**Loki of Nowhere**

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**Summary**

Loki dies on Svartalfheim. Then he wakes up. It does not take long before Hela seizes the opportunity to offer Loki a deal: end Thanos's life in exchange for his own. Loki knows defeating Thanos will be no easy feat and so a conversation with the Norns becomes part of the bargain.

The Norns tell him three things:
1. His only path to success lies in utilising the Infinity Stones
2. The Infinity Stone contained within the Tesseract – the only stone he will ever wield – will not be enough on its own
3. The name of a potential ally who has the highest capacity to both wield another one of the Infinity Stones and collaborate alongside him

And that name... That name is Tony Stark.

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Alternatively, the one where Loki and Tony try to build a time machine.

Notes

I started writing this in the summer of 2016 so it will be canon divergent from the current MCU regarding all the films that have come out in between that time and now, although occasional bits of newer canon material might be referenced/included. Many liberties have also been taken with the incorporation of bits of Norse mythology here and there and worldbuilding and so on.

If you'd enjoyed reading this then please don't hesitate to leave comments! I'd love to hear from you regardless of how much time has passed between when this was last updated and the present and feedback does wonders for my motivation to write not only this fic but also stories in future.

The rating is probably borderline T/M and I wasn't kidding when I tagged this as a slow burn. Other than that I think I've covered everything and hope you enjoy the story!
Loki opened his eyes and there was colour.

He hadn't expected to see colour but then again, he hadn't expected to have been able to open his eyes.

His chest held the evidence of the wound Kurse had inflicted, a hole that had been skewered straight through his sternum – and it had pierced straight through; Loki could recall the sick feeling of the blade breaking the skin on the other side and the sensation of the air on his exposed flesh before the pain had started.

It was a morbid thought that if he was to reach into the wound with a finger, he might have been able to poke through to the other side. Idly, Loki wondered how much it would hurt.

The wound was numb, he couldn’t feel anything from it – no pain, no discomfort, nothing to indicate that anything was out of the ordinary, nothing except... Where was he?

This was not Svartalfheim. Svartalfheim did not have grass or trees or a sky so clear it looked like a void filled with nothing but a filter of soft blue light. Was this some meadow on Asgard he did not know of? Perhaps Midgard? Somebody must have moved him while he did not have the capacity to be aware of it. Loki had been so absolutely certain that he had been about to die. See you in Hel, monster, he had vowed.

Ah, Loki thought. So that was it then: he was dead.

Thankfully there was no sign of Kurse but if this was Hel then it was more pleasant than he had been expecting – picturesque even.

Loki was sat on a path that ran between the two forests, a trail in the grass worn down by trampling footsteps rather than a path that was there by design. There was a rustle in the leaves somewhere behind him and when he turned he saw a cobbled road that stretched into the distance. And there, at the end of the road, was what had to be the largest hall Loki had ever laid eyes upon. Its golden walls did not gleam in the same way as the royal halls of Asgard – where Asgard’s walls were built to demonstrate power and might, these walls radiated invitation and warmth.

Perhaps this wasn’t Hel then. Hel’s reputation was not one that was known for its hospitality. And if by some mistake of the gods this was Folkvangr, then where were the warriors that reigned over the field?

Loki eyed the golden building some more. There were no figures entering or leaving, only two large inviting doors at the centre of the hall.

Loki brought himself to his feet. If he was able to discern who the owner of the hall was then he stood a chance of being able to deduce where exactly this place was. But he had to remain cautious. He had no desire to be outnumbered or attacked or captured or--

Loki almost laughed. He was dead, that much he knew for certain. So what did it matter? He could not feel pain and the worst that could have happened already had.
After supposing that he had nothing left to lose, Loki walked towards the hall with as much dignity a man with a gaping hole in his chest could.

The doors opened before he could touch them and there, with a smile on her face despite her wet eyes, was Frigga.

Loki didn't know who moved first, himself or his mother, but it did not matter. Their arms were wrapped around each other and Loki could feel her, how solid and whole she was, and how she had rushed to embrace him despite his last words to her.

“Mother…”

"My son." The sound of her voice made Loki squeeze his eyes shut: he had not thought he would hear her speak again. "Oh, Loki…” Frigga sighed. “I had not thought to see you for thousands of years yet.”

“It would seem that I have a talent for disappointing you.”

Frigga moved her arms from his neck to his shoulders, and she gently pushed him back to look him in the eye. “Do not say such things. I am prouder of you than I have ever been, I merely wish that your life had not been cut short. Please do not mistake me wanting you to have lived a full life for not being happy to see you.”

"And I am happy to see you," Loki said, "in spite of it all."

"Oh, Loki," Frigga sighed again and wrapped her arms around him for the second time.

"Mother?" Loki asked with hesitancy in his voice once Frigga had lessened her hold.

"Yes?"

"Where are we?"

“I don’t doubt you possess the intelligence to figure it out for yourself, my son. But if you find yourself failing, you may hold your self-regard as responsible for that.”

Loki floundered, not having expected a riddle of sorts.

“Or try thinking about it differently, Loki. Rather than asking in which realm your soul would rest, try the question of where my soul would come to rest.”

"Valhalla?" Loki blurted out. He let out a quiet scoff. “You being in Valhalla I can believe. But myself? That's not possible, I--"

"Listen to me and listen very carefully," Frigga said sternly and Loki obeyed, stilling and closing his mouth. "You died in battle. You died a noble death, sacrificing yourself for another and slaying a terrible monster as you did so."

"Tricks," Loki muttered.

"Tricks or not, the fact remains that you still did it. Whether or not you consider yourself to be a warrior does not matter – you died a warrior’s death. All those souls who have died a warrior’s death are eligible for Valhalla and you, my dear boy, deserve to be here just as much as anybody else."

"Perhaps I might have died in what can be loosely interpreted as a warrior’s death. But Odin selects
by hand which souls pass to where–"

"You do not think that your father would grant you eternity in Valhalla?"

"The man you call my father would sentenced me to die if he had his way."

Frigga took his hands in hers. "I know he claimed he would. It is my belief that he wished you to feel the weight of your actions with as much impact as possible. He appeared to be under the impression that his way would cause you to wish to redeem yourself in his eyes more so than if he expressed disapproval. Then there was the matter of Asgard’s citizens needing to believe their king would deliver fair sentences to all, regardless of his personal relationship to them. If he did not deliver the death sentence – as would permit an unwarranted invasion and treason – then being more lenient for the sake of his wife is far more sympathetic than for the sake of himself in the eyes of the people."

“There’s never only one reason for anything he does,” Loki muttered.

"I don’t believe he would have been able to carry out the sentence, although he most likely overestimated his self-control regarding that aspect." She frowned. "Sometimes your father's judgement can be incredibly misguided and the man is far too stubborn for his own good. You're both similar in that matter."

"Are we not going to acknowledge the great incongruence between his punishment for my actions and his punishment for Thor's actions?" Loki snapped and dropped her hands. A moment passed and then he lifted his lips apologetically. "I must be a terrible son to only have been so recently reunited with you before baiting you into an argument."

"Nonsense," Frigga said. "Hearing you call me mother has been one of the greatest gifts I have received. But I cannot hold it against you that even while dead it seems we still have unresolved family issues." Her smile was not a happy one. "Although I question your priorities," she went on to tease, "as it was only a few moments past that your former life ended and yet you are equally as fixated on criticising your father’s decisions."

“How odd,” Loki said, “it’s almost as if my death has not altered the decisions he has made.”

Frigga ignored the sarcasm. "You seem remarkably calm about that, my son."

"I thought that I’d die after I fell from the Bifrost and I have thought that I would surely die countless times since. The fear caused by the anticipation of death made dying rather anticlimactic in the end."

"And are you satisfied?"

Loki avoided her gaze. "What does it matter?"

"It matters to you, therefore it matters to me. Are you satisfied with how you died?"

Loki paused before answering. "I would have preferred not to have met my end by such a witless beast."

"You know that your half-answers do not escape my notice."

Loki let out a huff of air.

"I do not regret it."
"Then I am glad to hear it. It was an incredibly selfless thing to do – not that you'd admit it. Have I mentioned that I'm proud of you? Your father is too, you know. He has granted you a place in Valhalla, after all."

"Then he must be willing to offer Valhalla to anyone foolish enough to die for his son."

"Might I remind you that Thor is not his only son. And I have sound reason to suspect that even if you did not die for Thor's sake, your father would not have abandoned your soul."

Loki shook his head. "Duty always defeated sentiment to him."

"I need you to know something," Frigga said, her voice becoming more urgent. "I need you to know that despite all the people who thought there'd be no redeeming you, that imprisoning someone who can't be reformed would be futile, they were wrong. I knew there was still good in you. I wanted you to have a chance to prove that to everyone who ever doubted it and to yourself. And you did. Only," she said, her voice wavering slightly, "you ended up having to die to prove it." Frigga cupped his face. "Despite your intelligence and insightfulness, you can be incredibly dense at times. How could you believe that your blood would not make you family? How could you believe that your actions could erase our love for you? Your father and I may not love some of your actions but never doubt that they could remove our love for you."

Loki temporarily lost the ability to conjure words.

"Speaking of your actions, my dear boy, I think it's past time that we had a long talk about them. Without any interruptions this time. Shall we take a seat?"

Frigga motioned him inside and beckoned him inside the hall, towards one of many hundreds of tables that occupied a room so large he could see where it ended. None of the warriors drinking or feasting appeared to take much notice of them as they took their seats in a secluded corner by a window, and the rumble of their talk and laughter allowed them privacy.

Frigga sat and waited patiently and Loki was powerless to refuse her.

"I..." Loki's voice was dry. "I don't know what you want from me."

"I want you to tell me the whole tale in your own time. I only know fragments of it, bits here and there and extracts from what we discussed in your cell, but my understanding is incomplete. I want to know and understand why you did such terrible things, Loki. I need to know what happened to you."

Loki clenched his hands together tightly.

"There's no rush," she pacified, "we have the whole of eternity. I will try not to interrupt you."

"I... I don't know where to begin."

"May I suggest that you start with why you let go?"

Loki grasped for a drink.

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Loki talked in sporadic clusters. He spent more time staring at his hands than he did talking and when he did talk, his throat would seize up and he could only choke out a few words at a time; at other times long strings of sentences gushed out of him like a dam broken free. Occasionally he
found himself snarling out in anger or fingers tightening around the handles of his mug, but Frigga kept true to her promise. He had barely gotten started – there was still so much left to tell – when, for the briefest of moments, Frigga appeared distracted for the first time since he started speaking and it threw him off course.

"That's odd," Frigga said, frowning at the window behind him. "That doesn't happen here."

Outside, the grasses and flowers had begun to rapidly wither and dry and a greyness was sweeping over the ground like a slow-moving wind. It was only when a figure appeared over the horizon line that Loki was moved from unconcerned to intrigued.

The figure was one of a woman, a woman bearing Loki’s colours and a helmet like deer antlers that cast strange shadows in front of her as she walked closer. She was tall and imposing and held herself as if she had an army at her back rather than standing alone.

