is adaptable to any situation. And she did great work in making this room more livable. But I have also found Midgard isn’t as terrible as I might have been previously led to believe.”

“For a man who loved Midgard in his youth as much as your father, he certainly soured against it in his older age,” Frigga said, getting up and walking around the room. She bent down to smell one of the fresh cut Midgardian flowers Sigyn had decorated the room with.

“I’m guessing she gave you the full tour of the garden,” Loki mentioned. “It’s rather magnificent, isn’t it?”

“Most definitely,” Frigga agreed. “Sigyn has such enormous talent, and it’s always lovely when she chooses to show it off. She always was one of my favorite pupils for that reason.”

“What about me?” Loki asked in indignation.

“Now, Loki,” Frigga said, standing up straight to face her son, “the fact that you are my son would make saying that you are my most beloved pupil of all time rather biased and unfair to all the others, wouldn’t you say?” Loki smirked and pressed a kiss to his mother’s cheek. “Speaking of which, I see that you are coping very well without the use of most of your seiðr.”

“Yes,” Loki said, still a bit nervous about talking about the Jotun aspect of his seiðr. “I cannot say it hasn’t been frustrating. Of course, Sigyn might argue that it’s been harder for her since she’s had to do all of the seiðr-related tasks. But I think I coped well.”

“And how is your work on your more natural abilities coming?” Frigga asked hopefully.

“Our Midgardian hosts have been very helpful in that regard,” Loki said, a bit embarrassed that Frigga, as usual, had cut to the heart of the topic he was trying to avoid. “It has been nice having the support.”

“Yes, I suppose it is best that you’ve been able to develop and explore these talents in an environment that isn’t so hostile to them,” Frigga sighed. “I blame myself for not helping you explore them earlier.”

“Mother, you shouldn’t…” Loki began.

“No,” Frigga sighed. “It was silly of me to go along with your father’s prohibition on telling you of your true heritage. Initially, his arguments for it seemed sound. It seemed like the best way to protect you from those that might wish you harm, and by keeping you and Thor in the dark, neither of you could accidentally let the secret slip. However, I should have guessed that by hiding your true nature there would be consequences. I am just pleased to know that not teaching you to utilize your innate
Jotnar abilities with seiðr didn’t stunt your abilities nor has it manifested itself in your seiðr in other harmful ways. Then again, you always have been so linked to your seiðr, so in tune with it and so talented it that it should hardly come as a surprise that you so easily have developed a new - or rather long dormant - ability.”

“I’ve not mastered it exactly,” Loki said, trying hard not to preen under his mother’s compliment. “But I am working with it. Enough that, when Odin decides to call me back, I can safely say that any Jotun seiðr I can manifest will not have harmful effects. Unless I wish it too, of course.”

“Sigyn said you have moved on to creating constructs from ice,” Frigga mentioned.

“Yes, but not the weaponry the Jotnar are so famous for, so the Asgardian court can rest assured,” Loki snorted. “I’ve mainly stuck to trying to copy items. For instance, I made a series of vases out of glass based on pictures of some Sigyn showed me in the advertisements for a Midgardian shop.”

“I cannot wait for you to show me some of your newfound talents yourself,” Frigga said encouragingly. “You’ve always been so creative with your seiðr.”

“Well, I’m not sure you would wholly agree I’ve put such creativity to good use,” Loki said. “Sir Stark enjoys having me help out with the variety of iced alcoholic beverages Midgardians seem to favor. I apparently make ‘a mean daiquiri,’ which I understand to be a compliment in this realm.”

“Do you plan on making visits back to Midgard and your new friends once you are returned?” Frigga inquired.

“You seem to have great faith that the Allfather will let me travel freely between the realms once my confinement is over,” Loki snorted. “I honestly wouldn’t be surprised to find myself again confined to my rooms on Asgard once we return.”

“Well, I think you might find a bit more leniency when you return home,” Frigga said. “After all, Thor has spent a large amount of time here as of late. In fact, I am a bit fearful that both my sons might intend to make Midgard their new home and never visit me.”

“It isn’t you that would keep either of us out of Asgard,” Loki assured her.

“Yes,” Frigga sighed. “Your father and brother had quite the falling out.”

“He’s not my father,” Loki huffed.

“He hasn’t always been the best father, but he’s still your father,” Frigga cautioned her son. “Just as I will always been your mother.”

“It’s not the thought of you as my mother that has caused me such pain and torment all these years,” Loki pointed out.

“Yes, but shouldn’t I be held just as responsible?” Frigga pointed out. “I could have done much more to prevent Odin from treating you boys the way he did. I supposed I thought all of those father-sons bonding outings did good and my lecturing Odin didn’t fall on deaf ears. And perhaps I put too much stock in thinking the way you and Thor reacted to your father was more about you boys being moody adolescents than his parenting.”

“You did everything you could,” Loki said. “The fact that he didn’t listen to you isn’t your fault.”

“I suppose not,” Frigga sighed. “And I cannot excuse his behavior. But I would like to share some insight on it.”
“I doubt there is anything anyone could tell me that would make me feel sympathetic toward him,”
Loki huffed.

“First and foremost, you and your father get along about as well as he and his father did,” Frigga
said. “Even though he was the heir, Odin always felt he was the least favorite of Buri’s sons. He had
the hard task of living up to the expectations his father had for him as well as the expectations all of
Asgard had for a future Allfather. And Buri was much more demanding of your father than he ever
has been of your or Thor. It’s probably a good thing the old man died before either of you were born.
I wouldn’t have wanted either of you to meet him. Your grandmother was your father’s saving grace.
She was constantly between the two, making sure they didn’t kill each other. And Odin has always
been jealous of his younger brothers. While they were able to frolic and behave how they pleased,
any minor scuffle or small mistake he made was always blown out of proportion by Buri because
Odin was his successor, his legacy. It is a hard thing to carry all the hopes and dreams of another
person’s legacy on your shoulders.”

“Is that an excuse for becoming a kidnapper in the middle of a genocidal war?” Loki pointed out.

“I cannot honestly believe that he stole you that night,” Frigga said. “I know your father, and he
always has adored children. In fact, he was a much better father when the two of you were younger.
It seemed you three always got along marvelously then.”

“Yes, well, that was before he started hating everything about me,” Loki huffed.

“He doesn’t hate you,” Frigga insisted. “He fears your potential sometime. Just as I think he fears
Thor’s. And while fear doesn’t always equal hate it can have some of the same effects. No, I can
imagine what it was like for him that night. He had just learned I had lost the baby we were due to
have any day. Your father and I so wanted a big family. And then there was this baby all on it’s
own. I can see how the wheels in his brain would have worked. There was a child before him in
need of a mother and his wife was back at home, a mother who had lost a child. He always thought
Thor should have at least one sibling to grow up with, and while Jotnar were still largely hated and
feared in Asgard, he couldn’t see the harm in a small one. A very small one. Especially one that
showed such promise with seiðr from such an early age. Originally, he didn’t conceal you, you
know. You changed into your Aesir form all on your own. Quite impressive for an infant. And so he
brought you home, thinking that if we hid your true nature until you were old enough and mature
enough to understand our reasons for it he would not only save your life but protect you and foster
you until one day you could accomplish the great things you were born to.”

“Did he know?” Loki asked curiously. “That Laufey was my father when he took me?”

“Not when he took you,” Frigga insisted. “We learned that later. After the battle had cleared, a rumor
swirled that a child born to Laufey - a runt by Jotun standards - had disappeared during the fray.
There was no word of the child’s mother, and Laufey never officially recognized the disappearance
of the child. But why would he? You know as well as I that in that culture it is still common for
children to taken to the temples and then to the mountains to be exposed. We heard stories all the
time of Jotnar children left to die for defects as small as not having prominent tribal markings. It was
almost a given that a child of your size would be killed.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Loki pointed out, “considering my own tribal markings are those of
Jotunheim’s royal family.”

“Yes, the crown of Ymir,” Frigga sighed, touching her son’s forehead that was now Aesir white.
“But it isn’t only kings and princes who bear that mark. Anyone sired by a male of the Jotun royal
family bears those markings. You could have been one of Laufey’s by-blows or the son of one of his
cousins or the child of a man distantly descended from the royal family. Saying your markings made
you Laufey’s son is like saying every blonde in Asgard is your father’s.”

“I know that you didn’t take me maliciously,” Loki told his mother, “but I find it hard to believe Odin found me and brought me back to Asgard with pure intentions. He always seems to have a scheme of some sort in play.”

“Yes,” Frigga smirked. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think the two of you were related.”

“Mother,” Loki groaned.

“Believe it or not, the two of you have quite a bit in common,” Frigga said. “Just enough to make the two of you constantly butt heads. It’s the same way with Thor. He and your father are alike in all the ways that drive each other mad and different in all the ways that do the same.”

“I don’t want to think about having anything in common with him,” Loki huffed.

“I’m not saying you have to forgive him. Now or ever,” Frigga said, “but do keep in mind he could have left you there to your fate. He could have given you to someone else. But he chose to raise you and continue raising you knowing who you are. I know he was harsh, and there are many things he did that I didn’t agree with but could do nothing to stop. Though I wish I had. But, in his own way, Odin does love and care for you. I think most of the hurt he has caused in your life is because he is trying to make you into something you aren’t. He so badly wanted life to be easier for his sons, and he trying to make them conform to behavior that he thinks will make their life easier he has actually made it harder for them. Ironically, he has done the exact same thing to the two of you his father did to him. I think he is just now realizing it.”

“I don’t plan on forgiving him any time soon,” Loki cautioned his mother. “And I hardly doubt he will even try to seek my forgiveness.”

“Your father may surprise you,” Frigga smiled. “In fact, his ability to surprise people is one of the ways I find Odin and you to be quite similar.”

After catching his mother up on some of the experiments he had been able to do sans seiðr, Loki decided to see if Thor was ready to take their mother on a tour of the laboratories downstairs. According to the talking building - which Frigga found terribly amusing - Thor was already down at the laboratory entrance with Sigyn, Darcy, and a very frazzled Jane. The last thing Jane Foster expected after returning to the labs was to find out that her alien boyfriend’s mother, the virtual queen of space, had made a surprise drop in and was eager to meet her. Jane knew she was in desperate need of a shower and to change out of her travel sweatpants before meeting Frigga, but Thor didn’t seem to care about her appearance or that she was slightly jet-lagged from flying back from California that morning.

“Why didn’t you tell me your mother was coming today?” Jane hissed at Thor, interrupting his happy listing of all the activities he, Jane and his mother could do together during her stay. Thor was caught off kilter.

“She didn’t tell us she was coming,” Thor said. “It was a surprise. Her Name Day gift from Father
was to be with us.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” Darcy cooed.

“Thor, I can’t meet your mother like this,” Jane shook her head. “I’ve just run a marathon through LaGuardia and I’m in my travel sweats.”

“They say ‘my ass is out of this world’ on the butt,” Darcy informed Sigyn in a hushed tone. “I bought them for her, and she’s never read them because Jane doesn’t really think too hard about her longue wear.”