Frigga had not been the only warrior to have noticed her presence, and those that recognised the figure turned rigid in their seats. Loki thought it strange to see the fabled warriors forget their weaponry and battle rage and instead act with something unnervingly akin to fear. Just as Loki was pausing to consider the implications of exactly who the figure could possibly be, there was a loud knock at the door.

The sound of laughter and merriment was replaced by a thick silence.

Nobody answered the door but most of the warriors were on their feet, as if unsure of whether to hide or attack.

There was another knock, followed by the sound of an exasperated voice: “I do hope that you do not think to fool me into believing the halls of Valhalla are currently vacant,” she said. “If you mighty warriors need consoling then fine, I shall give you my word that you need not fear.” Her voice rang clearly through the hall despite her being outside. “I am not seeking entrance nor am I attempting to siege you.” She sounded amused at the idea. “I only wish to speak to one of you.”

There was another silence and then one of the Vanir warriors called out, her voice wavering. “Which one?”

“Loki.”

Loki tensed and Frigga lay a hand on his shoulder.

“I’ve been reliably informed that you do have a Loki among you,” the voice from outside said.

The warriors had not yet noticed him but there were a few Loki recognised. Before Loki could respond or react or begin to even consider what his next course of action should be, Frigga intervened.

“Do you give your word that he will remain unharmed?” Frigga asked.

“Yes, yes. I will not harm him.”

Some of the warriors appeared to be deducing Loki’s true identity, he could feel their eyes on him. Loki rose from his chair.

"Loki," Frigga whispered, "I can only attempt a guess at her name, but I think it would be wiser to
see what she wants rather than deny her."

“I suppose any peace and merriment I might have been granted was always bound to be cut short,” Loki muttered.

“Loki,” Frigga scolded quietly as she walked with him towards the door, the warriors clearing a path for them. “You must not be so cynical.”

“Shouldn’t I? It is, after all, only a matter of hours after I have arrived in Valhalla that the person who I can only assume is the Queen of Hel journeys here to specifically ask for me. Forgive me if I do not interpret that as a good omen.”

Frigga remained tight-lipped and opened one of the great doors before they stepped through it.

“You took your time,” the stranger outside said.

“What do you want of my son?” Frigga demanded, closing the door behind her.

The stranger turned her attention to Frigga, her indifferent expression suddenly cold and icy. “I didn’t realise he needed his mother’s consent to speak to strangers.”

“I don’t,” Loki said at the same time Frigga made the same assertion.

“Wonderful.” She ignored Frigga entirely. “I must admit, I had expected more of you, Loki.”

Loki was taken aback. “And what exactly had you expected of me?”

The woman in front of him smiled but there wasn’t anything pleasant about it. “Well, cowering behind your mother’s skirts hardly constitutes as living up to the family name, does it now? But I was always taught not to forget my formalities. I haven’t introduced myself, although I haven’t exactly been subtle…”

“Hela,” Loki said. “Queen of Hel.”

Although how exactly the Queen of Hel had found her way to Valhalla, Loki had no idea.

“Yes,” Hela replied, smirking as if she knew something they didn’t. “That’s it.”

“What do you want of my son?” Frigga asked again but Hela acted as if she had not spoken.

“I suppose you must be curious…” Hela said, making it clear that she was speaking to Loki and Loki alone by angling her body towards him.

“I am,” Loki replied and instinct told him to have patience instead of pushing the topic.

“I want to bring you back,” Hela informed him, as if she was granting him a huge favour.

“Back? Back where?”

“Back to life. But I have a few conditions, of course. I’m a busy woman and I have many things to do so I shall get to the point. I have a proposition for you: your life in exchange for a favour.”

Loki frowned. "What could possibly want from me?"

"I don't suppose you've often had the misfortune of a man's unwanted attention?"
"I’m not unfamiliar with the concept.” Loki had to work to not intone it as he would a question.

"I’ll be more specific: have you received unwanted attention from a man who goes by the name of Thanos?"

"While so much as being in his peripheral attention is far more unwanted attention than I’d ever care to receive from him, I suppose that I would class–"

"If I knew you would be so pedantic I would have elaborated earlier. Allow me to explain: Thanos has been attempting to woo me for years now. He appears to be under the impression that I lack the company of souls in Hel and thinks that increasing those numbers will impress me or something equally as ridiculous.” She rolled her eyes. “The reality is that with each gift he gives me, I have yet another soul to accommodate for.” She scowled. “I have little patience for a child screaming out for attention. He presumes too much. But if I ignore his intolerable presence for much longer then my domain will soon be filled with more souls than it can handle at such short notice. If he presumes to demand my attention then I will deliver it to him in worse ways than he is capable of imagining. I may finally grant his soul entrance into my realm but I will personally ensure that his soul will be screaming for my mercy before long."

Loki chose his next sentence very carefully.

"Whilst the idea of his soul screaming for mercy is incredibly appealing, I'm afraid I'm not entirely sure what it is that you require me alive for."

"You're a good boy," Hela said. "Unfortunately, I cannot touch the living. If I could, then I would have dealt with my little problem entirely independently. This is where you come in: I want you to kill him for me."

"Me?" Loki let out a bark of laughter. "You stand outside a hall full of the legendary fallen warriors from the tales we tell children and yet you called my name? Forgive me if I question your judgement but why would you choose to lay your trust in a lying trickster when the mightiest of honourable fighters are only on the other side of this door?"

“It is not a warrior I need to kill him,” she said. "I need someone more than that.” Then she gave a grin so fully-fledged that her teeth gleamed. “A lying trickster might be exactly what I need."

Loki blinked at her. "And if I don't manage to kill him?"

"If you break your word after I restore you back to life, I will show your soul no mercy when you die."

Loki frowned. "That sounds too simple – what else is there?"

"Oh, yes," she said as if she had suddenly remembered something. "If you don't do it then your brother will die. Amongst potential billions of others. But he's the only one who you would truly care about.

"Loki," Frigga said, "you should consider this."

"But I've only just got back to you–"

"I can wait. You have a chance at life again. True life. Life in this realm isn't the quite the same. Do not let me be the reason you stay dead, I would hate myself for it. I want you to live."

"Even if it means fighting him?"
Frigga cupped Loki's cheek.

"It is not my decision to make, I can only implore you to--"

"You should listen to your mother," Hela sneered. “She has an uncanny knack for persuasion.” Hela had spoken with such venom that Frigga stared at her in outright confusion.

Loki pressed his lips together.

"If we are to make a bargain I need the full terms," he said finally.

"The terms are this: your life for his. I will heal your wound and restore your life force if you agree. There is no time limit, but the time before you kill him is borrowed, and when you die you'll spend that time in my realm. Think of it as an incentive to not squander time. The instant you finish him is the instant you are no longer in debt to me. Only after he is no longer breathing will your life be your own again."

"What happens if somebody or something else kills him before I do?"

Her lips twitched with amusement. "Fine." She held up her hands. "I shall even add in a futile clause for you. If somebody or something else kills him before you do then you won't owe me a debt, but your soul will not reside in Valhalla when you die."

"I do not like that term."

"I must ensure you stay motivated and act quickly somehow. Maybe you shouldn't have forced me to invent what would happen in that scenario. But it hardly matters. I doubt that any person or thing currently alive in the entirety of the universe has the resources to kill Thanos."

"Then how is it that you expect me to?"

"By the having the right resources. I shall even gift you with a favour. No – I'll be generous. Two favours. One clue is the Infinity Stones. You know of the gems he is after, yes? Good. If you can locate the ones he hasn't managed to find yet then it shall put you at a great advantage. My other favour to you will grant you a personal audience with the Norns themselves. I daresay they’ll be more informed than I am."

Loki's mouth fell open. "The Norns? How could they possibly have a stake in this?"

"They are moderately concerned about the future of the universe and Thanos's growing potential to kill them."

"But no one has seen the Norns in who knows how many millennia and they do not even reside within the Nine Realms anymore."

"If he does manage to kill them it might impress even me. However, I should warn you not to expect the Norns to give straightforward answers. They do enjoy droning on and on about threads of fate. Excessively." Hela's expression was one of distaste. "But as I said, if you want any more details you'll have to ask them yourself."

"I will bear that in mind."

When Hela smiled it was neither kind nor cruel: it was victorious.

“Then we have a deal?” she asked.
Loki’s eyes darted between her and his mother. His mother said nothing aloud, but her eyes were encouraging.

“We do,” Loki agreed, holding out a hand.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Hela said with a mockery of sweetness, “do send the Allfather my love if you get the chance.”

Then the Queen of the Dead grasped his hand in hers.

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to buying_the_space_farm for going over this story for me and EmuSam for betaing the earlier chapters!

My tumblr can be found here if anyone's interested.
Chapter 2

The instant Hela let go of Loki’s hand, all of it – Hel, Loki’s mother, Valhalla – was gone.

Instead, he was lying on his back and the winds had swept a layer of grit over his body. He sat up with a start, gasping for breath, hand clutching at his chest. There was no hole this time, nor any blood. The flesh was entirely intact and only a scar was left behind as evidence of his injury.

Loki was unsteady as he clambered to his feet.

The winds became stronger and large drops of rain began to fall, as if Svartalfheim itself was spitting on him. He had to keep his eyes squinted to avoid the black sand blowing into them as he scoured the surrounding lands for any sign of shelter. There was little to be found apart from wide open plains and his destination became obvious – back to the path between Svartalfheim and Asgard. There was little he could do while upon this realm, but he knew Asgard better than any other realm. He knew not only its people, its strengths, and its weaknesses, but also how to influence those within it, how to trick those within it, and how to operate within its most powerful circles.

Asgard was no barren moon; it was much better defended than that.

Slowly, as he walked, a plan began to form and take hold.

He would walk into the cave entrance as himself and exit as one of Asgard's guards. And the best part of that plan? The best part was that he wouldn’t even have to utter a single lie. Or, the more he thought about it, perhaps that was the worst part.

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"Loki," Odin said after he'd dismissed the other guards. It was not a question or an accusation.

Loki tilted his head downwards.

"Yes, my king," Loki confirmed. How he loved double meanings.

"Have you found his body?"

Loki shook his head.

"Why have you returned without his body?" Odin was tight-lipped as he rose from the throne.

This was wrong, this was not an eventuality that Loki had been prepared for or anticipated. He would have to improvise.

"We searched for hours--"

"Do you think that only searching for a handful of hours is adequate? He was my son."

Loki’s mouth fell open. How was it that himself, the Jotun relic, was declared as a son by the very man who would have beheaded him for his crimes that were less than half of what Thor did? Had someone managed to impose as the Allfather before he’d gotten the chance?

"You would still call him your son?” Loki found himself asking. “After everything?"
"I cannot deny that we did not share the same blood. But it was myself and his mother who raised him and none of his actions can erase that."

Something seemed wrong. Loki could feel his plan slipping around him, or perhaps it was himself who had become entangled and trapped within it.

"Is that so?" Loki didn't mean to let himself say that; it would be too risky, too foolish. No guard with a healthy regard for his life would be as presumptuous as to question the word of the Allfather in such a fashion.

Then Odin looked at him – not at the illusion of the guard that Loki wore but right at him. Thor had been wrong about many things a long time ago when he named his father an old man and a fool, but he had been right about one of those two things: Odin had grown weary and weak in his old age but he had never been a fool. Loki braced himself for Odin's inevitable attack, to have to haul out magic and dodge blasts from Gungnir, but they never came.