“They do seem rather comfortable,” Sigyn said. “Perhaps I might find a pair as well.”

“You got it,” Darcy nodded.

“But Mother will not care how you appear!” Thor insisted at Jane. “You could come out of hibernating through the winter in a biglesnipe’s nest and she would still find you lovely! I’m sure of it!”

“Do you think I look like I’ve spent the winter with a bunch of bilgesnipe?” Jane asked, horrified.

“No! Of course not! You’re as beautiful as ever!” Thor said, trying to figure out what he’d said wrong.

“Besides, it’s just about what your mother will think,” Jane insisted. “I want to make a good first impression, but also having something nice on will give me a boost of confidence. I mean, I only get to meet her once and I would rather do it feeling good about how I look.”

“I’m sure you will have plenty of time,” Sigyn tried to reassure Jane. “After all, it’s Loki’s turn to show her around now, and I can’t see him letting that time slip out of his fingers too quickly.”

“He and mother are very close,” Thor agreed, “and haven’t seen each other in a year, so they have much to catch up on.”

“So, enough time that I can get a good shower in?” Jane asked hopefully.

“I shouldn’t see why not,” Thor shrugged.

“Hey! The dynamic duo of Foster and Lewis are back!” Tony said, emerging from his labs. “How’s California? Did Thor tell you his mom popped in for a visit?”

“Yes,” Jane groused, “hopefully I’ll have enough time to straighten myself up before I run into her.”

“Yeah, first impressions are the worst,” Tony said.

“I still think Mother will be impressed with you no matter what,” Thor insisted. “It’s not like she’s some kind of sea hag.”

“Mother!” Loki called from the top of the stairs leading down to the labs. “Thor just called you a sea hag!”

“Loki, that didn’t work when you were a hundred, it’s not going to work now,” Frigga rolled her eyes, following her son into the room. Her eyes fell to Jane and lit up, just as Jane let out a helpless “meep.”

“You must be the darling Jane my Thor has told me so much about!” Frigga grinned. “Come, let me
get a good look at you dear.”

“Well, Rymr,” Tony said to Thor, “you’re in trouble.”
Meet the Parent

Chapter Summary

*Or, in which, Jane agonizes over first impressions and Frigga moms all over everything.*

Fortunately for Jane, the excitement of showing the Allmother around her lab just about put the fact that she was meeting Thor’s mom looking like she had spent the night hungover on a friend’s couch in the back of her mind. Deep down, Jane knew everything she was working on was probably child’s play to Frigga, but that didn’t stop the Allmother from asking interesting and engaged questions as well as praising Jane for her hard work and passion. In fact, Jane couldn’t help but see a lot of Thor in his mother as the Allmother attentively listened to her explanations and just generally seemed thrilled that Jane was thrilled. Jane already had a sneaking suspicion that most of Thor’s better qualities had come from his mother, but meeting with her only confirmed it.

“Your work is just as impressive as Thor said,” Frigga smiled when Jane was done with her tour and a brief demonstration of her work. “Your work must be quite in demand here in Midgard.”

“It is now,” Jane admitted, “but it didn’t use to be. Before Thor arrived here, most everyone just kind of thought I was a crackpot. But now people are more open to the possibilities about what really is out there in the universe.”

“There are always those who doubt possibility,” Frigga agreed. “And it can’t be an easy task to open their minds.”

“Well, I don’t know how much of that I do,” Jane blushed.

“I know there are limitations to what they can tell you,” Frigga said, “but I hope my children have at least offered some guidance.”

“They have, though unlike some of the others here, I don’t mind finding things out for myself,” Jane shrugged. “Thor likes to pretend he doesn’t know as much as he does while Loki will give you hints, but prefers to do it in a way that makes it seem like he’s still lording his wealth of knowledge over you. But it’s been great to have Sigyn around. There are a lot of other scientists here, but not in my field. With her, I feel like I’m talking to a fellow professional. Of course, she definitely knows more than I do but she isn’t one of those people who is in your face about it. I can just babble and bounce ideas off of her.”

“There were many who felt Sigyn should have gone into astrology,” Frigga agreed. Jane mentally noted that Frigga called the field “astrology” rather than “astronomy.” “I suppose it is the Vanir nature to look to the stars. It was one of my favorite subjects as well. But Sigyn wanted to be a healer, and no one was going to stand in the way of that passion for her. Quite right, I should say. There is something rather rewarding about knowing you are putting your talents to use for the betterment of others.”
“I’m sure she’d be good at anything she put her mind to,” Jane agreed.

“Speaking of passions,” Frigga said, “Thor has told me you create almost all of your equipment yourself. It’s quite impressive to see someone developing their own instruments.”

“I’m sure you have much more impressive stuff on Asgard,” Jane admitted sheepishly. “I have to admit, it’s a little bit frustrating knowing that I’m recreating something that other people already know about in your realm, but at the same time it’s a thrill to discover something new.”

“You have every right to be proud of your work,” Frigga informed Jane. “And who knows what new things you might contribute by bringing a Midgardian perspective to things.”

“I just hope I’ve not bored you by talking about my work,” Jane said. “I’m sure you learned all the stuff I’m trying to discover as a girl.”

“I find nothing more interesting than hearing someone talk about something they are truly passionate in, and you seem to love your work a great deal,” Frigga insisted. “To be honest, I never expected Thor to one day introduce me to a female companion of his who was a scholar. Not that I’m not positively thrilled that you are. I suppose it was always a great fear in the back of my mind that one or both of my sons might bring home a woman who was incapable of intelligent conversation. It is wonderful to see my son with a woman who appreciates an intellectual challenge.”

“I think Thor is a lot smarter than most people give him credit for,” Jane told the Allmother. “And I’m not just talking about the things he knows because of how advanced Asgard is. Thor is really intelligent when he puts his mind to things, but he hardly ever seems to get an opportunity to use his smarts. People just expect him to be this big dumb warrior and so he seldom gets to use his intelligence because no one ever asks him to. And Thor isn’t the one to but in and answer a question even if he’s the only one who knows the answer.”

“No,” Frigga smirked, watching as her sons bickered in the corner of Jane’s lab while Darcy and Sigyn shared donuts and watched the two men in amusement, “that has always been Loki’s department. Everyone always thought Loki was the intelligent one, so they never pushed Thor in the classroom. Likewise, everyone always thought that Thor was the strong one so they never expected Loki to push his limits on the training field. In truth, both my sons are talented in a myriad of things. And I’m not just saying that because I’m their mother.”

“Well, even if Loki did try to destroy some of the planet, I don’t think you did too bad a job raising them,” Jane said. “Though, I do have some words for your husband I should probably keep to myself if I know what’s good for me.”

“I think I have too often held my tongue, more willing to let things my husband has done or said slide than pick a fight with him. Particularly about her sons,” Frigga said. “I think, however, I might adopt a new policy of telling Odin exactly what I think whenever I think it if that means things will improve for our boys. I might even encourage others to be more open with the Allfather as well.”

“From everything Thor’s ever told me, you most of all probably demand that kind of respect from Odin,” Jane smiled.

“I’d like to think so,” Frigga laughed.

“Mother! Isn’t Jane’s laboratory delightful?” Thor said, bounding over.

“It is most impressive, and it is easy to see why you are so proud of her,” Frigga agreed.

“Do you wish to see the rest of the labs?” Jane asked Frigga.
“Well, I’m sure it couldn’t hurt,” Frigga said. Before Thor could offer to show his mother around, Loki butted in.

“I should show Mother the others,” Loki said. “Out of all of us, I have spent the most time in Stark and Banner’s labs.”

“How good of you to render yourself helpful to others,” Frigga praised her son. Loki preened under her words, causing the others - save Sigyn - to struggle to hold back a giggle. There was something oddly comical about the way Loki always sought praise from his Mother. He brushed off compliments from others so easily, as if he expected them, but it seemed like anything nice Frigga said was something for him to brag about.

“Loki has helped out quite a bit,” Thor admitted. “He was in Stark’s lab the other day. They also built a robot that propels smells according to Lady Pepper.”

“Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be entirely surprised Loki used some of his talents for mischief,” Frigga smirked. “At least you were constructive and worked with others to do so this time.”

“See, I have made improvements,” Loki said, sticking his tongue out at Thor. Thor returned the gesture as Loki began to led their mother on a tour of the labs.

Tony was thrilled to show the Allmother around his labs, almost as if he was showing off his creations to his own mother. Of course, unlike Maria Stark, the Allmother didn’t seem to require much explanation about his advanced engineering. The bots instantly took to her and JARVIS swooned as much as an A.I. could when the Allmother referred to him as a “charmingly intelligent companion.” Bruce was a little bit more nervous about having the Allmother in his lab space, though Thor, Loki and Sigyn all assured him that the Allmother was much more fearsome than she looked and could probably easily fell the Hulk in a single blow if she wanted to. Again, she was very complimentary of Bruce’s work and seemed thrilled to know that Sigyn and even Loki had helped him now and again. Bruce, in turn, was very complimentary of how Loki had adapted to Earth and his use of his Jotnar powers. Loki did his best not to blush as Bruce went on about how knowing how hard it could be to hide a part of yourself away and be fearful of what it could do. The Allmother was very gracious and with a few tears in her eyes, hugged thoroughly thanked Banner for her friendship with her sons.

Afterwards, it was time for the feast of Midgardian delicacies ordered from throughout New York that Thor had ordered for his mother to welcome her that night. JARVIS informed the group the first deliveries had arrived and Pepper was working to set them up in the dining room. Thor and Loki both rushed forward to be the first to the top of the tower and thus have control over how the room was set up. A shoving match ensued as they waited for the elevator and Tony mentally debated asking JARVIS to slow the elevator down a notch just for the pure entertainment value of seeing the two.

“I best go after them,” Sigyn sighed. “I wouldn’t want them to get into a fight over pushing the buttons in the virtual conveyance machine and break it. Again.”

“You’re such a dear, Sigyn,” Frigga smiled at her daughter-in-law. With the others gone, the Allmother was left with only Midgardians for company. “I hope that Thor and Loki have been good guests during their stay here. I know I don’t have to ask after Sigyn, but my sons… can be a bit much…”

“I’m sure they were on their best behavior,” Tony assured her.

“Hmm,” Frigga nodded. “Let me have the bill for any damages they have caused. I will make sure
Odin is held to his promise of paying you back for hosting them. It is, unfortunately, an honor one cannot refuse to house an Odinson. I remember being so embarrassed when they were hardly two hundred and I had to pay back my own cousin after the two of them burned down his astronomical tower in Vanaheim. Apparently, Loki wasn’t sharing the telescope and Thor thought summoning a bit of lightning would scare his brother off of it, not catch the drapes on fire.”

“Yeah, well, kids’ll be kids,” Tony shrugged.