"Loki," Odin said again, softer this time. "I do not know how you are here but despite it all, I find myself glad that you are not dead."

Loki's hand tightened around one of his throwing daggers.

"I hope you'll understand if I am having a bit of trouble believing you. It was you, after all, who if you had your way would have had my head removed from my shoulders."

"It would have been a fair sentence for your actions," came Odin's terse reply.

The illusion of the guard fell and Loki was left staring outraged.

"What I did hardly compares to--"

"I am tired of this dance," Odin said, sinking back onto the throne as if this was another court matter.

"As am I." Loki's words were clipped. He flung a dagger in line with an artery in Odin's throat but before it hit, Odin clutched Gungnir and a golden aura appeared around him that deflected the blade. Loki threw himself to one side and one of the Gungnir's blasts erupted at the place he had stood a short second ago.

Loki aimed another at the hand that clutched the sceptre, knowing that if he could just manage to separate Odin from Gungnir then the rest of it would be comparatively easy. But the ward remained strong and protected Odin well. His dagger fell uselessly to the floor.

"How do you wish for this to play out, Loki?" Odin spoke as if the effort of maintaining the ward was nothing. "When you fail to defeat me, what do you wish to happen? How and why did you return here? What plots are you hatching?"

Loki pressed his treacherous lips together and said nothing.

"Have you returned to spite me? To spit the gift of Valhalla back in my face?"

"Let's not pretend that was generosity on my behalf; it was Frigga you sought to please."

Odin ignored him. "Or are there more to your plans than mere spite? I see no outcome that does not end in you roaming free so tell me: did you find yourself craving the solitary confinement of your cell? If it is Asgard's prison you seek, you needn't attack me. If it is the end of my life that you seek
then you cannot have it."

Loki left an illusion of himself stood in front of the Allfather while simultaneously rendering his true form invisible as he crept behind Odin.

"Why not?" He whispered behind Odin's ear and reached through the aura to twist at the arm holding Gungnir. The ward scolded his flesh and caused Loki to let out a hiss of pain. With a jerk of the arm, Odin sent Loki reeling backwards.

"Because, Loki," Odin said, "you possess neither the ability nor the conviction to defeat me."

"You believe me to not have the conviction to end your life? Should I be flattered that you think so highly of me? Or should I be dismayed at being so greatly underestimated?" Loki took a step forward in a calculated predatory movement. "Or are you trying to goad me into proving you wrong and making a rash move?"

"Your mother" – Odin watched as the mention of her caused an involuntary flinch – "died believing that you are still redeemable. The moment you kill your own father is the day that you can never be redeemed."

Loki grinned widely, showing all of his teeth. "Then I have nothing to lose."

"You may have killed your own birth father but you never thought of Laufey as your father, did you, boy? He was not the man who raised you. He is not the father who is sitting in front of you. It matters little how many times I wish it not to be true, the fact remains that I am still your father."

"Oh, you had a hand in raising me," Loki said quietly, his rage seeping into his voice like ice and fire all at once. "But you were always a king above a father."

"Does this mean that you have purposefully forgotten every time I spoke to you as a man does to his son? Every time I listened to the frets of a child and did not dismiss them as idle? Every time we sat together as a family?"

"You appear to be under the impression that these memories are… sweet. You forget how much lies taint things." Loki gestured to himself as a prime example. "No matter your claims, it is hardly a coincidence that since I learned of my true heritage, you have made no attempt to establish anything remotely resembling fatherly behaviour. Once you could no longer lie to placate me, you were happy to lose all paternal attachments—"

"Tell me: do you truly believe your own words or are you merely using them to excuse your behaviour?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"Are you stalling, Loki?"

Loki masked his doubt by wearing a false smile and letting out a light laugh. "What reason could I possibly have to want to stall this?"

"Because you cannot bring yourself to kill me," Odin said. "I’ve known you as my son for almost as long as you have been alive and I know how this scenario will play out. We will argue like this for hours, achieving and resolving nothing until you inevitably fail to slaughter me when you consider me to be in a moment of weakness. Or... I could drop the ward and bring the moment you lash out into occurrence much sooner. You always did have a flair for the dramatic, Loki, but I am afraid this will end when you realise the truth of my words."
Loki stared in disbelief.

"I will drop the ward and let you take your best shot." Odin nodded to one of Loki’s throwing knives lying on the floor. "You have an accurate throwing hand, as I recall. And I guarantee that I will be perfectly safe."

Loki raised a hand, fingers shaking and gripping the handle of one of his throwing daggers.

"I am not so willing to walk into your trap." Instead, Loki brought up the knife so that it bit into the skin of his own throat. "Let us test the truth of your words, shall we? That’s what you claim you want." The tremor in his voice was more audible than he would have liked. “If you truly consider yourself as my father, you will end this by dropping Gungnir.” He swallowed, hard, then added, “If not, it will hardly be a great loss to you to lose someone you have no familial attachments to.”

"Loki, you must have only just returned from Valhalla, be reasonable—" Odin began to move towards him and Loki reflexively dug the blade further into his skin.

"The greatest liar there is," Loki accused, eyes brimming with rage and his face contorted into a snarl as he drew the blade backwards.

Odin threw Gungnir to the ground. "Loki – please."

Loki stared at the sceptre lying on the ground and then at Odin. "Thor was right after all." He barked a laugh. "You are a fool."

A vision of Loki, rendered with the blade still at his throat remained in place whilst the true Loki proceeded to move towards the sceptre.

"Loki," Odin said, reaching towards the illusion. "Do not be ridiculous. Put the knife down." Odin's breaths were laboured and it seemed to require more effort than it should have done for him to move. The Odinsleep. It could not have come at a better time. "Your mother would never forgive me."

Loki gripped Gungnir tightly and pointed it at the back of the man who would only spare him for the wrong reasons. The sceptre was shaking. Loki took a deep breath and prepared to deliver the blow. The Allfather had reached the illusion now, fingers stretching towards the hand gripping the dagger. Then Odin's fingers went straight through it.

Odin stiffened and braced himself.

Now. Loki had to do it now.

A snarl ripped out of Loki’s throat and he proceeded to clobber the Allfather around the back of the head. It was a blunt and inelegant blow but Odin slumped to the floor, lying unconscious all the same.

It took only a gesture of the hand to adopt the Allfather’s skin and turn Odin invisible. He blinked at the space where his father’s body lay. He should have been feeling something more. He should have been delighted, filled with relish, triumphant with the knowledge that he defeated the most powerful being in the Nine Realms.

The memory of the last time he witnessed Odin fall into the Odinsleep swelled in his mind’s eye like a bruise.

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The vaults of Asgard were each the size of a courtroom, with a combination of hundreds of powerful objects, ancient artefacts, and relics with both known and unknown uses forming labyrinths to walk through. Loki could feel the prickling pull of the Tesseract, stronger and more persistent than it had been when he had been confined to his cell. Loki shook it off – he'd survived for over a thousand years without it. He didn't need it, no matter how much the Tesseract tried to convince him otherwise.

The Tesseract was hidden well, but Loki had the advantage of being able to feel it gently tugging at the edges of his mind. Its whispers became stronger the closer he got.

It sat on a tall pedestal, its glowing blue muted by the metallic golden hues of the surrounding objects and walls. Loki grasped it and his flesh felt the most alive it had done since he’d died. The glow of the Tesseract was almost making him giddy, but the elation was of a different brand than the last time he held it. This time it brought him clarity rather than escalating his thoughts and he wondered how he’d managed to survive so long after parting with it.

_I died_, Loki reminded himself. _This is real._

When his breathing returned to a reasonable rate, he discarded the illusions and stared down at his father’s body sprawled on the floor. He curled Odin’s fingers around one handle of the Tesseract’s casing, grasped the other himself, then tugged.

Loki had braced himself for the pain but his bracing had been inadequate. The power of the Tesseract stole through his veins in a rush that was neither hot nor cold but it burned all the same. It was raw energy and it had been so so long since it last touched him.

Once the pain was over, normalcy felt sweet, if normalcy could be described as standing on a carpet of fog so thick he couldn’t see his own boots. The air was more than cold; it was a crisp sting that felt as if it punctured his lungs with each breath he drew in. Odin’s skin had already started losing its colour but Loki knew that it would be longer before he himself would succumb to the cold.

Loki made slow progress with dragging Odin’s body along the ground. The man was heavy and the last time the two of them travelled to Niflheim had been under very different circumstances – Loki had still been a boy and the purpose had been purely educational. Odin had dressed both him and Thor in rare enchanted clothing that would prevent their bodies from freezing so long as they did not remain for too long. As they walked, Odin pointed out and named each of the frozen statues of ancient expelled warriors. As a boy, Loki had clung to his father’s hand for fear that the fog was concealing monsters underneath it. As a man, Loki was the monster it concealed.

A thick layer of frost had grown over the Allfather’s skin and clothing. Most men Loki would have trusted the harshness of the realm enough to leave a foe behind, but Odin was no ordinary man and it was not a risk Loki had any desire to take. Loki would wait. He would wait until Odin was indistinguishable from the rest of the statues and only when Odin was no more than another frozen fable would Loki return to Asgard.

Odin was slumped on the ground, the one exposed arm stretched out from Loki dragging him having frozen entirely solid and the rest of his body not far behind. Loki positioned him in the midst of a cluster of warriors and the scene looked like a scattering of life-sized board game pieces, all with Odin at the centre of it. Some of the statues still bore weapons, their frozen faces contorted with rage and their arms raised to strike while others were on their knees, eternally begging kings long since dead to spare them of their fate.

The image of Odin, still and stiff and unmoving with one hand forever reaching out towards him
lingered long after he teleported away, and it was an image that haunted him as much as it delighted him.
Odin had often said that the throne of Asgard was not a comfortable one to sit upon, but Loki found it rather refreshing. When he gave commands whilst wearing the skin of the Allfather, no one dared question him, no one dared disobey. There was no doubt in the eyes of all who looked upon him. Fear and respect were one and the same with the Allfather. Throughout thousands of years Odin had – so he thought – proven himself as a worthy ruler of Asgard, a wise king who sought to keep the Nine Realms at peace. But, Loki supposed, no king defeated because of lingering sentimental values towards a dead woman could be truly considered wise.

The dead hold no judgement over the living. At least, that was what Loki used to think, but Frigga would not be happy if she were to see him now.

It did not matter. It should not have mattered. The throne was the best possible seat for him to sit upon if he was to plan a strategic and tactical defeat of Thanos. If he could not hide, having the entirety of Asgard’s defence and military at his fingertips was not an undesirable second option.

Loki tapped Gungnir with his fingers as he walked. It helped to focus him. He had still hadn't gotten used to glancing down and seeing hands so aged by time.

"I wish to speak to Heimdall," Loki announced to one of the two guards at the entrance to the dungeons. Even the most mundane of statements seemed to hold great authority when spoken in Odin's voice.

"Yes, your Majesty," one of the guards said. Both of them avoided eye contact and elected instead to stare at their own boots.

"Alone," Loki said and made his way through the maze of cells until he came face to face with Heimdall.

It was pleasant to be on the opposite side of the walls this time.

"Loki." Heimdall's voice was flat but him saying Loki's name aloud hardly mattered – there were no prisoners or guards close enough to hear him.

"Greetings, Heimdall," Loki said pleasantly. "How fares your sight?"

"These cells cannot shield you from my gaze, Loki. I watched you die and yet here you stand. Tell me how you did it. What was it? Necromancy? A deal with something far more powerful than yourself? Or did your true form prevent you dying a hair’s breadth away from death?"

Loki held his chin upwards and forced civility into his tone. "I am glad to hear these cells do not hinder your vision. Tell me: what other sights have you beheld from behind these walls?"

"You, imposter. Usurping the throne and tricking those around you into believing that you are the rightful king."

Loki sighed.

"Tell me what you see. What of Jotunheim? What of the temporary peace between other realms? What threatens Asgard? What lurks in the spaces between realms?"

"I serve the true king."
"I am the true king! With Odin gone, Frigga dead, and Thor gallivanting across the Nine who else would the line of succession fall to but me?"

Heimdall turned his gaze to scrutinise Loki’s face. Heimdall's gaze had always been unsettling; the man could see the birth of a new-born baby, the last breath a person would take, tears falling for the first time in centuries.

Loki stared back. He had nothing to hide anymore. The guards would take no note of a prisoner's claims, especially if it was a treasonous claim from a man imprisoned for treason.

"The true king must still live." Heimdall’s eyes burned a bright gold.

"Yes, well." Loki flashed a grin. "In that case, he should be here to claim it. In the meantime, I should give you a warning," Loki said. "If there is any information you keep from me know this: you are harming the citizens of Asgard more than you are harming me. I am the only person in Asgard who will listen to you and I also happen to be in a great position of power. If you do not willingly serve me then it still remains your responsibility, as one gifted with great sight, to protect the Nine Realms from falling into chaos."

Heimdall did not appear convinced. "And you, Laufeyson, are the one to stop the Nine Realms from falling into chaos? You, who wears chaos like a cape?"

"At the present," Loki said, "I am all that stands between the Nine Realms and what will come."

Heimdall frowned. "And what will come?"

"You will know if you see it. I would hate for the realms to suffer on behalf of your petty hatred for me. Do not let yourself be discouraged – you are still Asgard’s gatekeeper. It’s just," Loki said, looking pointedly at the gate covering the entrance to his section of the prison, “a different gate that you will be keeping.” Loki smiled faintly before withdrawing. "Farewell, Heimdall."

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To say that Loki had been kept occupied would have been an understatement. His current reign was infinitely more complicated the last. In addition to the usual duties of a ruler, his months had been spent strengthening old alliances and forming new ones, and he found that his silver tongue appeared to have become somewhat tarnished and his talents in diplomacy were not as efficient as he would have liked. He had guilds working on designing and building new fortifications for Asgard and he had heavily increased the demand for mining and forging weapons and armour. He had summoned scholars from across the Nine Realms and had them researching the potential locations of the remaining Infinity Stones, all without mentioning the true name of what it was they were searching for.

Maintaining the illusion of Odin over his own form cost his magic heavily. It made him constantly weary and drained of energy.

Loki barely slept. He found that he had too much to accomplish. While the daylight hours were spent in politics and having preparations in place for Thanos's inevitable attack, his own personal research into the whereabouts of the gems ate well into the night. The trail of the Aether had gone cold after Odin had sent it away to an unknown location and he'd discovered little more than vague whispers about the remaining Infinity Stones.

Loki’s sleep was always dreamless and never deep enough.

He had been so occupied that it almost escaped his mind that he had yet to have his promised
meeting with the Norns. Hela had given no indication of either when or how it would occur, and Loki had been too taken aback by the prospect of being brought back to life on the condition of killing Thanos to think of asking for specifics.

To make matters more complex: Loki was of the firm belief that Asgard needed to expand its kingdom because he knew now that there was no such thing as just the Nine Realms. There were countless realms, all stretching across the universe to places so far away that even Heimdall could not see them. The problem was that Loki knew this, he had walked upon the grounds of these realms that no Aesir had before, but Odin had not. Therefore, Loki had to claim to the rest of council that rather than definitively knowing the existence of worlds outside of the Nine, he had sound reason to suspect that other unexplored worlds may exist. For the first time, there was doubt in their eyes when they looked upon Odin.

"Perhaps you could present us with compelling evidence, Allfather," the treasurer had suggested. "I would be most curious to see what sort of thing could make you suggest that there are still realms undiscovered."

Loki could have snarled in frustration. Of course, the treasurer would be reluctant to put aside a considerable amount of gold for something which was only viewed as a theoretical possibility. Asgard was a slow realm to adapt, to age, to evolve. It looked exactly the same as it had done a thousand years ago when Loki was still a child. The beliefs were still the same, as were the technology and values.

"There will be evidence," Loki said testily, but he did not add that perhaps the evidence would only present itself too late.

"I do not doubt it, my king," the treasurer replied, head bowed. Lies. Although, if anything, it would only make sense that the greatest liar would be surrounded by a council of liars too. Perhaps they all lied so well that the truth was never discovered, or perhaps they all were able to discern lies so well that communication was rendered functionless, a mere routine.

"Council dismissed," Loki said and watched them scuttle away like insects.

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When almost a year had passed, it became less unnatural to see the Allfather's gaze staring back at him a glass reflection. Heimdall had claimed not to have seen anything of significance and although he did not appear to be lying, there was no way to be completely certain.

Thor had a habit of returning to Asgard, preferring to do so less and less frequently. Instead, he spent most of his time on Midgard. Loki thought it strange that Thor would choose to live amongst the humans, but then again, Thor never had a rational mind. Perhaps his lust for battle had simmered a little and was replaced by simple lust for a woman instead.

The Allfather would not approve and rather unusually, his would-have-been beliefs and Loki's were aligned.

Once it had delighted Loki, how easily he was able to fool Thor into believing that Loki was his father. Now he grew weary of it and the tedium of conversation with Thor irked him.

"Thor," Loki had said during a private feast between the two of them, "high time has passed between the present and your mother's death."

Thor stopped eating and frowned.
"Father?" Thor asked.

"The circumstances of her death… They weigh upon my mind." Loki’s tongue felt clumsy.

Thor nodded. "I often find myself recalling the memory when I least wish to do so."

"Yes," Loki said. "It seems that my imagination grows wilder and wilder with possibilities. What if…"

"What if I had gotten there sooner?" Thor finished, his voice gruff. "What if I had never let the Aether bury itself in Jane? If I had never been banished to Earth and met Jane, would Malekith still have found his way to Asgard?"

_The stairs on the left_, Loki thought but did not utter out loud.

"As Asgard's king I should have the power to stop anything… And yet I failed to prevent my own wife from being killed."

Thor shook his head. "You had no hand in it, Father," Thor said, staring down at his plate. "If anyone should have been able to save her it should have been me. I arrived only in time to see her impaled. I have never felt so useless in all the centuries I have been alive."

"Neither have I," Loki said. "I wish to honour her somehow. I wish to create something for her. Something for all of Asgard to remember her by."

“Like a statue?”

“Frigga would never have wanted such an overt monument to herself. She would have wanted her values to be remembered, not her image.”

“Then what are you thinking? Gardens for the citizens of Asgard?”

Frigga had found peace in the royal gardens but that was not specific enough to her person for Loki.

“Actually, I was considering establishing new academies in her name.” Loki elected to omit the possibility of these schools being schools for sorcerers as it might be seen as too radical of a shift in Odin’s values for the time being.

“Oh!” Thor beamed. “Yes! She’d like that.”

The two of them continued eating in content silence until Loki introduced a new topic of conversation.

"There is a rumour that concerns me…"

"What is it, Father?"

"I have heard tales that something heads for Asgard, something which does not come from within the Nine Realms."

"Something from outside of the Nine Realms?" Thor scoffed and then quickly adjusted his tone to a suitably more respectful one. "I thought that not possible." Thor shoved a large slice of boar into his mouth. "Whatever makes you believe these tales are anything more than hearsay?"

"Are you questioning my judgement?"
"No. Of course not. I was simply curious."

"If you have as much faith and respect for me as you claim, then you should know that I would have valid reasons to entertain the possibility," Loki said, cutting the rind of his meat with a knife and eyeing Thor.

"I know you would, Father."

"Good. Then I have a favour to request of you. A quest, if you like."

"Yes, Father?"

Loki licked the sweet residue of the honey sauce from his lips. "There may be future grievances for Asgard should these claims prove to be true." Which they certainly would be if Thor managed to complete the task with any degree of competence. "For the safety of our people I need someone I can trust to venture out and gather adequate evidence on behalf of our realm. I would complete the task myself but Asgard needs to keep its king close. I can think of no one better than you." How hard times must be for Asgard when Thor was the most qualified person to fulfil a task like this. Loki suppressed a shudder.

"Of course." Thor looked cheered at the thought. "I will do it. I will bring so much evidence that it would be heavy enough to break the rainbow bridge."

"I am pleased to hear it," Loki replied and Thor, who had long since finished his meal, rose from the table. "And Thor?"

"Yes, my King?"

"Do it with haste."

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More time passed but the Norns still had not presented themselves. They were the gods of the gods within their own right and Loki had many speculations about how they would appear. They could hardly just walk into Asgard. Perhaps they would establish communication in a more abstract manner; he had read stories about the Norns speaking to people from within their dreams and stories about people having strange visions all while fully awake.

Perhaps that was the problem. Loki had been so occupied and sleeping so little that he could not recall having had dreams for months. It was entirely possible that he had inadvertently blocked the only form of communication with the Norns he could have. Would Hela consider her favour given if the Norns had attempted to meet with him and had failed?

Loki vowed to test his theory and head to his chambers at a more reasonable hour in future. The information he could gain from the Norns would surely be more valuable than the scrapings of vague information he’d gleaned from various books.

"Father!" a voice shouted, jolting Loki from his musings. "Father!" Thor shouted. "I have found and returned what you asked of me!"

Loki stood up slowly and excused himself from the council, bringing Thor in tow to an empty servant’s quarters nearby.

Then he noticed that Thor was not alone. A few paces behind him a red humanoid figure drifted, taking in its surroundings with a soulless analytical gaze.
Loki turned to Thor.

"What is that?"

"He," Thor corrected, "is Vision."

"I asked you to return an object from another realm and instead you bring me this?"

"Father, listen!" Thor's eyes were bright with light. "He holds evidence that other realms exist."

Loki pursed his lips.

"Explain."

"I will, but it is no short story."

Loki scowled. Thor's quest should have been so easy! All he needed to do was return from the planet he already holidaying upon with some remains of a Chitauri soldier or a piece of their technology and be done with it! Instead, Thor had brought... that. Loki eyed the thing Thor named Vision with disdain. Vision caught his gaze and returned it with a pleasant smile, or what Loki assumed the thing believed to be a pleasant smile. It was neither creature nor beast. Neither a person nor a machine.

Creatures, beasts, people, and machines, Loki knew how to operate. This thing fell into no such category and Loki was not sure what to make of it.

"Then proceed," Loki said, sliding his eyes off it and to Thor.