It was obvious that Thor’s idea of what constituted the best foods of Midgard and Loki’s idea about Midgardian cuisine were not alike. It was easy to tell which brother had ordered which foods. The caviar, fancy cheeses, chocolates, and fine wines were easily Loki’s picks while the hot wings, mini hamburgers, three types of mac and cheese, and myriad of ales were easily Thor’s choice. The only food that it seemed both brothers had agreed on were the variety of bacon-wrapped items. Sigyn, thankfully, had been left to pick out any fish dishes. Thor had also asked his Midgardian friends to order their own favorite foods for the Allmother to try, bringing the Allmother a veritable world-rounding feast including Russian delicacies, Scotch-Irish pub grub, Indian vegan options, Italian pastas and pizzas, sushi, various wrapped Mexican dishes, and a can of spray cheese. Being the gracious and diplomatic woman she was, the Allmother never gave any indication if she disliked any food given to her. Natasha was quite impressed.

Following the evening meal, Thor and Loki about turned to wrestling to see who would have the privilege of giving up their bed to their Mother for the night before Pepper graciously announced she had organized one of the guest suites for the Allmother, set up with everything she would need for a relaxing evening. Loki and Sigyn giddily instructed the Allmother on how to use the bath bombs Pepper had provided and then were shooed out of the room so Frigga could relax for the evening. The following morning, she took Pepper aside and thanked her greatly for the various bathroom accoutrements she had found. It had been one of the most relaxing evenings Frigga had in decades and the two women bonded over breakfast and the difficult task of organizing and ordering about powerful and head-strong men one just happened to be in love with. Within minutes, Pepper was convinced the Allfather would fall to pieces without Frigga in the background to offer her support and wisdom. Of course, neither Thor nor Loki had ever indicated otherwise.

The following day was a whirlwind tour of Loki and Thor’s favorite places in New York City for the Allmother. After a day of sightseeing, the Allmother was returned to the tower will shopping bags full out items her sons thought she might enjoy. Of course, it was evident to the others that the Allmother seemed to be enjoying having time with her sons rather than the stacks of books and jewelry Loki had gotten her or the glass knick knacks and Mjolnir t-shirt Thor had purchased. When she returned to the Tower, Frigga suggested she should put her feet up after a long day of walking, leading Thor and Loki to argue over who had over-exerted their mother the most. Frigga deftly broke up the fight by sending Loki off to make her some tea and Thor in the opposite direction to find a blanket.

“I have to say ma’am,” Steve informed her from one of the other common room chairs, “you manage them pretty well.” Frigga smiled. She had gotten Steve to stop calling her “your majesty,” but he still wouldn’t give up calling her “ma’am” for simply “Frigga.” She had to admire his manners.

“Well, I’ve had hundreds of years of practice,” Frigga said airily. “And they aren’t too hard to keep in check if you know how they work. They may have a thick outer shell, but I think both my boys
are sweet darlings underneath.” She paused for a moment. “You must think my maternal instinct leaves me a bit blind.”

“No ma’am,” Steve shook his head. “I think my ma felt the same way about me. I was always getting into trouble, picking fights with fellas twice my size. A lot of other people thought I was a troublemaker, but my ma always new I was more concerned with letting injustice slide than getting beat up. It’s how she raised me, I guess. She saw a lot of stuff in me no one else did. Stuff I didn’t even see myself. I suppose it’s a mother’s job to see the best in their kids, even when no one else will.”

“It’s not always an easy job,” Frigga admitted. “Sometimes admitting to faults in your child feels like admitting to faults of your own. I often think about how things would be different if I had acted differently. But I suppose the best I can do is worry about the future and try to make it brighter.”

“That’s a nice way to think about it,” Steve agreed.

“I have missed having both my boys at home,” Frigga sighed, “and I know their Father is the reason they stay away. Well, Thor at least for the time being. But I can’t help but feel that once Loki’s banishment here is lifted he won’t be eager to return to Asgard either. I can certainly understand why. I know it’s a mother’s duty to watch their children grow and leave, but I suppose I’m not entirely ready to let go yet. And most of all, I want them to feel happy to return home any time they wish. It would be a lot easier to make that true if I didn’t love their father so much. Things were so much easier when the boys were younger. Odin was a much easier father then. But for some reason he just can’t deal with children once they’ve hit their 700s. All the growth and hormones I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, hoping he was doing his mental math right, “teenagers can be hard.”

“I always secretly thought it was because Odin realized his children were growing up and soon would have to protect themselves instead of relying on him for protection,” Frigga admitted. “But he’s also the type of man who can’t stand finding his own faults in other people. And one always seems to find the faults they least like in themselves in their own children.”

“I find it hard to believe you have any faults,” Tony intoned from where he had just walked behind them.

“I see why you and Loki get along,” Frigga smirked at the man. “But now, I see parts of myself I wish I didn’t have in my sons. I’ve always felt that I’m a bit of a people pleaser and a push-over when things get down to it, and I see that in Thor constantly. And I have always had a hard time handling compliments on my work or feeling a sense of accomplishment, which Loki does as well.”

“Those aren’t the worst faults to have,” Steve shrugged.

“And you did a good job raising them,” Tony said. “So don’t sell yourself short on that.”

“That means a great deal to me,” Frigga smiled at the men. “Thank you.”

“I have your tea Mother!” Loki said, racing into the room with a full tea set balancing on one hand and a tray of delicious scones most likely cooked up by Sigyn in the other.

“And I have my selection of finest blankets!” Thor said, bounding in afterward. “Mother, you must try the Midgardian fabric known as flannel! I find it most comforting!”

“Oh,” Frigga sighed happily, “how my sweet boys do spoil me.”
While Frigga had promised to stay until her sons were sick of her, it came to be very apparent that neither Thor nor Loki could easily tire of their mother. Odin, however, seemed to miss her terribly and within three days of her departure one or both of his ravens was swooping in and out of the tower with missives for the Allmother, asking her advice on a myriad of miniscule things. Thor and Loki both rolled their eyes at their father’s actions despite the fact they knew he couldn’t be parted with their mother for long without hounding her with messages. Frigga said that interrupting her travels to ask silly questions about what jam he should have with breakfast or whether he should round up to five or ten with the number of gods stationed on some moon colony were Odin’s little way of showing he loved her and missed her.

Initially, Loki and Thor protested that Odin could spare her for at least a few more days - a month tops - in order for her to spend time with the sons he had practically driven away. Frigga, however, knew that the constant flow of raven-related activity was putting Stark on edge and that, as much as she would miss her sons, she did have a great deal of her own duties to perform back on Asgard. Secretly, Frigga also hoped her visit would remind her sons that not everything on Asgard was enjoyable and prompt them to return for at least a small stretch of time. The evening of her third day, Frigga announced she would be returning to Asgard the following morning. Thor, Loki, and Sigyn were all disappointed but also understood that she had important duties as Allmother to attend to. She also sometimes seemed like the only thing that stopped Odin from going off world-conquering again like he had in his youth. Jane and Darcy said their farewells to Frigga that morning as they were booked on in a local observatory that night and probably would spend the rest of the morning catching up on sleep.

Thor and Loki were mournful during breakfast the following morning, knowing their mother would soon be leaving. Frigga, by contrast, was very cheerful. She reminded Thor that he could come back to Asgard whenever he wished to visit her and Loki that he could do the same once his banishment was up. While the thought of returning to Asgard didn’t seem to hold much sway for either of them, both brothers had to admit the thought of catching up on lost time with their mother might be worth braving Asgard’s annoyances. Still, Loki did his best to contrive a reason to see the Allmother on one of the other realms if at all possible. He had already managed to convince Sigyn that, once his imprisonment was up, they should spend some time with her relatives on Vanaheim and in Niðavellir just to prove to them Sigyn’s Midgardian sabbatical hadn’t left her worse for wear.

As Frigga prepared for her departure, the group found themselves standing in a line outside on the deck from which she would depart. While it was expected Frigga would give a tender farewell to her sons and daughter-in-law, the assembled Avengers were not prepared for the warm goodbye Frigga decided to give each of them. Most of the group were confused when, after being wrapped up in a big bear hug by the Allmother, Natasha quickly excused herself and raced out of the room. However, when she next embraced Clint, he began to see what had Natasha so off kilter.

Somehow, Frigga seemed to smell of the early morning dew on the farm, drugstore perfume, a steaming mug of cocoa after a day skating on the pond, and a roast chicken straight from the oven. He could almost hear the warm laughter. The last time Clint had experienced such warmth or had such an overwhelming sensation of comfort he had been five years old. It had been the cold night his mother gave him and his brother a hug goodbye before leaving them with the babysitter, going to a dance at the Elks Club with their father. Despite promising the evening would make up for his latest rash of bad behavior, Dad had gotten drunk at the bar and crashed the car on the way home, killing both of them instantly. That last hug as his father urged her to hurry up so they could leave was the last memory Clint had of Edith Barton.
Steve found himself next in line as Frigga let go of Clint, who seemed to be shaking somewhat. Frigga wrapped Steve up tight, and before Steve could really process what was happening, his senses seemed to be taking over, processing the smell of antiseptic, a cooling apple cake, and freshly baked soda bread, the sounds of fresh laundry fluttering on the line and a soft Irish aire being hummed in the distance. He could almost picture his mother in their tiny tenement apartment on a day off from work, preparing the evening meal to cook so she could take down the clean laundry as it baked, stopping to ruffle his hair as he bent over the kitchen table, working on some new art project. When Frigga pulled away, Steve could have sworn for a second he wasn’t looking at the Allmother but at Sarah Rogers, as he remembered her during his youth.

Unlike Clint, Steve and Natasha who had nearly fought off the goodbye hugs, Bruce leaned into the smell of fresh garden mulch, the taste of fresh-from-the-oven chocolate chip cookies, and the sound of Christmas carols being sung around a freshly trimmed Scotch pine. He could picture his mother, playing with him and his brand new Erector set, beaming as he took home first prize in the elementary school science fair, and pressing a warm kiss to his cheek after reminding him to put on his hat and scarf. And yet, the memories of her face down in a pool of her own blood in the driveway after that final confrontation with his father didn’t surface like they usually did.

By the time Frigga reached Tony, the Iron Man was already melting in fear of whatever the Allmother had just done to the Hulk, Captain America, Hawkeye, and the Black Widow with her magical hugging powers. He came close to trying to fight his way out of the goodbye hug only to be overcome with the smell of Chanel No. 5, the sound of tinkling piano keys, and the gentle sensation that someone had sneaked into his room late at night to ensure he was properly tucked in. Tony almost wanted to drop to his knees and beg forgiveness from Frigga, as if she was his own mother, to apologize for all the times he had been brusque, sarcastic and divisive when he should have been focusing on being the son she deserved in the precious few moments she had left.

None of the Avengers noticed as Frigga bade farewell to her own children before being beamed up to where a squadron of Asgardian armed guards would escort her back home to the palace. All beaming and warm from their farewell with the Allmother, Thor and Loki were surprised to find the rest of their friends ranging from near tears to completely absorbed in them as a result of Frigga’s kind embraces. Sigyn, however, seemed to shoot the rest a glance of sympathy, as if she knew exactly what they were feeling at that moment.

“You know man,” Clint said through his sniffles, “you could have warned us that your mom’s super power is the mom hug to end all mom hugs.”

“I do not understand…” Thor said, confused.

“Mother does not possess magic hugging powers,” Loki snorted. “Though she does give good hugs.”

“They don’t know,” Sigyn addressed the other Avengers kindly. “They’ve never known another mother.”

“What in the Nine are you talking about?” Loki demanded to know.

“When I embrace your mother,” Sigyn explained to Loki, “I do not just feel her embrace but all of the comforting things I associate with mothering… the gardens at Folkvangr, the smell of Dwarven stew, thick blankets on cold nights, and soft lullabies with a harp playing in the background. As the two of you have only remember mothered by her, you do not experience anything beyond the Allmother herself. However, she does have the ability to somewhat channel the mothers of those she comes into contact with…”
“And as the mothers of most of our compatriots have…” Thor said, slightly upset himself now, “passed into the next world…”

“I’m sure she didn’t mean to upset any of you,” Sigyn said soothingly to the four Midgardian men before her.

“Upset?” Steve interjected. “I haven’t been hugged like that since 1936! Of course I’m not upset! It was nice… just… it was like getting to say goodbye in a happy way, not waiting outside some TB ward because I couldn’t go in.”

“At least you got to see yours,” Tony muttered.

“Seeing it isn’t always the best thing.” Bruce shook his head. “But, yeah, it was nice. It was nice to have a memory that’s not… tainted…”

“Maybe we really should start a support group,” Clint sighed. He then looked up. “Oh, shit. No wonder Tash was so upset.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asked.

“She… she never knew her biological parents,” Clint said. “I hope…”

“You don’t honestly think she would have a Red Room flashback, do you?” Steve asked worriedly. Clint shrugged as if to say he didn’t know.

“I will go check on her,” Sigyn offered, leaving Tony to corral the rest of the guys into the communal kitchen for a bit.

Gingerly, Sigyn snuck toward the Black Widow’s rooms, making sure to avoid the numerous traps and secret alarms Natasha had set up for self-protection. Sigyn had heard rumors of what had happened to Natasha in the early chapters of her life and her own scrying and readings done on each member of the compound the first week she and Loki arrived revealed many dark, swirling things about Natasha’s dark past. If anyone, Natasha probably stood what Loki had gone through - being broken apart and put back together over and over again by a force that made you feel more powerless than you actually were. Bent to the will of one who was awesome in the terrifying and trembling sense of the word, forced to do things perhaps not natural to one’s conscience.

Normally, Natasha would have been concerned that Sigyn was so easily able evade all of the traps she set up in her room for unwanted guests between the front door and the bedroom. When Sigyn found her, Natasha was sitting on the edge of her bed, staring blankly at the wall. She was not crying because Widows do not cry, but if there did happen to be some wetness around her eyes, it was a mere coincidence. Silently, Sigyn slid onto the bed, sitting next to the red-headed woman and waited.

There were several moments of silence before Natasha spoke.

“She smelled like sorrel soup,” Natasha finally said quietly, “and sounded like a lullaby I can barely remember, one that I heard once long ago in a forgotten time. She felt like sunshine on my face and a warm hand pressed against my cheek.” Natasha paused again for a period of time. “What does that mean?”

“I think,” Sigyn replied, “it means someone loved you very much, someone who maybe wanted to be as a mother to you but was not given the chance.”

“I’m not sure how I should feel about that,” Natasha admitted.

“That’s fine,” Sigyn nodded. Natasha was quiet again and, when Sigyn got the impression Natasha
didn’t want to talk further, she simply slipped her arm around her friends shoulder. Neither of them noticed how long they stayed like that.

No one questioned Sigyn’s demands that they order out from Natasha’s favorite Russian expat restaurant complete with a special gallon order of sorrel soup for Natasha to keep in her fridge for eating later. Most of the others were too tired if they had wanted to argue. Besides, Clint loved the dumplings, Steve ate just about anything placed before him, and Russian food had enough in common with Asgardian cuisine that Thor and Loki both enjoyed it immensely. The food seemed to help Natasha get over whatever funk the Allmother’s goodbye had put her in or at least get her to the point she could school her features into tricking the others to believing she was fine. The others also seemed to have recovered from their encounter and, in fact, were jollier than they had been in a while.

The meal over, Steve and Bruce started packing up the leftovers and cleaning up the dishes from the meal while Clint and Thor lay in a food coma in the communal room. Tony was working on some schematics while Jane, Darcy, and Sigyn talked about some of Loki’s work. Natasha was finishing off some of the deserts while Loki nursed a cup of coffee. It was a typical after-dinner repose for the residents of the Tower. At least until two giant ravens squawked their way into the room from seemingly out of nowhere.

“What the…” Tony groaned. “Great. These guys.”

“Hello Huginn! Hello Muninn!” Sigyn waved happily at the two birds who then landed on the table and began walking around. There was a note tied to Huginn’s leg.

“It’s another message from the Allfather,” Thor said, trying to get the letter from the two ravens, both of whom were more intent on pecking him.

“Naturally, he’s still sending Mother messages even though she’s back in Asgard,” Loki huffed. “How inconsiderate.”

“I’m sure that’s not it,” Sigyn said, managing to distract Huginn with some bread from a blini so that Thor could get the message off of him.

“How does the old man not cause an international incident with those birds?” Tony marveled as Thor unfurled the letter. “I can’t imagine anyone likes getting pecked to death for a message.”

“Oh, the Allfather does send envoys from time to time,” Loki rolled his eyes. “The ravens are just for more personal communication. Usually for Thor and I when we are in trouble. In that case, he usually doesn’t mind the thought of us being pecked to death.”

“What did he want?” Sigyn asked Thor curiously.

“This message isn’t for mother,… Thor said, looking at the scrawl on the envelope.

“It’s for you Loki,” Sigyn said nervously, handing the letter from Thor to her husband. Loki took the letter, stood up and began pacing the room.

“Do you think he’s made up his mind about your sentence here on Midgard?” Thor asked.
“More than likely,” Loki grunted.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Jane asked curiously.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to learn my fate,” Loki said.

“I’m sure it’s good news,” Steve said hopefully. “You’ve made a lot of improvements since you got here. You’re a good guy.”

“I agree,” Bruce nodded. “You’ve fulfilled all of the parameters he set out for you and more. You’ve shown a lot of growth. He should be proud to welcome you back to Asgard.”

“And if it’s not good news,” Tony said, always ready to play Devil’s Advocate, “we can just keep you and Sigyn here on Midgard. I mean, Odin may think he’s king of however many realms there are, but I’d like to see him come to Earth and convince the UN of that.”

“I will have words with Father before it comes to that,” Thor insisted.

“Read the letter,” Sigyn encouraged Loki, getting up and taking hold of his hand, “there is no sense in torturing yourself over possibilities.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Loki sighed.

The others in the room waited with bated breath as Loki scanned the letter, though they all seemed to let out sighs of relief as a grin spread over Sigyn’s face as she read it over her husband’s shoulders. Despite sensing it was good news, Thor was still impatient to learn his brother’s fate.

“What does it say?” Thor demanded.

“The Allfather is pleased to announce that I have fulfilled the terms of my banishment and, on the advice of his council, he has agreed to return to me my full status and powers as I have clearly shown my ability to use both responsibly during my tenure here,” Loki read. “He also wishes to discuss my right to once again travel freely among the realms - particularly so long as I have a fitting companion such as Sigyn - to monitor me.”

“So, you can go home, but you don’t have to,” Tony said. “I think that’s the best news you could have asked for.”

“Yes, but there is one condition,” Loki frowned.

“That Sigyn is with you?” Thor prompted.

“No,” Sigyn said. “He has to go to Asgard to get his seiðr restored. And Thor, you must accompany him for this.”

“Why that scheming!” Thor huffed. “I knew he would find some underhanded way to get me to return to Asgard!”

“I think you can put aside your tiff with your father to celebrate Loki’s success,” Jane said to Thor.

“Yes, well,” Thor frowned.

“So, Loki,” Sigyn asked curiously. “What are we to do.”

“I suppose, lykyng,” Loki sighed, “we are for Asgard.”
Over The Rainbow

Chapter Summary

In which goodbyes are said

Even with Sigyn’s use of her “higitus figitus” style magic, it seemed like it took longer for all of Loki and Sigyn’s belongings to be packed away for their return to Asgard than it did when they left. Tony reasoned this was probably because they were taking more back than they brought, though he had encouraged them to leave some stuff behind in the hopes they would come back. Sigyn had offered to use her seiðr to return the room to it’s original dimensions, but both Pepper and Tony had told her not to, saying she and Loki might need the space if they ever decided to return. However, Sigyn still miniaturized her indoor garden into a bubble made of glass so she could continue caring for it on Asgard. While he was oddly sad to see the room of dangerous plants go, Tony knew there wasn’t anyone in the Tower who would dare take care of it in Sigyn’s absence.

Loki had taken the time to make the rounds and say his farewells to the various Midgardians he had befriended, telling them he and his wife had been called back to Norway. He had lunch with his coffee shop workers, a dinner with Reggie and his family, and then stopped by the joke shop in the evening to bid everyone farewell. It had been bittersweet to say farewell to these friends, many of whom made him promise to visit if he was ever again in New York. Deep down, Loki knew that his royal duties could keep him from Midgard for decades, especially if he had to pick up the slack Thor had left behind in the past few months. Not that the promise of returning to Asgard only to immediately depart again was upsetting to Loki in anyway.

In fact, he and Sigyn were both looking forward to their return even if leaving behind their newfound friends did sadden them. Sigyn wanted to see her sisters and niece again, gab with Idunn about the new baby, and catch up on all the infirmary gossip from Nanna and Eir. Loki himself wanted to see his mother, make sure his rooms were in order, and most importantly have his seiðr returned to him. They both were looking forward to having Fen around again, and if the Allfather did send them off on other diplomatic missions most of the other realms would be able to allow him to accompany them in their travels. Sigyn’s horse would probably end up coming too, though Loki was less partial to the beast than he often let Sigyn believe. Then again, any creature that enjoyed setting Thor on fire when he didn’t let it eat his easy-to-mistake-for-hay hair couldn’t be all bad.

No, if anyone was putting off their return to Midgard it was Thor. He had every reason not to want to return, mainly because of his tremendous falling out with Odin. He and the Allfather had argued over Jane, his self-proclaimed title of protector of Midgard, his friendship and alliance with the Avengers, and his desires to see certain changes in how Asgard was run. Loki imagined Odin was now highly regretting banishing his eldest son to Midgard, though Loki thought the Allfather perhaps should have expected Thor to bond with the realm so easily considering the fact that Odin himself had done so in his youth. Bruce had likened it to Thor being on some Asgardian version of Rumspringa, which Loki gathered from explanation was the chance of the youth from some technologically-devoid cult to experience the actual world before they gave it all up. Loki thought Tony’s suggestion that Thor was on some Midgardian gap year or spring break was more apropos. After all, Thor had been traveling a foreign country, developed a relationship with a woman from a wholly different culture than his own, was putting off his responsibilities, and would probably return to Asgard talking about all the “helping” he had done in Midgard when really he spent the bulk of
his time having fun.