Thor's methods of storytelling were as convoluted and as glorified as ever, but eventually Loki managed to discern the truth: Thor had intended to return with the sceptre but had found that without the core, it was no more than a useless artefact. Which brought Thor around to explaining what exactly had happened to the core of the sceptre.

"I'm afraid I am not quite following." The words left Loki’s mouth with reluctance – it was something he had never had reason to say to the likes of Thor before.

"I am not sure I fully understand it either, Father, but as it stands, the Mind Gem is implanted in Vision's forehead."

Loki directed his next question at Vision: "Have you mastered the Mind Gem?"

"Mastered it?"

"Do you feel that you have full control over it?"

Vision shook his head. Just as well. It would hardly do for the sentient synthetic flesh come to life to be able to peer into his thoughts and reveal Loki for who he truly was.

"It enables me to do remarkable things but I believe there is still much that I don't know, Sir."

"The proper term," Loki said with a frown, "is your Majesty."

Vision exchanged a look with Thor. "Then my apologies, your Majesty."

"But as interesting a tale it is, Thor," Loki continued, "this does neither prove nor disprove that any realms outside of the Nine exist."
"There is more, your Majesty," Vision said, pulling out the sceptre from behind its back.

Loki took it with caution.

It was not as it once was. Where before, the tip of it glowed a bright blue, this time there was just an empty void surrounded by the pointed metal of the tip of the sceptre. There was no thrumming when he clasped his hand around it, and the only use the sceptre had left would be as an impaling weapon.

"A weapon belonging to a realm outside of the Nine," Loki murmured, accidentally forgetting that he had intended to present the statement as a question.

"Yes," Thor confirmed. "I consulted with an expert on Midgard and I am certain that Asgard's smiths will not be able to identify the metal used to forge it either."

"Hmm," Loki said, surprised, "this may work."

Thor grinned widely. "I told you I was up for the task."

Loki turned to Vision. "You are welcome to continue your stay in Asgard indefinitely."

"I had hopes of returning back to Earth soon, your Majesty. I have duties that I am needed for."

That complicated matters. A prisoner unaware of their imprisonment was a much better behaved prisoner than one aware of it.

"Have you ever left Midgard before?" Loki asked instead.

"No."

"Then are you not curious? Do you not wish to explore while you are fortunate enough to be here?"

Vision was hesitant.

"Of course, but—"

"As a friend and shield brother of Thor's, the entirety of Asgard’s hospitality is extended to you. Thor will show you to your chambers."

"Actually, Father," Thor said, "I have something I wish to speak to you about. Privately."

Loki gestured to a servant and he motioned for Vision to follow him. After the two had left, Thor was still frowning.

"Why did you do that?" Thor asked.

"Be more specific."

"You didn’t extend the same courtesies to Jane when I brought her here. You made your opinion of my mortal companions very clear."

"That is true. However, at the time I was unaware that the Aether was contained inside of her body. The same cannot be said for your new companion."

Thor’s eyes were lined with suspicion. "What do you intend to do with him?"
"I wish him no ill fortune. In fact, I would go as far to say that I wish him the best of fortunes, as, if any persons with nefarious intentions should manage to get their hands on what is embedded inside of his forehead…"

“So you want him to remain here, as you wanted Jane to despite all the destruction it could have brought? You said it would be unwise for the Aether and the Tesseract to be in the same place at one time. Why would this be any different?"

“The Mind Gem is unlikely to reawaken long thought extinct races as the Aether did. And the creature who wields the Mind Stone appears to have a much more stable grasp of its power than your Jane ever did.”

“Are you intending to weaponise him then? Is that your plan?”

“The knowledge that he has already been weaponised by your so-called Avengers appears to have eluded you. How would Asgard utilising his powers be any worse than Midgard doing precisely the same thing?”

Thor stared at him as if he was a stranger. “Vision is reasonable and good-hearted. I am sure that if you were to just speak to him honestly, he would be willing to help.”

“I have few reasons to trust him and little knowledge of his character to form a valid basis of—”

“I will vouch for him, father.”

Loki was not swayed.

Then Thor added: "He is able to pick up Mjolnir."

Loki raised an eyebrow. “In that case,” he said, “it will be your duty to watch over him. You will ensure that he does not leave Asgard without permission, that no one else learns the truth of him, and – most importantly – that no one else harnesses the power of the Mind Stone.”

Thor shook his head. It wasn't a refusal – it was an expression of distaste. “Very well, but I will not lie to a friend.”

“You do not have to lie to him,” Loki said, “I am merely asking you to abstain from informing him of the entire truth.”

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"May I ask the purpose of our council meeting?" the treasurer questioned.

"You may," Loki replied and presented the sceptre. Perhaps if the treasurer continued being his irksome self, Loki could skewer him with it instead. The sceptre was only a skeleton of what it once had been, but the craftsmanship did not resonate clearly with any of the realms. "I believe," Loki said, as if he held any doubts, "that this artefact I hold is considerable evidence."

The council members looked at each other, some frowning, some shocked, others curious.

"I have consulted with several blacksmiths from this realm and others. None can identify the metal used to forge the weapon.”

"Where was it found?" One of the council members asked.

"This is the weapon that Loki used to invade Midgard after falling into the abyss. Perhaps the
abyss is not as empty as we believe.” Loki placed the sceptre on the table. He cared not whether they touched it; it made no difference with the absence of the Mind Gem. “I believe anyone of a rational mind would question how a weapon can be forged inside of an abyss – unless of course, the abyss had another side. You may examine the sceptre yourselves. You will see unfamiliar markings across the underside and you are welcome to invite any scholars, smiths and linguists to take a look at it to confirm its origins. I give you three days before I deem it necessary to begin taking action regarding this discovery.”

There was an intake of breath at his suggestion of three days, but his patience was past being worn thin. His role as king was a constant struggle between acting upon what he knew was necessary and maintaining the illusion that Odin had come to these conclusions by himself and through reasonable means.

Ultimately, three days should not have been too great a cost.

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"Father?" Thor asked during another one of their private feasts one evening.

"What is it?"

"I am concerned about one of the prisoners–"

"You do not need to trouble yourself with the likes of them."

"I cannot help it when it is entirely my fault that one of them became a prisoner in the first place."

"You still wish Heimdall to be free."

"It was myself who talked him and everyone else into the plan, if it wasn't for me–"

"What they did was treason," Loki said quietly. "Are you aware of what the usual punishment for treason is?"

"I... I am."

"Then you should consider that I have already shown a great amount of leniency."

"But it is not fair that as the instigator of it all I am free whilst they are locked inside of cells!"

"I would never allow my son to be imprisoned like that." For the first time, Loki could not quite identify the expression on Thor's face and found the experience to be most unsettling. Was it disgust? Distaste? Doubt? Loki could see no reason why Thor would regard Odin in such a manner.

“You believe us to be on the brink of war?” Thor spoke after a long moment.

“I know us to be.”

“Then you should put my friends to good use. You know their hearts serve the realm and they are no good to anyone locked away inside their cells.”

“And what you have me do?”
Thor was quiet in contemplation before delivering an answer. "Hogun would be able to persuade the Vanir to our cause much better than any Aesir. Sif would be well respected in Alfheim as the elves favour female warriors. And Fandral has a reputation for being one of the most charming men in Asgard for a reason. I would send him to deal with our less amicable allies."

"And Volstagg?"

"Volstagg... Er..."

"I suppose that as a seasoned warrior, he would make an effective trainer," Loki said, not unkindly. "He would indeed." Thor sounded far too happy.

"Do not mistake this for me granting them freedom," Loki warned. "I am merely using their capabilities due to the urgency of the situation. They still will be expected to answer for their crimes against the crown upon completing their tasks, although their sentences may be reduced depending upon their performance."

The sound of their knives and forks scraping was the only thing to break the silence until Thor spoke again.

"Father?" Thor asked with uncharacteristic tentativeness.

"What troubles your mind now?"

"Has... Has Loki's body been found yet?"

"No," Loki responded curtly.

"But surely they must have found something by now? How many men were sent?"

"I sent an appropriate number of men for the task."

Thor's expression darkened. "How many men?"

Loki gave his best stern glare, one that came ever so naturally to Odin's features. "I sent a small team."

"What does that mean? Two? Twenty? Two hundred?"

"It is not your place to question me." Each word was punctuated with finality and authority.

The anger in Thor's eyes burned to sadness. "He was my brother and your son. Regardless of his wrongdoings, he was Asgard's prince. He has a right to a funeral."

Loki froze for a moment before managing to respond. "Sending a dead and flaming body out into the open water is hardly a priority compared to the defence and fortification of Asgard."

Thor stared at him with something akin to revulsion. "Who are you?"

"Asgard's king. I am who the realm needs me to be."

"An old man so desperate to distract himself from the death of his wife and son that he invents a high-level threat to occupy himself with?"

Loki stood up so abruptly that it almost unbalanced the table.
Thor flinched but he was able to meet his gaze. "Father. I speak to you as my father, not as Asgard's king."

*Good.*

"They are one and the same." Loki placed his cutlery back on the table. "I find that my appetite has disappeared."

***

It was a relief to not have to hide behind the skin of the Allfather around another being, even if it was only one. The simple pleasure of it had eluded him on a daily basis for almost three years now.

"I have seen… something."

"I need more than that, Heimdall."

"It stirs beyond the branches of the Yggdrasil, in places too dark for me to see. Or it did stir, once, at least. Now it moves forward, and the fleet is gaining in numbers."

"Tell me, where does the fleet head towards?"

"Asgard," Heimdall said. "It heads for Asgard. The fleet should arrive in a number of weeks."

Loki cursed.

"You know who has sent the fleet?" Heimdall enquired.

"It’s irrelevant now. But, yes, I know what he is capable of."

"I’ve been watching you with great interest."

"And great suspicion too, I would assume."

"That is true. I also think it true that you have been attempting to raise Asgard’s defences and increase the number of soldiers and allies we have."

Loki laughed but it was high pitched and wrong. It echoed off the walls and reverberated strangely until he could hear his own hysterical laughter echoed back at him.

"You think I require your approval? Now? What good are you now? All I needed you for was a warning of when he enters the Nine Realms, and a direction of where he heads."

"You fear this person."

"Any person who doesn’t winds up dead. Or worse."

*You wound up dead and yet here you stand.*

"I’m aware. If that is all, I must be going—"

"Wait."

Loki paused. The panic hadn’t settled in yet. He hadn't had the time to fully process that this was real and that Thanos was attacking and his months and months of political manoeuvrings and research would do him little good.
“There’s more?” Loki hardly dared to ask.

“The fleet appears to be following some sort of signal or trail. I thought it was heading for Midgard but it changed directions entirely when the source of the signal moved.”

That had not been what Loki had expected. “Where is the source of this signal?”

“Currently strolling through the gardens with Thor.”

Loki left the dungeons, his cape billowing behind him. He barely remembered to put the illusion back in place before exiting.
“Thor,” Loki commanded, slightly out of breath, “forget what I said about Sif and the Warriors Three. I have a much more important task for you all.”

“Father? Is everything alright?”

“No, Thor. This is urgent. I need to speak with you privately.”

Thor nodded a brief farewell to Vision and the two of them walked deeper into a vacant area of the gardens.

“What is it?” Thor asked.

“It’s your companion. He cannot remain here.”

“But you said–”

“Never mind what I said! Listen to me!” Loki grabbed Thor’s shoulders. “It’s happening again! The gem – it’s reaching out to its previous master. Asgard is not ready, Thor! This is what I’ve been preparing for and we need more time. Do you hear me?”

“What do you need of us?”

“I need you to take him as far away as you can, I need you to be constantly moving, I need you to not let anyone touch him – anyone bar one.”

“My King?”

“The man who comes… You cannot fight him. You would die. All your friends would die. You must promise me, Thor, that if Thanos catches up with you that you flee!”

“I’m no coward.”

“This isn’t a question of cowardice! This is a question of saving the life of you and all your friends! What good is dying if it is all for nothing? If you choose to fight you will all die but if you flee only one of you might die. What good is nobility and pride if it only leads you to more death? Is it truly noble then?”

“I’d rather die a proud man than live to see myself become a man who lets his friends die.”

Loki shook him in frustration. “You would not be letting him die. You would not be allowing him to die. If Thanos is on his tail then Thanos will find him and use him in whatever ways he sees fit. Do you understand?”

“Who is this Thanos and why–”

“I do not have time to fully explain to you the gravity of the situation and who he is. But know this: your companion lures him to Asgard with every second he remains here. Asgard is not prepared. Asgard will fall if he arrives.”

“I cannot in good conscience assist you in sending off a man to die.”

“That’s not what this is! I am sending the group of you away to lure Thanos away and spare the
destruction of Asgard and its people. Whilst you are away, I advise you do all that you can to separate your companion from the gem. If you manage to accomplish that, bring the gem to me immediately. If it is a choice between your companion’s life and Thanos acquiring another gem then there is only one true option. It is imperative that Thanos does not get another gem, do you hear me? He is already far too powerful and he will become even more unstoppable if he succeeds.”

“I believe…” Thor said. “I am beginning to understand.”

Loki noticed that his fingers were digging into Thor’s shoulders in what must have been a painful manner and released him.

“If you use your mind rather than Mjolnir you all could survive this,” Loki told him more gently. “But I need you to know that there can be no compromise here. This is not like how it was with Jane. The odds are not the same. Thanos can and will destroy you all if he crosses your path. Malekith is nothing but a pup in comparison to him.”

”You fear him.” Thor was stunned.

“Any person capable of forming a single rational thought should be. Now. Are you up to the task?”

“I…”

Loki grit his teeth. “I know it seems like a terrible moral choice to you Thor, but what is the value of one life against the lives of every Asgardian you know?”

Thor’s mouth was hung open slightly and Loki could feel the remaining time they had slipping away.

“How about this? You give me your word that when the time comes, you will return and under no circumstances allow Thanos to reunite with the Mind Stone, and in return I will release Heimdall for you.”

“I don’t suppose you are giving me much of a choice.”

“No,” Loki said. “If you don’t agree you will force me to send someone else in your stead. A less capable warrior. Your friend’s chances of surviving would fall lower.”

Was that resentment lurking behind Thor’s eyes?

“Fine then,” Thor said. “But I hope to prove you wrong.”

“Oh, and Thor,” Loki added when Thor’s back was turned, “a final word of advice. Use the Bifrost. Thanos is many things but he is not faster than the Bifrost. Call out to Heimdall and he will hear you.” And, Loki added privately, he will summon you back when you fail to abandon your friend.

***

Asgard changed slowly. A matter of a few weeks would have made little difference in the political climate, but with the Mind Stone gone Loki had bought Asgard more time. Leaders from across the realms had answered the Allfather's invitation and gathered in the golden halls of the Realm Eternal, making it busier than Loki had ever known it.

The Allfather would not have attacked Thanos unless attacked, would not have spent so much of
the realm's resources upon its defence without having witnessed the wrath of the invader first. It was not mercy or pacifism: it was a strategic move in order to gain more information about how the enemy would attack. They were lucky that Loki was not the Allfather. The wisest king there had ever been, if the word of the common folk was to be believed, and he would not have anticipated the death and destruction that Thanos would bring upon them all. Loki had seen it firsthand. He had lived it and breathed it and drowned in it.

It was not a question of if Thanos would invade Asgard – it was a question of when. The average lifespan of the Aesir was thousands of years long and no doubt Thanos would see that lifespan as an insult to Hela herself. How many fabled and seasoned warriors Asgard housed would only make Asgard a more valuable sacrifice in Thanos’s eyes? Worthy souls, he had called them. Theirs, but not Loki’s. The first thing Thanos had told him was that Loki’s soul was unworthy of Hela and for precisely that reason, Thanos had allowed him to live.

Thanos had not wished to insult Lady Death with something so meagre as Loki’s soul.

And Loki was the reason that the name of Asgard fell into Thanos’s ears.

He wondered whether the news of his death had fallen to Thanos’s ears too. Loki debated whether Thanos would have believed it to be true. Thanos would have his doubts – he had seen into the very core of Loki’s being in order to determine which of his weaknesses would be of most use to him. Thanos was clever; he had to be, he would never have gotten this far if he wasn't.

Time. Loki could not indefinitely stall the attack. His hopes of forming alliances across the universe rather than merely within the Nine Realms were rapidly diminishing. He had thoughts that maybe, with all their combined forces, resources, and intelligence, their chances of survival would be considerably higher. Unless something rapidly changed, Asgard would not survive the Mad Titan’s attack. Perhaps if they'd had more time to prepare, to make more alliances, to gain more knowledge, then the outcome would be different. As it stood, Asgard was doomed. The Aesir would be able to stall Thanos, and only stall him.

And Loki would not sit idle to die with them.

***

Loki was still as equally bewildered as to precisely what Hela meant by the Norns paying him a visit. He'd been sleeping in irregular patterns, half in anticipation of them coming to him in a dream like in the stories, and the remainder of his truly doomed attempt at a sleeping pattern could be attributed to a combination of having died, having been brought back to life, and the newfound responsibility of having to destroy the most powerful being in the universe.

But as far as Loki was aware, the Norns had not come to him in his sleep. His sleep had not been deep or restful enough for him to remember any of the stories his mind told him during the night.

Asgard's king was in a constant state of not-to-be-disturbed. Which was why the entirety of the council, not to mention the king himself, were surprised when they received an anonymous piece of parchment containing a message demanding to formally meet with 'Asgard's new king', as well as a mysterious signature of three indecipherable runes underneath the careful script.

Before, the insinuation that the writer of the letter could have known that he was an imposter would have been a great concern. Now it was merely an irritating complication to account for.

"Tell them they can wait," Loki instructed the guard who had handed over the letter. "The king is very busy attending to urgent matters."
The guard bowed his head and turned to make his leave, but before he reached the door, three women walked through the doorway as if the tens of guards meant nothing to them.

Each guard lining the perimeter of the room drew their swords and moved in a formation to protect their king.

"We pose no threat," one of the women said.

"Trying to harm us will not put you in good fortune," the middle one said.

"We only wish to speak to Lok–"

"Name yourselves," Loki interrupted timely and the three women glanced at each other. “I trust you do have names?”

They turned to face him them and he felt their eyes pierce through his false skin. He searched their faces in return, hoping for some clue as to their origins. In terms of physicality, they had little in common; they ranged in physique and skin colour and based on appearance alone, he could not identify which of the Nine Realms the hailed from. They all had a slightly otherworldly look to them that could not be attributed to one particular feature and they looked as if they had not seen the sunlight in months.

"We do," they replied.

"Though we shall not waste time with such frivolities as the names you gave us," the one in the middle added.

"And are you aware that you are addressing the king? The king that you so rudely interrupted whilst he was making important decisions impact the wellbeing of all the realms?"

"We are."

Gungnir slipped in Loki’s grasp but he managed to catch it before it fell to the floor.

"Are you under the impression that I, Odin Allfather," Loki emphatically stressed his title, "allow insolence to go unpunished?"

"We have little concept of insolence within our culture."

"And what culture is that, exactly?"

"It matters not," the one on the left with wild curly dark hair said. "We have a message to deliver of the utmost importance to one Loki–"

"I've had enough of this," Loki interrupted. "If it is Loki you wish to speak to" – he gave them a very significant look – "then you may find his body in the catacombs below. I do hope you enjoy conversing with dead men."

The three of them gave him puzzled frowns.

"Go!" Loki commanded, eager to see them off before they gave away any more clues about his true identity. "I have important things to discuss and I am sure it must be considered impolite to keep a dead man waiting."

***
The three strangers had ventured further into the catacombs than Loki had anticipated by the time he was able to sneak away without raising suspicion. His torch was almost depleted of oil when he found them.

"No disguises this time," Loki said, arms in a gesture that was as apologetic as it was modest; that was, not at all. "I hope to avoid any further confusion."

"You have wasted much time," the one with hair the same colour as the whites of her eyes said.

"Clearly," Loki retorted, "you have never been involved in the political manoeuvrings of a royal court."

"You may find yourself surprised at the threads we manipulate, Loki. I assume that is how you would have us address you? You have had so many names that it is difficult to keep track of them all. Laufeyson. Odinson. Silvertongue. Asgardian. Frost Giant. Slayer of Frost Giants. Slayer of fathers. Prince of Asgard. King of Asgard—"

"Stop talking, Urd." The voice of the middle woman rang with authority. "We have much to discuss and very little time in which to discuss it."

"Perhaps you should have cared to visit me earlier. I am a very busy man, after all," Loki interjected.

"We dug our way out of our underground city and traversed the stars to find you!" the middle one hissed.

One of the adjacent women comforted her by patting her arm and her rage subsided.

"I assume you know who we are?" the comforter asked.

"Did Hela send you?" Loki asked instead.

"We do not follow her command, although she did request that we speak to you. We came voluntarily."

"Then you must be the three original Norns: Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld. I must admit I had wondered when exactly you would deign to visit me."

"Fool!" the middle one hissed. "Your line of fate lies in knots on the floor of my spindle wheel and you dare accuse us of incompetence."

Loki rolled his eyes. "I have a war to prepare for. I'd appreciate it much more if you hurried to the part where you tell me how to win it."

"The fate of far more than the Nine Realms is at a great peril."

Another roll of the eyes. "Yes, I am aware of that."

"And we have combed and combed the threads of fate, searching for strands that allow for our continued survival, but have since only come across one very elaborate tangle."

"Excellent," Loki said, "then there is a chance of success after all. If you would be so kind as to inform me how to follow it then that will be useful."

"It is not so simple."

""
“Not so simple?” Loki retorted. “Each one of you has domain over the entirety of the past, present, and future. How could it possibly be complicated for you?”

“We can see and persuade but we cannot force.”

“Then how does that make you any better than a standard fortune-teller?”

Loki was aware that it was unwise to anger them but he could not quite bring himself to regret it either.

“Even a true seer could not tell you of alternative paths you might have taken. The prison escape, Kurse, the stairs to the left – you altered his path. Had you not, Frigga would have survived for a few more years – depending upon how you fare against Thanos, of course,” Urd said.

Loki’s jaw was tight.