Of course, Thor did have a bit to fear about returning to Asgard. The last time he and Odin had such a falling out Odin had sent him to Midgard. This time around, Thor was practically convinced Odin would confine him to Asgard instead to show his ire. Thor wasn’t seeking his father’s forgiveness and neither did he expect to hear any apologies himself. Thor and his father didn’t fall out often, but when they did they fell out hard. They were also both excellent grudge holders, something Loki had previously thought was just another Odinson family trait he had inherited. So, in the hopes of speeding Thor’s packing for Asgard up and fulfilling his usual role in helping his mother smooth things over between Odin and Thor when they had a tiff, Loki found himself in his brother’s rooms, watching as Thor tried to cram as many Midgardian t-shirts with funny sayings into the luggage Jane had bought him as possible.

“You know, they might fit better if you folded them,” Loki said. “Or at least took Sigyn up on her offer of placing all of your things in one of her pocket dimensions until we return.”

“I only need this small case,” Thor said. “I do not plan on staying long, and Sigyn’s pocket dimension will be of no use to me once I return here to Midgard.”

“I suppose,” Loki said, deciding it was best not to bring up the possibility of Thor’s return to Asgard lasting longer than he wanted. “Though you could make your own pocket dimensions. I know you abhor being seen using any kind of seiðr that doesn’t channel itself through your hammer, but it does make traveling frightfully easy. And it’s relatively easy and useful.”

“I’m not staying long, Loki,” Thor reiterated.

“Well,” Loki sighed, “I do appreciate you coming. And I agree it was unfair of the Allfather to make your appearance a contingency of my restoration.”

“I would have come to see it if he hadn’t requested it,” Thor huffed. “He just had to add that in there to show that he could.”

“You know he loves showing that he can do things,” Loki rolled his eyes. “Just let the old man through his temper tantrum and you’ll be back here lickety-split.”

“I suppose,” Thor huffed. “Though I don’t think it would kill him to look at things from my point of view once.”

“Kill him, no,” Loki said. “Make him fall into one of those oh-so-useful Odinsleeps he always seems to require whenever things aren’t going his way, perhaps.”

“And then I’ll be stuck on Asgard for sure,” Thor huffed. “I wouldn’t want Mother to be on her own…”

“And the last time I tried to handle things no one seemed to believe I could do it,” Loki said bitterly.

“Funny, isn’t it,” Thor mentioned, “that the son father wants to succeed him doesn’t want the job and the son who would actually be good at it isn’t trusted enough to do so.”

“A cruel irony you don’t need to remind me of, Thor,” Loki huffed.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Thor sighed. “You know, it’s too bad you couldn’t pull one of your shapeshifting things with the two of us… send yourself back to Asgard as me and allow me to remain here on Midgard as you.”
“One problem with that,” Loki pointed out. “I think people would wonder why my wife was suddenly very amorous with you and why I had forsaken her for your Midgardian paramour. And even if we reversed the ladies, I think Jane would have a hard time keeping up in the healing wards and Sigyn would have a hard time not unveiling all the secrets of Asgardian cosmology to Midgard.”

“Yes,” Thor sighed, “and it would also be hard to explain why you in my guise could not wield Mjolnir.”

“You being asked to display my skills at seiðr would undoubtedly be more disastrous,” Loki smirked. Thor laughed.

“Remember when I tried to copy myself as you do and nearly split myself in half?” Thor laughed.

“Yes,” Loki smirked. “Mother was terrified. I don’t know what worried her more: the fact that you were attempting to do advanced seiðr without guidance or even a knowledge of the basic mastery of the spell or the fact that had you succeeded there might have been two of you running around.”

“It was probably better that I didn’t study seiðr further,” Thor said.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Loki mentioned. “You would have gotten in control of things eventually if you had been taught…”

“If I had been willing to learn,” Thor put in.

“That too,” Loki shrugged, “but it’s never too late to learn.”

“I suppose,” Thor said.

“And even Odin knows advanced seiðr, so don’t let anyone put any of that seiðr-is-unmasculine tripe into your head,” Loki huffed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he put that into your head in the hopes that you wouldn’t overpower him with your own seiðr one day.”

“Then why did he let them teach it to you?” Thor smirked. Loki rolled his eyes.

“You really think I would have let him stop me?” Loki replied. Thor laughed loudly at that.

“I am at least glad that things are on their way to being right with us, brother,” Thor said to Loki sincerely. “I know there are still ways things can improve, but it is nice that things are getting to where they should be with us. And it comforts me greatly to know that you are becoming happier and more comfortable with who you are because, and I perhaps do not say this to you often enough, you are a good person, Loki. One of my most favorite people in all the realms.”

“You aren’t so bad yourself,” Loki admitted awkwardly. “Now, what else do you need to pack? If you don’t hurry up, Sigyn will come in here and do it for you, and she won’t care which one of your flannel shirts you think will most impress the Asgardian hordes.”

Naturally, Tony couldn’t let anyone leave the Tower for what would most likely be a long and
drawn-out departure without throwing some kind of farewell party. Tony made it a point to make
sure all the foods Loki, Sigyn, and Thor had grown to love in Midgard were served and had invited
Fury, Hill, and Coulson up from D.C. for the occasion. Fury and Hill had accepted the invitation
purely to make sure Loki returned to Asgard as promised for the party’s big grand finale while
Coulson wanted to get some tips from Sigyn about caring for the succulent garden he had started.
Hill may have also asked Sigyn a parting question or two about orchids, though Sigyn was wise
enough to know that Hill didn’t like people to know she had interests outside of her work. Rhodey
had also come down to say goodbye to Loki and Sigyn as well, having developed a begrudging
respect for Loki after his birthday party performance.

The party wasn’t large by Tony Stark’s usual standards, but Loki wasn’t one for big events and
Thor, who usually loved indulging in festivities, was a bit morose that he was going to have to be
parted from Jane. Instead of his usual antics, Thor remained on the couch, cuddled with Jane and
nursing some mead while he listened to Rhodey and Steve talk about military procedures and how
the whole bureaucracy of the armed forces never seemed to change. Coulson was there listening to
them as well. Hill and Natasha were at the bar, sipping on fruity drinks and seeming to silently judge
everyone. Darcy and Pepper were next to them, chatting back and forth. Loki was content to remain
in a corner with Bruce, chatting quietly, while Sigyn flitted from group to group, engaging in
conversation with everyone. She eventually flitted back to Loki and Bruce, bringing Steve with her
so he could get another slice of pizza from the table behind them.

“So, what are you going to do when you get back?” Steve asked Loki curiously.

“You mean if this isn’t all just a clever ruse to bring me back to Asgard so the Allfather can finally
execute me?” Loki snorted.

“Loki!” Sigyn hissed, annoyed. Loki squeezed his wife’s hand comfortingly and she rolled her eyes,
not entirely appeased.

“I suppose I shall have some manner of audience before the Allfather immediately after I return,”
Loki shrugged. “Once that is complete, Sigyn and I will most likely have to collect Fen from her
sisters and I will want to ensure no one has been messing about our quarters. After that unpacking,
and I’m sure you’ll want to take dear Kolr out for a ride to get him back into his proper exercise
regime.”

“I have missed riding,” Sigyn nodded.

“Then there will no doubt be some correspondence to catch up on,” Loki said. “I don’t plan on
making an appearance at the usual evening feast, so probably organizing what research I have
managed to accomplish here into my vaults in Asgard and then a good night’s sleep in my own bed.”

“Nothing better than that,” Bruce nodded. “Being in your own bed, surrounded by your own
stuff…”

“It will be nice, but with all luck we won’t be in Asgard for long after we return,” Loki admitted.
“Hopefully, I will be allowed to move freely again. And get the Allfather’s permission to go.”

“If you already have the right to move freely, why would you need his permission?” Bruce asked,
confused.

“As a member of the royal family, one cannot simply just take off anywhere,” Loki explained. “They
must have the express permission of the Allfather for any off-realm travel. And he can revoke that
permission whenever he sees fit.”
“It’s more protocol than anything,” Sigyn nodded. “He typically doesn’t refuse any of us the right to travel places. But then in cases, such as when Thor, Loki and the others went to Jotunheim that time, they were technically breaking multiple laws since the Allfather had not granted them permission to travel.”

“And, historically at least, members of the family aren’t technically punished for breaking this law,” Loki said, “though Thor and I both were in a way. It’s one of those rules that’s more about reminding people they must have complete and total obsequiance to the Allfather than it is about maintaining any particular type of law and order.”

“So, where do you think you’ll go once you can move around?” Steve asked.

“I have no doubt we’ll have to visit both Niðavellir and Vanaheim so Sigyn can prove to her relatives that she has come back from Midgard no worse for wear. And I have no doubt Odin will find a way to tie some sort of diplomatic errand he needs done into this visits. I’d also like to visit Alfheim for a time, both to catch up with Uncle Ve and for some research I’m conducting.”

“Naturally, that’s all contingent on the Allfather granting Loki the freedom to travel betwixt the realms again,” Sigyn said. “If he is not allowed to come with me, I’ve decided I’ll stay put and my family can come to me if they really want to make sure I’m alright.”

“Which I’m fine with as your father will most likely visit with your brothers, but your mother does so hate coming to Asgard,” Loki snorted before briefly explaining to Bruce: “Freyja prefers to be the highest ranking woman at any court she attends, so she’s barely ever at the royal one in Vanaheim because her sister-in-law…”

“My Aunt Gerðr,” Sigyn put in.

“Technically outranks her as the wife of the crown prince,” Loki said.

“Save when my uncle is gone, then Mother is the highest ranking as a princess of the blood,” Sigyn said.

“And Freyja loathes Asgard where she is not only outranked by my mother, her little cousin, who is Allmother but also by Sigyn who is my wife,” Loki smirked. “Freyja does so hate being outshone by her daughters. Reminds her she’s getting old.”

“It’s not entirely Mother’s fault,” Sigyn insisted. “She was terribly indulged as a child and no one ever bothered explaining to her that Freyr would inherit the throne until she was much older than she should have been. And it doesn’t help that Mother has always been, well…”

“An anal-retentive autocratic control freak?” Loki suggested.

“I was going to say ‘bossy,’” Sigyn replied.

“Oh,” Loki said, “I thought you were going to say ‘bitch.’”

“Loki,” Sigyn chastised.

“You’re always telling me I need to be more truthful,” Loki smirked, “and then you chastise me when I tell the truth.” Sigyn rolled her eyes, but smiled at her husband.

“What about you, Thor?” Steve asked as the thunder god came over to refresh his and Jane’s drinks. “Do you think things will smooth over with your dad when you go to Asgard?”
“No,” Thor said morosely. “It will take much more time before we can bury the battle axe.”

“The phrase on Earth is bury the hatchet,” Bruce corrected.

“What is a hatchet?” Thor asked, confused.