“But do not mistake me,” she continued. “If Kurse had not killed your mother, then you in turn would not have set out on your course to kill Kurse and Thor would not be alive. One way or another, you would have suffered a great loss, both caused inadvertently by your actions.”

Loki could not formulate words to speak.

“Now listen carefully,” another one of the three instructed, “because you have almost wasted all the time you have. You know what is coming, yes?”

“Thanos.”

"He who would break apart the wheels of fate."

"That aspect does not sound unappealing."

"You have no idea, godling, of the role that fate has played within your life," Urd said.

"Actually, I think I do," Loki corrected coldly. "And in this instance, I would gladly help Thanos destroy it."

"You blame fate for the mistakes that you have made and you seek to avoid responsibility and shift the blame like a child! The fault is your own!"

"How easy it must be to say that from the point of view of the ones who have the grasp of the spindle."

"Make no mistake – we do not control fate. We spend our lives attempting to coax and persuade it, but fate is not an easy beast to tame. Fate does not run like yarn does; it has a will of its own, and often there is little we can do regardless of our knowledge of all of the potential paths that lie ahead to form the tapestry."

"How strange, it almost sounds as if you are trying to absolve yourselves of the blame."

Another one spoke, the one Loki suspected was Skuld. "What tragedies lie in your past will be nothing compared to what lies ahead in your future if you proceed not to listen to us."

"Tragedies that lie ahead in my future?" Loki scoffed. "All I can do is die. I am the only person left in the entire universe that I still care for."

"You should learn quickly that it is not easy to lie to beings that have borne witness to your entire
past and all of the futures that branch ahead of you. Thor still lives,” the middle one said. “Your brother still lives.”

Loki's eyes shifted between each of them. “Why haven’t you visited him as well if you find me so uncooperative? Heroism is much more his area. I care not whether you die. I care not whether Thanos destroys realms upon realms until the surfaces of them are covered in nothing but blood and bone. I have no wish to die. I will be the saviour of naught but myself.”

“Yes, child, we know,” Urd said. “I have borne witness to every decision you have ever made, and I hold you as personally responsible for many of the wrinkles underneath my eyes. I know you more than you know yourself and there is nothing you could do that could surprise me.”

"What she means to say is that your threads are particularly... stubborn. We've had little success manipulating them in the past. We had hopes that speaking to you in person would yield better results than invisible and from afar,” the middle one – Verdandi? – explained.

"If it's my soul you're after, I'm afraid it's already been claimed."

"We require nothing that belongs to you. It is our wish to attempt to guide you, for our mutual benefit. Should Thanos find us he will attempt to slay us, and we wish to remain... intact."

"You want me to kill him for you then."

"You were already going to attempt to kill him for your own benefit. Our goal is to increase your chances of succeeding."

"Continue."

"The key to Thanos's power lies within his control over the Infinity Gems. Therefore, the key to defeating him also lies within the gems. I have been informed that you have already formed a unique alliance with one of the gems."

Loki instantaneously knew she was not referring to the Mind Gem. And how the Soul Gem had marked him could hardly be described as an alliance.

"The Tesseract," Loki murmured.

Skuld nodded a confirmation. "You are one of a very select number of beings who have successfully entangled with the Tesseract before. Hela had good reason to choose to be the one to defeat Thanos. The odds are considerably higher in your favour than almost anyone else's with the advantage of the Tesseract."

"But–"

"Yes, the Tesseract alone will not be enough."

"The remaining gems, then.” Loki's voice was flat.

"Correct. There are minor complications, however."

"Beyond merely locating them?"

"Yes. You will never master the others. We've examined every thread of fate that branches ahead of you, and in none do you master them. Forget the Mind Stone and the Aether – it is the Time Stone you should seek. If you wish to succeed you will need to form an alliance with a person who
can master it."

Loki stared ahead blankly for a second. "If you tell me that my oaf of a brother is the only person who can master it..."

"Not Thor."

"Who then?"

"Your threads have intersected in the past before."

"The name, if you would be so kind."

"On one condition. After we tell you, you must immediately find him. If you do not, he will die. The universe's odds of surviving fall considerably lower. You must remember that we truly have examined all the branches and it is only in the paths in which the two of you form an alliance that your chances are highest and it becomes a possibility that you succeed."

"The name," Loki repeated.

Verdandi retrieved the Tesseract from where they had placed it around a corner.

"The name he goes by," she said, thrusting it into his hand, "is Tony Stark."

Tony Stark? A mortal Midgardian man? Loki would have laughed if he had not been so stunned.

It took a short moment to recall which one of Midgard’s self-proclaimed group of mightiest heroes Tony Stark was. He was the one with the flying suit of armour, the one who had somehow managed to resist the Mind Stone which had marked the beginning of a series of events resulting in Loki’s failure.

“The Avenger?” Loki asked, perhaps on the off-chance that there was another Tony Stark somewhere who was not so quite so frailly mortal and who did not already classify Loki as an enemy. A withering look confirmed his worst suspicions.

“And how exactly do you propose that I persuade—”

“You agreed!” she hissed. “You must go! Now!”

Loki clutched at the Tesseract, willing it to succumb to his will and focusing his thoughts upon his memory of the city of Midgard.

“Wait!” Loki urged. “The Time Gem – where is it?” The blue of the Tesseract was growing and brighter.

Verdandi made a quick gesture with her hand as if she was throwing an invisible object at him.

Loki caught a brief glimpse of a vision, one of the inside of a cold icy chamber. Before he had time to make sense of it, the vision was obliterated by the blast of the Tesseract and the Norns were gone.
Chapter 5

There was a bright flash of blue and tendrils of icy smoke rose from Loki's back as he appeared at the top of Stark Tower. The Tesseract’s energy burned through the core of his bones like molten lava and it was a pain as sweet as it was sharp, a pain that Loki had missed dearly.

For a brief moment, Stark Tower was almost exactly as he remembered, except perhaps emptier. Then his vision cleared and the reason for the Norns’ urgency became apparent when he glanced the view of outside. The city was smouldering with the ashes of the buildings, and bodies were littered on the ground below like leaves fallen from trees.

Midgard was at war. Whether it was with itself or some other realm was unknown. He scoured the horizon, fearing the worst invader but finding no evidence to either confirm or deny it.

Loki disappeared into the tower but found it abandoned. If Stark was not inside of his tower then that meant he was likely at battle, and the Norns had somehow saddled Loki with the responsibility of finding him.

As Loki made his way out into the streets below, the evidence presented itself with the Chitaurian soldiers.

So it was Thanos then.

For reasons unknown, Thanos had turned his sights to Midgard. Had the Mind Stone led Thanos here or was it something more? Was there another Infinity Gem Loki was unaware of on Midgard?

Loki’s stomach clenched.

Stark was in more immediate peril than he would have guessed and the idea of himself saving the human's life was utterly preposterous and yet... If the Norns had told him the truth, then his own life would rely on Stark's survival.

Loki moved forwards, using his ears as guidance and he rendered himself invisible to the eye, not out of fear of the soldiers, but for the purpose of passing through them with greater efficiency. The resounding chaos of the battle could not be mistaken. The capital of the planet had been destroyed almost beyond recognition.

The number of Chitauri far outnumbered the number of humans. The humans were everywhere all at once. Lying dead on the ground, shooting from floating ships in the sky, fighting on hand and foot. None of them knew yet how little chance they stood, how futile their efforts would be.

All the fighters would die.

Loki was running now, the Tesseract in one hand and Gungnir in the other. Twice he narrowly avoided tripping over stranded corpses and another time he only just managed to avoid a story of a building collapsing above him.

Stark. He had to find Stark. Loki might have had trouble accepting that Stark was supposedly a person who he could benefit from, but he had no wishes to take a gamble on his own fate by allowing him to die.

Loki pushed forwards into the heart of the battle where humans and Chitauri alike were fighting so densely that there was hardly any path for him to walk through.
He scanned the sky and the ground both, searching for the red and gold armoured man. Red was everywhere. A shield, painted in red and blue and white lying forlornly on the ground. The copper hair of Midgard’s own spider splayed across the pavement and next to her, the metallic blood-red synthetic skin of the one they named Vision. There was a sickening empty hole in his forehead where the Mind Stone had once been.

Blood. There was so much blood. The battle must almost be over.

Thanos must have got what he came for.

At least Heimdall must have managed to transport Thor back to Asgard.

Loki turned another corner.

He had so little time.

Then he saw him at the end of the street. Thanos. The icy blue of his eyes sent chills so deeply down Loki’s spine that it caused him to freeze. It was only when Thanos's eyes moved over him that Loki was able to move again.

Stark. Where was Stark?

There were still no signs of him flying in the sky. Was Loki too late? Had he risked coming here for nothing?

Loki searched the ground again instead, clinging to the hope that the man may be fighting on his feet instead of in the air.

A flash of red high up heralded his attention. But it wasn’t Stark, instead—

*Thor?*

Thor wasn’t supposed to be here! He had sent Thor to lead Thanos on a wild goose chase, not to challenge him in combat! And Heimdall— He had counted on Heimdall ultimately betraying him in the end, but he had trusted Heimdall at least get Thor away the instant Thanos got too close. Heimdall must have not believed him, must have assumed that Thor stood a strong fighting chance against Thanos – either that or he must have assumed that spiriting Thor away would play some part in Loki’s schemes.

It didn’t matter now. Neither had listened. Thor was here.

A cold wave of fury washed over Loki.

He couldn’t afford distractions and this – this was a distraction.

Thor launched himself through the air and thunder boomed as he emitted a huge bolt of lightning from Mjolnir.

Thanos did not so much as flinch.

Loki looked away. Thanos was not angry yet; he was practically welcoming the attack with arms open wide. Thor still had time.

It was imperative that Loki managed to locate Stark. Stark was the key to surviving. He had to, he must, he had no choice but to prioritise finding Stark first, no matter how much it tore at him.
He’d already died for Thor once.

Then – there in the shadow of the buildings, he saw it. Loki’s stomach plummeted further, but he ran towards it regardless. The shell of the armour lay sprawled on the ground before him, the metal dented and singed in too many places to count.

No no no – this was supposed to be his only chance to live. The only way he could fulfil his end of the bargain. The only way he’d see Frigga again and not have to watch the universe wilt away into a lifeless eternity.

Loki’s hands flittered over the faceplate. Stark had to be alive. He had to be. If he had been too late…

The amour twitched and Loki could breathe again.

Alive. Stark was alive. That was good. That meant that there was still a minuscule fraction of a chance that he could survive this.

Something exploded behind him and the impact sent Loki flying backwards.

Thanos.

Thor.

In a strange disentangled moment of realisation, it occurred to Loki that he had never actually been on the receiving end of Thor's lightning up until that point. After the white flash hit, he was no longer capable of moving and there was a short moment of anticipation between the impact and before the pain started.

There was a second of nothing and then electricity stormed through his insides and his veins felt like they were on fire, on fire or going to explode or both. He couldn’t move, couldn’t cry out in pain or shock, couldn’t do anything but wait for it to stop.

The aftermath of the strike left Loki with the stench of burnt leather and a tender soreness festering at his insides.

When his limbs stopped vibrating and he managed to sit up, Loki turned around only to realise that the lightning had not come from Thor. It couldn’t have. Mjolnir was not in either of his hands.