“Battle ax it is then,” Bruce shrugged.

“It’s an axe you use to chop wood,” Steve explained.

“Why would you bury such a useful axe instead of the axe you used as a weapon?” Thor asked, confused.

“This is why we need an Asgardian to English dictionary!” Tony called from across the room.

“But, whatever is between my father and me, the important thing is that Loki has his seiðr returned to him,” Thor said, putting a hand on his brother’s shoulder, “and that he and Sigyn can continue on with their lives as they should be.”

“Yes, well,” Loki said, choking on his drink. He was never very good at sentimentality with his brother.

“We do appreciate you agreeing to come with us,” Sigyn assured Thor. “I know you aren’t exactly keen to return to Asgard…”

“Well, I do have some things I need to do there anyway,” Thor shrugged. “I don’t plan on staying very long. Perhaps to pick up a few things…”

“And deal with whatever atrocities have occurred in your rooms since your departure,” Loki put in.

“And then I plan to be back here quickly enough,” Thor said. “Maybe I’ll even see if Sif or the Warriors Three wish to come with me. They have enjoyed their brief forays here.

“Just let Tony know ahead of time,” Steve smirked, “so he can get rooms ready for them. And pre-order all of the building supplies he’ll need to patch up the walls after they’ve used the training rooms.”

“There is a good reason why training in Asgard is done in open fields,” Thor shrugged. “That and because it’s hard to clean blood off of a ceiling.”

“Yes,” Loki grumbled, “I can’t wait to go back.”

With the party winding down, Loki found himself sitting in one of Stark’s overly plush armchairs with a somewhat-sugar-crashed Sigyn curled around him like a cat. All in all, Loki had to admit it wasn’t a bad farewell party. It hadn’t been too over the top, Thor had spent the entire evening moping, and it was drawing to a close with Sigyn cuddled up against him. Certainly, Loki wasn’t looking forward to going back to Asgard, but he would be remiss if he didn’t admit he would be glad to see his mother and his chambers. And catch up on some of the latest gossip. And maybe stock up
on some potion ingredients. And there was always time to peruse that out-of-the-way bookshop he and Sigyn liked to visit, the one that always smelled of old ink and wood smoke and always had a rare item or two in stock, often one that contained information on borderline illegal magics. Come to think of it, there were probably a few orders he had placed at a few shops around Asgard that were at best two years overdue for pick up. And then there would be the mail to go through…

“What are you thinking of, my love?” Sigyn asked him happily.

“My mental to-do list,” Loki admitted. “There is a package of bezoars I ordered before the entire…thing with Thor’s coronation. I rather hope it hasn’t exploded in a backroom somewhere since then…”

“All of your previous orders were delivered,” Sigyn sighed, “apparently, the news of your perceived death made any merchants you had outstanding debts toward decide they wanted to settle up accounts. Thankfully, your mother and Thor were gracious enough to handle them for me. I probably might have blasted a few of them out of the palace.”

“Good to know,” Loki said, “though I assume those bezoars have gone bad by now anyway.”

“Yes,” Sigyn smiled, “I donated them to the infirmary. Anything else you’ve forgotten to tell me until right this moment?”

“That I love you?” Loki said, testing to see if he was in trouble.

“I already knew that,” Sigyn laughed before kissing him. “I meant about anything else you may have secretly hidden or abandoned in Asgard.”

“Not that I can think of,” Loki said, “thought, there is a distinct possibility there is a prank or two I had planned long-term for Thor that hasn’t been activated yet. I probably should keep better track of my machinations.”

“I’ve already suggested you keep a journal,” Sigyn pointed out.

“Yes, but logging my indiscretions could be used as evidence against me,” Loki said, “and I haven’t found one of those secret ink recipes I trust yet. And naturally, if I ever do, the Allfather will just commandeer its use for state affairs. And writing on his arm which members of the Alfheim envoy are which so he won’t confuse them again.”

“Yes, well, who chooses to send identical twins as ambassadors for two different principalities that are perpetually at war with each other?” Sigyn snorted.

“Elves?” Loki suggested with a smirk. Sigyn rolled her eyes at him. “Personally, I think they do it on purpose. Elves live twice as long as Asgardians do, and I know how bored Asgardians can get after a few centuries. Elves must find something to entertain themselves, after all.”

“Is that your way of saying you’d rather we go to Alfheim initially before visiting my family?” Sigyn probed.

“I would love to go to Alfheim instead of visiting your family. In fact, I would go spend a few months on a barren rock rather than seeing your family - mainly because I am not exactly keen to experience the chewing out I am going to get from both of your parents,” Loki huffed. “I can’t imagine the fact that I dragged you here to Midgard to partake in my punishment will help the cause of endearing me to either of them. Not that I expected to become more endeared to either of them in the first place.”
“I can remind them it was my decision to accompany you,” Sigyn said. Loki snorted. “And if that doesn’t mollify them, I can remind them of how stubborn I am, and that you would have stood no chance against my attempts to join you.”

“That they might believe,” Loki admitted.

“To be fair, you know my parents’ treatment of you isn’t just about you, right?” Sigyn asked. “Mother and Father are just as mean to Bragi. Father wouldn’t like anyone who married one of his little girls. And Mother was annoyed that Idunn not only ran off with a man who turned out to be a poet but also a man Mother hadn’t personally approved. That’s why I thought your higher status would suffer the blow for her, but it turns out…”

“...that your mother is a control freak who wants to pick out partners for her daughters despite that her own arranged marriage is an ongoing, unmitigated disaster?” Loki scoffed. “Goddess of beauty. Goddess of hypocrisy is more like it…”

“And of course, your personal feelings toward her didn’t exactly help with the whole attempt at endearing you to my mother,” Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“Your mother would still despise me, even if all I did was compliment and flirt with her,” Loki snorted. “I could prostrate myself before her and she’d still hate me based on nothing more than the fact I am the son of her little cousin Frigga who was supposed to grow up and become another one of her simpering little handmaidens, begging for her attention and financial support. Then, instead, my mother had to go hitch her wagon to Odin’s. You know your mother still hates mine for daring to have a higher station in life. Putting Freyja in her place when she acts all uppity around Mother is probably the only thing old Odin is good for.”

“Perhaps I should go visit Folkvangr alone, send you ahead to the court at Nóatún,” Sigyn said thoughtfully. “That way you might get yourself into less trouble, and my mother will still get to see me. I’m sure you could arrange to have some fun with my cousins, and Grandfather always loves having you about.”

“He is one of the few people who seems to enjoy me stirring up trouble,” Loki admitted. “And your Uncle Freyr and Aunt Gerðr are easily the most tolerable members of your family, even if your cousins seem to think tipping people out of boats is a fun game.”

“It’s a game you enjoy if you’re the one not being tipped out,” Sigyn reminded him. “I’m sure we could find some official Asgardian reason why you shouldn’t come to Folkvangr, either. I’m sure it won’t be hard to convince the Allfather of that.”

“You are absolutely delightful when you are scheming, my dear,” Loki smirked, kissing the back of her hand.

“Alright,” Thor said, coming over to the pair of them, “the two of you have been alone for too long and, since both of you seem to be fully dressed, I can only assume you’re plotting something.”

“Nothing bad, I promise,” Sigyn vowed.

“It would be rather brash of us to start planning some new mischief when I haven’t exactly been excused from the punishment of my previous mischief,” Loki agreed.

“As if that has ever stopped you before,” Thor rolled his eyes.

“Is it time for us to go now?” Sigyn asked nervously.
“I’m afraid so,” Thor sighed, “but I’m sure the worst of it will be over soon.”

Thor and Steve carried the luggage toward the Iron Man launch pad where the Bifrost was set to appear, Thor his own carefully packed luggage and Steve the heavy-looking trunk of Sigyn and Loki’s that still felt light as a feather when carried. Hill and Coulson had opted to stay inside, letting the others wish their fond farewells to Loki, Sigyn, and Thor in a more private setting. Coulson, of course, had already said his goodbyes earlier on and Hill had not-so-subtly let Loki know what he could expect if he tried to take over the planet again after regaining his magic. Loki mainly found her threats endearing.

“It’s been good to get to know you,” Steve said, shaking Loki’s hand. “And you’re a good guy. You and the wife take care of each other.”

“Of course,” Loki nodded.

“Hope everything works out,” Clint said, “and try not to get yourself rebanished within five minutes of returning home.”

“I won’t make any promises,” Loki shrugged as Clint clapped him on the shoulders.

“Just know if you do get rebanished Fury will probably put you on the official on-duty list for good,” Natasha pointed out.

“Dually noted,” Loki nodded.

“Be safe,” Bruce said, giving Loki a slight hug, “and thanks for all the tea bags.”

“I hope you will enjoy them,” Sigyn smiled, giving Bruce a hug.

“Hope it goes well,” Darcy said.

“And please try to keep Thor out of trouble,” Jane said to Loki.

“You do realize who you’re talking to?” Loki snorted.

“It never hurts to try,” Jane shrugged before she and Darcy both hugged Sigyn. “Thanks for all your help.”

“I really didn’t do anything,” Sigyn shook her head. “But next time we meet you will have to tell me how it all has progressed.”

“We’ll miss you,” Darcy said.

“Have fun showing Asgard all your new card tricks,” Rhodey said.

“They might even be impressed by some of them,” Loki smirked.

“Let us know how everything goes,” Pepper said, hugging Sigyn tightly.

“But please not with some bird that does watermelon-sized poops,” Tony begged.

“Better yet, we’ll pin any letters to Thor’s armor,” Loki suggested. “That way, there’s only a fifty percent chance they will get lost in transit.”

“It was fun having you around, Reindeer Games,” Tony said to Loki. “And if you and the Missus ever need a place to crash, you know where to find me.”
“Yes, well, that also depends on if Thor can separate his mouth from Jane’s long enough for us to leave in the first place,” Loki snorted, nodding in the direction of where Thor and Jane were currently wrapped up in each other.


“We’ll take care of her after you leave,” Pepper said of Jane, knowing Sigyn would be concerned.

Sigyn gave her a soft smile as Thor stopped kissing Jane but held onto her as he bade farewell to the rest of his companions. He and Jane gave each other one last kiss before Darcy helped take her out of the area where the Bifrost would ultimately show up. As the others backed away to allow Heimdall to have plenty of room for his work, Thor, Sigyn, and Loki gathered closely around their luggage and waved goodbye to their friends. Before they knew it, the three were hurling upward through the familiar sensation of the Bifrost where Asgard awaited.
The Realm Eternal - in all its eternalness - hadn’t changed a bit since Loki had last laid eyes on it a year ago. Then again, not much in Asgard ever seemed to change on the surface. He had barely put himself to rights after coming through the Bifrost when a swarm of well wishers pushed themselves into his periphery. The Warriors Three and Lady Sif had come to greet Thor, knowing well he would be saddened after having to say farewell to Jane, while Sigyn’s sisters had all come to greet her. Idunn was fresh from the garden in her gardening apron with pruning gloves in the pocket while Nanna was in her healers uniform. Idis would be at her lessons at this time of day, so she was not there by Syn and Snotra immediately began bombarding Sigyn with questions about Midgard similar to the one’s Idis would have asked while Var stood unhappily off to the side. Amid the fray, Loki heard Heimdall’s voice behind him.

“You have developed a newfound appreciation for Midgard as well,” Heimdall said to Loki.

“Yes,” Loki admitted, not wanting to show that Heimdall’s all-seeingness always managed to unnerve him a bit. “Funny, isn’t it, that Thor and I have gained admiration for the realm at the same time Odin seems to have lost all memory of his own.” If Heimdall had any borderline treasonous thoughts about the Allfather’s stance toward Midgard he kept them to himself and only gave Loki a knowing smile. Loki decided not to point this out. “I always find it strange how little Asgard seems to change, no matter how long I’ve been away.

“It is the Realm Eternal,” Heimdall smirked. “Strange, is it not, how a place that isn’t where you are from can easily become your home.” Loki knew Heimdall knew of his own inner battle over where his home actually was. Loki hardly expected to ever be welcomed with open arms in Jotunheim, yet Asgard had never completely. But if Heimdall could keep secrets, Loki decided he could as well.

“I sometimes forget that you aren’t Asgardian,” Loki mentioned to Heimdall. “Is it very hard that your posting here prevents you from going back to Vanaheim?”

“No,” Heimdall admitted. “I came to Asgard because I felt there was nothing left for me in Vanaheim. Besides, I do check in on the place from time to time.”

“Of course,” Loki snorted.

“Well, well, well, as I live and breathe,” Volstagg said, sidling up to Loki. “You look a lot better than the last time you came back from Midgard.”

“I feel much better than I did the last time I came back from Midgard,” Loki admitted.

“Good to hear,” Volstagg said, putting a comforting arm on Loki’s shoulders. “The missus looks good as well. I’m sure she has a horde of new Midgardian friends and admirers.”
“Naturally,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Loki does as well,” Thor mentioned.

“I’m not surprised,” Fandral snorted. “Loki and Sigyn could charm the spots off a goat if they put their minds to it.”

“You’re one to talk,” Loki snorted. “How many fights with cuckolded lovers have Volstagg and Hogunn had to break up for you since I left? Any less than a dozen and I’d think you’d grow lazy.”

“If they were wise they might let him get pulverized a time or two,” Sif snorted. “Maybe then he’d learn his lesson.”

“Hello, Sif,” Loki said. “Sigyn is back in one piece, but I’m sure you’ll check her over yourself as you can’t take my word at anything.”

“I think her sisters have already done that well enough,” Sif shrugged. “Besides, she tends to get on to me if I’m too harsh with you. It’s almost as if she enjoys your company.”

“Sif!” Sigyn squealed before rushing forward and embracing her friend. “I have so much to tell you!”

“And I you!” Sif laughed.

“You know,” Idunn said to Loki, “I suppose I should be rather cross with you with all of the treats you sneaked Idis from Midgard.”

“They were the least I could do after all the clever and creative cards she sent us,” Loki shrugged. “And it would be a terrible blow to my reputation if I didn’t keep up some kind of rascality, even when in exile.”

“You best be glad Bragi took some of those chocolates as well,” Idunn said. “Otherwise, I might be more cross with you.”

“Hasn’t he written some of his soulful lyrics to win back your favor yet?” Loki asked with a raised brow. Idunn rolled her eyes but smiled in spite of herself.

“I will say that Idis has performed admirably in her lessons and kept her room rather clean since your departure,” Idunn said. “If I had known the prospect of her Aunt Sigyn and Uncle Loki bringing her a present from Midgard in exchange for good behavior would actually work, I might have employed it more often.”

“She’s much smarter than Thor or I,” Loki said. “Even the promise of entertaining goods from throughout the realms never stopped us from nearly burning down the palace or flooding the throne room.”

“We’ve got so many questions about Midgard,” Syn butted in.

“You and Sigyn are going to have to tell us everything,” Snotra agreed.

“In due time,” Idunn cautioned her younger sisters. “I think there is a more pressing appointment with the Allfather that must first be attended to.”

“Right you are Idunn,” Thor agreed. “I suppose we should make our way to our audience before we tell any more of our travels.”
“It appears our escort awaits,” Loki gestured to his brother. Thor spied the contingent of rjóðrhaukar, the Red Hawk guard specially assigned to protect and do battle with the crown prince of Asgard, as well as a contingent of einherjar.

“Apparently, Father wishes this to be a formal occasion,” Thor huffed.

“Well, lead on, fearless brother,” Loki gestured to Thor, “and make sure to order them to not stick any spears in my back this time.”

Loki had nearly forgotten how ostentatious the main throne room of the palace was in his absence. Nearly.

There were some hard things to forget about the throne room, such as how everything was covered in gold and the looming statues of Buri and Bor that stood like twin pillars toward the entrance. The plan was that each of Asgard’s rulers would have their statue put in succession. One day, Odin’s would stand next to his father and probably Thor’s next to that one when the time came. After making himself king, Buri had put his face everywhere he could in the kingdom, and then upon his own ascension, Bor had tried to one-up his father but putting his face everywhere else. Odin had also remodeled much of the palace and some of the surrounding city in his own image. Loki thought idly that by the time Thor ever came to the throne there would be nowhere left for his visage to appear, if Thor kept up the family tradition of vanity via architecture.

Any pictures and statues of Loki would probably be relegated to the seldom used, barely dusted gallery that held all the images of Odin’s younger brother and Princess Valdís, King Bor’s elder sister. Deep down, Loki always knew he would probably be relegated to the gallery for lesser and embarrassing members of the royal family. Now, Loki just hoped that his portrait wasn’t put anywhere near the creepy one of Great-Aunt Valdís whose eyes seemed to follow you about the room. As children, Thor had convinced him that Great-Aunt Valdís was actually trapped inside the painting and her eyes were actually following you around, hoping someone would realize the truth and break her curse. Which had made Loki really terrified when Great-Aunt Valdís came for a visit about a year later. It had taken all of the motherly tricks in Frigga’s arsenal to convince Loki that the woman before him was in fact his great aunt and not some wizened old crone who had cursed her and taken her place.

Sigyn’s hand slipped into his as they continued their walk toward the throne, surrounded by a retinue of guards, Sigyn’s sisters, and Thor’s friends. While Loki was about ninety percent sure the Allfather wasn’t luring them into a trap where he would suddenly renege his offer of returning Loki’s seiðr and general freedom and then summarily order either Loki’s execution or eternal imprisonment, it was still comforting to know he had Sigyn by his side. Of course, Loki had a feeling his wife’s sudden desire to hang onto him was more about her personal fears than providing him with assurance, but he wasn’t about to let Sigyn think for an instant he held any fear in his heart. That would only give her more fear of her own.

He could now see Frigga and Odin on their thrones. Frigga was grinning brightly, dressed in one of her favorite yellow dresses and radiating general happiness that all of her family were once again under the same roof. Odin, naturally, was every as bit subdued as Frigga appeared ecstatic. Poised on
his throne in full regalia, Gungnir gripped firmly in his hands, Odin always seemed to have the same stoic expression whether he was dealing with two farmers arguing over possession of a sheep or his two sons returned from months of absence. At one point in his life, Loki had admired Odin’s ability to stay regal and emotionless in all situations, but now he was beginning to wonder if perhaps a good leader ought to show at least some emotion, especially when ruling on things that others seemed to be rather emotionally invested in.

“Thor,” Odin said, addressing his eldest first as always, “we will speak of matters later.”

“If these ‘matters’ involve my relationship with the Lady Jane and my desire to return to Midgard as one of its protectors, my mind has not and will not be changed,” Thor informed his father. “In this, I am resolute.” Loki wasn’t sure what impressed him more: the fact that Thor had so openly defied the Allfather or that he had used the word “resolute” correctly in a sentence.

“Be that as it may,” Odin gruffed, “we still must speak. Now, as to the greater matter of my secondborn…” Loki was taken aback by the fact that Odin was still publicly acknowledging him as his son. Of course, Loki couldn’t let himself be thrown off for more than a moment and executed a perfectly flourished bow before the throne.

“Allfather,” Loki gestured.

“I have received glowing reports of your behavior on Midgard from all who have seen you there,” Odin said. “I know you have learned a great deal from your time there, and you have exhibited a great compassion and understanding for others, particularly those with which it would seem you have nothing in common. You have shown that you know how to use your unique abilities for the betterment of others, even those to whom you owe no debts.”

“And for this, we are very proud of you,” Frigga interjected.

“Yes,” Odin said, seeming to struggle a bit with the admission.

“You have behaved admirably and just as a true prince of Asgard should,” Frigga praised before glancing at her husband, prompting him to say something.

“The Allmother is correct,” Odin agreed. “You have represented Asgard, the royal family, and yourself well in your time on Midgard.”

“I…” Loki said, searching for one of the sarcastic remarks he would usually inject at this juncture. “... thank you…” Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sigyn positively beaming beside him.

“I admit that putting your life on the chopping block when others who have behaved similarly to you were not under such threat was perhaps not the best method of handling your situation,” Odin sighed. Loki did his best to try and not look smug at this admission of a mistake while Frigga seemed to openly beam that her husband was at least somewhat apologizing for something. “I suppose it is in a parents’ nature to sometimes respond to extreme behavior with extreme consequences. I may have failed to realize that children are sometimes like young colts in that they will respond to the yanking of their reigns by pulling against them harder. My own father tried the same tactic with me. I should have learned then it would not work.”

“Yes, well,” Loki said, clearing his throat and not sure how to react to some genuine-in-public admissions of fault from Odin.

“But that is not why we are here today,” Odin said, finally standing up from his throne. I wish it to be known across the realms that Loki Odinson has fulfilled the terms of his sentence.” Loki coughed
a bit, still not entirely sure how he felt about Odin still insisting on being his father. “As these terms have been met, he shall be restored to his full powers and titles. Henceforth, let none among us say that Loki Odinson has not atoned for his past.” From Gungnir rippled the sparkly green essence of Loki’s seiðr back into his body. Loki let out a sigh, feeling complete for the first time in a while.

“Thank you, Allfather,” Loki said quietly.

“I am due no thanks. Your accomplishments are yours alone,” Odin replied to his son before returning to his full volume to address the court. “I also wish it to be known of our pride in the accomplishments of Princess Sigyn during her tenure in Midgard. Like her husband, she has proven a good and worthy ambassador of our realm and used her gifts and knowledge to benefit others. Her sense of loyalty to her husband during his time of crisis can also be seen as a lesson to us all.”

“Thank you, Allfather,” Sigyn said, blushing as she curtseyed. Loki took Sigyn’s hand into his own and kissed it as she rose from the ground.

“Being reunited with our family is a great time of joy and therefore should be celebrated accordingly,” Odin announced. “Tonight, we shall have a feast celebrating the return of my sons and daughter-in-law.” The crowd let out the general whoops associated with the proclamation of a royal feast. Sigyn happily leaned into her husband.

“A feast in your honor,” Sigyn grinned to him.

“Yours as well,” Loki smiled back.

Odin adjourned the court and then motioned for the members of his family to follow him into the more private antechamber so they may speak alone. Sif and the Warriors Three gave Thor and Loki hopeful glances while Sigyn’s sisters gave her kisses and hugs before returning to what duties they had to complete before the evening feast. Loki himself couldn’t help but notice the odd twist of fate as he walked with Sigyn into the smaller throne room used as a more private audience chamber, typically for family matters when Odin still wanted to keep the impression that he was in charge of things. Usually Loki was the one with a sour expression trying to figure out his punishment while Thor walked into the room jovially as if all would be right. This time, Loki couldn’t help but feel optimistic about what the Allfather wanted while Thor looked very thunderous indeed.

“I hope we can get this over with quickly.” Thor grumbled. “I wanted to be back this afternoon. Now there is to be a feast?”

“You love feasts. And when was the last time you had an entire stag leg to eat yourself?” Loki pointed out. Thor grimaced at him. “At least make an appearance for Mother’s sake. She will worry…”

“Why are the words I normally say coming out of your mouth?” Thor said, finally letting out a hint of a smile.

“I know,” Loki grimaced himself, “it feel strange hearing them said in my voice.”

“Come along boys,” Frigga called her sons.

“Well,” Thor sighed, “into the breach.”
Sometimes it was hard to tell what was worse: being forced to have an audience with Odin where everyone in the Asgardian court could see though Odin held his tongue in their presence or having a private audience where no one else knew what was going on and Odin could talk freely. His concerns about what Odin wanted to say to them in private were only muted by the fact that Odin and Thor were obviously in a tiff, which would probably take the focus of the meeting. All the classic signs were there. Neither man was looking each other in the eye, both had a grimace on their face whenever they happened to glance upon the other, Odin was holding tightly to Gungnir while Thor was resting his hand on his hammer, and Frigga was glancing between the two in a mixture of concern and a desire to just through in the towel. It was funny how similarly the two men tended to behave, but as Frigga often said, Odin and Thor were cut from the same cloth and therefore could easily rub each other the wrong way.

As always, it was Frigga who did her best to diffuse the situation. She motioned for Odin to sit on his smaller throne and then, to make it to where Odin wasn’t staring down from his throne like a king over his sons, magically waved in a table and chairs for the rest of them to sit. A small little collection of nibbles and drink then appeared on the table with Frigga passing the plates around to make sure everyone got something to eat. Odin and Thor both waved the food off while Sigyn and Frigga chatted happily about some of the Asgardian dishes she had missed and how fun it had been to cook on Midgard. Loki filled his plate up with food. No doubt watching whatever tiff was about to boil over between Odin and Thor would be entertaining. But instead of addressing the obvious tension in the room with Thor, Odin turned to Loki instead.

“Well, Loki, now that you have returned to Asgard, what are your next steps?” Odin asked.

“Oh, I do hope you will stay a while,” Frigga said, placing her hand on her son’s arm.

“We will,” Loki said. “After all, there is much we have to catch up on.”

“Then afterwards?” Odin prompted.

“We are planning to take some time to visit with Sigyn’s family,” Loki said, “first in Niðavellir and then in Vanaheim.”

“I had thought I could go to Folkvangr while Loki could head on to my grandfather’s court,” Sigyn suggested.

“Yes, that would probably be best,” Odin agreed. “Freyja has been in one of her moods again. Well, she's been in one of her moods ever since I’ve known her…”

“Odin,” Frigga cautioned.

“It’s the truth,” Odin shrugged before turning back to his son. “I’m sure I can cough up some kind of diplomatic excuse to help you avoid Folkvangr. I hear your cousin Yngvi is getting close to his graduation and the chancery is working on some project. Perhaps Loki could be sent there as a consultant.”

“Oh, they do love him there,” Frigga smiled.

“I’m sure only because you were their greatest pupil,” Loki replied to his mother with a grin.

“I have missed your flattery,” Frigga laughed.
“It isn’t flattery if it’s true,” Loki replied.

“I think some traveling would be good for you and Sigyn both,” Odin said. “I must admit, I don’t think I have been putting your skills to their full and best usage, and perhaps my unwillingness to let you showcase your talents is why you have often manifested this talents in… other ways…”

“You mean troublesome ways,” Loki corrected.

“Yes, perhaps,” Odin acquiesced. “In your absence, your mother has helped me see how not encouraging you to use your gifts to their full, proper potential may have been harmful to all of us. In truth, I suppose a part of me has held both you and Thor back because it is easier to protect ones children when they have a limited range. But you cannot keep things chained and expect them to flourish.”

“I’m sure hiding my true identity fits somewhere into that as well,” Loki huffed. Odin let out a long sigh and briefly massaged his temples.

“I thought, in my foolishness, what I was doing was right because it was protecting you,” Odin said.

“And so you told me all of those terrible stories about how evil and nasty frost giants are to protect me?” Loki said.

“Your skill with seiðr was advancing rapidly and I feared it would only be a short time before you drew on that natural ability,” Odin admitted. “And in my arrogance and fear, I thought that if I made you fear such things it would prevent you from accessing them. I also convinced your mother this would be the best course of action. What if you had accidentally revealed your true form in a place where we couldn’t protect you? Among people who would hurt you? And then, once we were made fully aware - beyond a doubt - that you were Laufey’s son there was renewed fear… that he might come for you and…”

“…and kill me,” Loki surmised.

“You were found in the temple,” Odin said. “It is a Jotnar custom that children who are seen as inferior are taken into the mountains and exposed, left to die. But the royal family and those in great power do not wish others to know they have born inferior children. It is a sign of weakness, a sign that they can be overpowered. So they often have them spirited away to the temples for others to do their dirty work. And how could I leave a helpless child to die?”

“As you slaughtered his people?” Loki pointed out.

“Not children. Not innocents. Not anyone who did not raise a weapon in kind,” Odin shook his head. “Besides, it seemed like the Nornir themselves had planned it. I had a wife who had lost a child and here was a child that had no parents. And a very talented one who was already able to shapeshift at a few hours old. It was like you were Frigga’s son already. And well… you were…”

“What your father is trying to say is that you were an adorable baby,” Frigga said. “Cheerful and sweet. Hardly ever cried. Now, Thor could throw temper tantrums that could shake Yggdrasil, but you Loki were always my sweet boy.”

“Funny how much that’s changed,” Thor smirked. Loki kicked him under the table and Frigga rolled her eyes.

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questions that befuddled me, pose questions I had never thought of. My mother was probably the only one who truly had you pegged. Even though you were so young, she told me that it would be no use keeping secrets from you. That you would find them out anyway.”

“Allmother Bestla always had a good sense of people,” Frigga sighed fondly.

“Well, I suppose we should give you both some time to unpack and rest before the festivities tonight,” Odin said, standing up from the table.

“Wait,” Thor said, standing up angrily. “I thought we were going to talk about Jane and…”

“We can address those things tomorrow,” Odin said, waving Thor off.

“But…” Thor began.

“We are welcoming Loki and Sigyn home this evening and the end of his sentence,” Odin said. “I think it would best to leave matters that might seem unpleasant until afterwards. No need in casting a cloud over the festivities. Now, I believe I have some troops to inspect. Frigga, my love, I will see you for luncheon.” Odin made a speedy retreat out of the room, leaving Thor flabbergasted and angry.

“I think that’s the first time in my entire life that he’s used me as an excuse to get out of talking with Thor,” Loki said to no one in particular. “Oh, it’s been the other way around several times…”

“Mother, is he under some kind of enchantment?” Thor asked, not sure what to make of the recent turn of events.

“In a manner of speaking,” Frigga shrugged. “I may have threatened severe punishment as well as my own withdrawal to Vanaheim for the foreseeable future if he didn’t allow at least one day and night to pass without a fight with either of his sons. After all, Thor, we do want to celebrate the end of Loki’s sentence properly, without any family fights. I’m sure you can set aside your issues with your Father for one evening so we can have a nice family event. For Loki. And for me.”

“Alright, Mother,” Thor sighed, bending down and kissing her cheek. He moved to walk away but Frigga quickly wrapped her arm around his.

“Now,” Frigga said, “you are going to escort me to your rooms where I will show you the damage caused by your recent lack of care for your chambers and together, we will devise a plan to ensure your quarters stay clean in the future.”

“Yes, Mother,” Thor sighed as they exited the room.

“Well, what do you make of that?” Sigyn asked her husband once they were the only two left in the room.

“I would agree with Thor’s assessment that Odin is bewitched,” Loki admitted, “save for one thing. I am the only person who would even attempt to enchant him to be so kind to me, and I know I have not placed any such spell on him.”

“Loki,” Sigyn sighed, “perhaps he is trying to change his ways. After all, he’s had to live without both of his sons for several months and the threat of having to live without your mother as well would definitely break him.

“I suppose,” Loki shrugged.
“Come, husband,” Sigyn laughed. “We have unpacking to do.”

Upon returning to their rooms, Loki decided his first exercise of his newly restored seiðr should be unpacking the trunk, which allowed Sigyn to take Fen out into their little garden area and play a rousing game of fetch with him. By the time Loki had finished the unpacking, inspected the rooms, and done a few bits of housekeeping work, Sigyn had thoroughly exhausted Fenrir who then took to lazing on his pillow in the parlor chamber. Their rooms set to rights and having a few hours to themselves until their required appearance that evening, Loki then decided to do what he did best and proceeded to seduce his wife on every possible surface of their shared chambers. After all, it had been a while since they had a chance to fully utilize their chambers in such a way.

Now, spent and surrounded in silken sheets with Fen snoring slightly in the foreroom and Sigyn naked and cuddled up to his side, occasionally emitting snores of her own, Loki finally felt at peace for the first time in a long while. He knew there were still some in Asgard who hadn’t forgiven him for what he had done, who might never forgive him for what he had done. And he knew that there were some issues with Odin that would need to be worked out, perhaps some that never would work out. But now that he had set foot back on Asgard, both his return and his experience in Midgard had taught Loki some lessons he hadn’t imagined before and now, there were certain things he was more sure of than ever.

He knew that, as loathe as he still was to admit it sometimes, that Asgard was his home and there were those who work hard to ensure that he felt welcome there. And he knew he had a family in Sigyn, Frigga, Thor and even Odin - though the acceptance of Odin has part of his family came with the knowledge that family members didn’t always get along or even have like each other but still felt a bond of love that surpassed their differences. It was enough to make him feel more stable. Loki found himself, for the first time in a while, looking forward to whatever adventures next awaited him and life. And he knew, no matter what they were, he would have the woman currently at his side to share them with.

Chapter End Notes

That’s it for this story, though I have had an idea or two for a sequel floating around in my head. I’ve also had some other ideas, but for now I’m going to take a bit of a break and a breather before launching into anything full time. Thank you so much to all of you who have enjoyed reading this story as much as I have enjoyed writing it and coming along with me on this journey.

End Notes

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