Loki crawled forwards on all fours towards Stark and began to wrap one of the metal hands around a handle of the Tesseract container.

It was entirely involuntary how Loki’s eyes flicked upwards towards Thor. Mjolnir was in his fist now but it did him no good. Thor hung upside-down, entrapped within one of Thanos’s giant fists, and for all his swinging and all the blows he delivered, he came no closer to freeing himself. Loki’s illusion slipped and he was only made aware of it because Thor was staring straight at him, suddenly hopeful. Loki had no doubt that Thor would have shouted out his name if not for Thanos squeezing the life out of him.

Now. They had to go now.

Any delay would do nothing other than lower their chances.

The hope in Thor's eyes had diminished and there was a desperate hurt weaving with the fear. His eyes begged and pleaded for help, for Loki to just do something.
Stark's hand was fully wrapped around the handle now and Loki's was around the opposite, but he could do nothing but stare, transfixed.

Then Thor began screaming. It was a horrible sound, a breathless mixture of gasps and wheezes.

Loki scrambled to aim Gungnir, to blast, to fire, to somehow make it all just stop.

Instead, it was Thor's screams that stopped.

Loki's eyes were wide, his mouth open as if to shout for Thor's name but no sound left it. Thanos dropped Thor's body as if it were nothing more than a rag doll.

"THOR!"

Loki tried to surge forward and Thanos turned, almost in slow motion.

"Loki." Thanos dragged out the last syllable and he wore the mockery of a smile. "I see you have finally brought me the Tesseract."

Loki stopped in his tracks. The Tesseract was in plain sight, left with Stark's hand still wrapped around it.

"And you have arrived just in time to receive your crown," Thanos continued. "No one can say that I do not honour my bargains."

Loki couldn't think. Couldn't speak. Could hardly move.

"Come forward then, Asgardian, Frost Giant, I do not care what you call yourself. Hand the Tesseract to its rightful master in return for your long-awaited coronation."

Loki's fingers tightened around Gungnir's shaft.

"Have no fear," Thanos commanded, "I do not punish those who have been loyal to me. Now," he said when Loki still did not move, "hand it–"

The Hulk crashed into the Titan's body. Loki reeled backwards. He made a dive for the Tesseract and grasped its handle and pulled and the Hulk's roar was the last thing he heard.

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"What– Wh–"

Loki couldn't hear the man's stutters anymore; his ears were filled with the sound of the last of Thor's screams.

The Tesseract slid from Loki's fingers and fell to the floor and Loki's breath came out in rugged raw breaths.

Thor was dead.

It was a fact, yet Loki's mind refused to accept it. Thor had always seemed so invincible, so solid, so alive. Thor would have wanted to die a warrior's death, Loki dimly recalled, yet he was certain that this was not what Thor had in mind. There was no glory in this, no honour, no one left behind that Thor would have saved in an attempt to make his death mean something while he played the self-sacrificing hero.
Loki hadn't realised that his fingernails had been digging into his scalp.

Thor was dead.

And Loki hadn't stopped it.

For once, Loki hadn't started it either. He could have stopped it though, he could have used the Tesseract earlier and grabbed the two of them from Thanos's clutches. No, no, that wouldn't have worked. That couldn't have worked. Thanos would have seen him with the Tesseract, it would have taken longer, and then maybe Thanos would have been able to use the Power Gem to steal the Tesseract for himself. Another Infinity Stone within Thanos's power would be a death sentence for all. He had to have let Thor die. Didn't he?

But how could Thor be dead?

Something hit him in the back of the head. Loki turned around to see Stark fully clad in his armour firing something bright orange at him. It hit his face this time. It had more force than the last impact.

"TAKE ME BACK! TAKE ME BACK!"

Had Stark been yelling the whole time? Loki was unsure. His shouts were background noise against the torrent of his memory currently sweeping away at–

Another blow hit him and it came close jolting him out of his semi-trance-like state. There was something important. Something important he had to remember and do, but Loki could not think beyond the last expression on Thor's face.

Stark's armour made another protest as damaged joints creaked against each other, and then the man charged towards him and a great metal fist punched him in the stomach.

Loki barely felt it.

"I SAID TAKE ME BACK!"

Loki blinked at Stark through the darkness. Why was he so determined to go back? His friends were dead, the only thing waiting for him on Midgard would be death.

Loki shoved Stark off him and Stark ended up lying in a heap in the snow. Stark barely paused before he was staggering to his feet to launch another attack.

The whirring noises of the machinery rather gave away his intentions. Purely out of reflex, Loki dodged it this time.

"You wish for me to take you back to Midgard?"

Stark flipped up his faceplate and blood poured from a gash in his forehead. His eyes were like steel. “Take. Me. Back.”

There was a reason Loki shouldn’t, a reason that if he did Thor’s death, his own death, all of it would have been for nothing. But Loki wasn't sure what it was anymore. Stark was the reason he watched his brother die. He wanted to. He wanted to watch Stark die as if that would somehow bring his brother back to life or justify his death.

"Why?" Loki snarled.
Then Stark unleashed several things from his chest at once which Loki could not identify or dodge all at once. One hit his stomach, another made contact with his shoulder, and when they exploded they left behind a stinging pain.

"Because they need me!"

"He’s dead! All your friends are dead!"

Stark shook his head. "No, no, no, no, no. They need me, they need me–" Tears fell down Stark’s face and his voice hitched. "They’ll die without me. I can't let him win! I can't let them die while I'm out here!"

Loki didn’t know whether it would be better or worse to live in a similar state of denial.

"Your planet has already lost. Your team is dead." Loki barked out a bitter laugh and revelled in Stark’s pain; it was better than drowning in his own. "There's nothing left on your planet but death."

Stark made to move forwards and one of his legs almost buckled under his weight. His nostrils flared and his glare turned to fire instead of steel. "I SAID TAKE ME BACK!"

"No," Loki replied curtly.

Stark made a desperate grab for the Tesseract, but his movements had grown slow and feeble and with a single kick, Loki sent Stark landing back in a heap on the snow. Stark spat out blood and clutched a hand to his ribs as he struggled to sit up again.

"No," Loki finally said when Stark failed, "I will not be your aid of transport towards certain death." He tore his eyes from the Tesseract to glance at the fragile pile of human and metal and blood. "I have need of you and I require you to be very much alive."

"Fuck. You. Horns." Stark’s breathing was laboured and more blood seeped from his wound, a river of red running down his face.

Stark attempted to push himself up again by pushing off the snow with his hands but his elbows collapsed underneath him.

"Oh no," Loki said, "believe it or not, no matter how glorious it would be to see you suffer, we are on the same side this time around."

"Like hell we are!" Stark choked out, but his voice was weak and breathless.

"Listen to me!" Loki’s voice was hoarse. "I have more reason than anyone to see Thanos dead! I will make him suffer for this, even if I have to die to do it!"

"Then where were you?" Stark clutched at his midriff and involuntarily convulsed. "Where were you?" Another convulsion and his eyes rolled back into his head. Loki’s rage ebbed and was replaced by nothingness as he stared, unsure of what action to take. Stark’s eyes had lost their usual focus and he gazed up at the night’s sky. "What use are you?" Stark said and his voice trailed off as he sank into unconsciousness.
Chapter 6

There was nothing but the echo of Thor's final scream to fill the silence. The betrayal in Thor's eyes would haunt him into the next life, Loki was sure of it. In life, Thor had been idiotic; in death, he had been more so. Why couldn’t Thor just have listened to him? Why had Loki been stupid enough to believe that this time would be any different?

The final moment kept replaying over and over in his mind’s eye. Thor had seen him, his eyes lighting up with hope at the sight of his wayward sibling. Then Loki had done nothing. The panic and hurt were the last emotions he’d see on Thor’s face. It was as if he had been expecting Loki to join him in the futile battle against a being he had no hope of defeating. Had Thor expected Loki to join him in death? No, Loki decided, Thor was merely disappointed that Loki did nothing but watch him die.

Why? Why was Thor's disappointment so unsettling all of a sudden? Not so long ago Loki would have revelled in it, would have delighted in it. It had been so freeing to intentionally cause disappointment and hurt to those who had once claimed to love him.

Something had started twisting like a tangled thread inside of him years ago. That thing grew and grew into huge chaotic knots that no one, not even Odin, could untangle. Maybe Loki letting go of the Bifrost was his only way of letting go of his need to please Odin but it wasn’t until Odin spoke those cruel cruel words: *it is only because of your mother that you are alive* that the urge to make Odin proud completely came to pass.

Before, Loki would have been outraged, would have let his shock and hurt guide his every move and word, but the revelation that he’d never satisfy Odin had altered him irreversibly. The twisted thing had conclusive evidence that Odin would never give him the same justice as his golden son.

The twisted thing was delighted that Thor went against his own stubborn nature when he finally relented in begging for his not-brother's repentance. *If you betray me I will kill you,* Thor had promised. The twisted thing found pleasure in that threat but there was another thing mixed with the vindictive joy too: the small lingering ache that not even Thor trusted him anymore. The twisted thing left little space for anything else – until Frigga died, that was.

The twisted thing was quiet now. Maybe it died with Thor.

Thor died believing that Loki was aiding Thanos, that Loki was making true of his promise to bring him the Tesseract. Loki’s end of the bargain would have been complete. All Thor witnessed was a blue flash and a brief glimpse of Loki with the Tesseract in hand.

In Thor’s last moment it had been so obvious, so apparent, that he’d been desperate to trust Loki again. This time he could have done, he could have done when it came to this. But there had been no time to let him know and so Thor died believing that Loki had one more cruel trick to play, that he had come back from the land of the dead to betray Thor one final time and watch him die.

Was this guilt? Was this regret?

Loki had not felt either of those things when he set about to slaughter the race of Frost Giants, or when numerous humans died as a result of his actions, or when he made Thor fall from the floating fortress in the sky.

Why now? Why feel this now when his intentions were by comparison so pure that it almost
repulsed him?

Objectively, Thor's death should have changed nothing. Thor was not family. Thor was the one who burned brighter and brighter for no other reason than to cast a larger shadow, Thor was the one who he had wasted years of his life trying to compete with. He should have realised sooner; he could never win by competing for the same goals.

Loki should have been laughing.

Finally, finally, somebody had bested his brother. And Loki had gotten what he wanted, he had snatched Stark away from Thanos with barely a moment to spare.

Loki threw Gungnir down at the rocks on the ground and the collision of metal and stone rang out. Stark awoke immediately, his eyes flying open and ill-formed shocked noises escaping from his mouth.

Loki glared at the thing who was not his brother, the thing who his brother had to die for in order to be saved.

The thing dared speak.

"What–"

Loki charged at it and slammed it into a rock face, hand pressing down on its throat. Its pulse was a hailstorm of beats and when it tried to open its mouth, no sounds but rasps came out of it. Loki stared into its eyes. It was the reason Thor was dead.

Something made a whirring sound and blasted the hand that had been crushing its neck. The shock of it stunned Loki a little and he blinked.

It stared up at him and Loki could see the whites of its eyes surrounding the irises.

It changed its stance so that its hands where pointed at him.

It was broken but it was a fighter.

Loki remembered the first day his brother swung a sword, the first day that his brother won a fair fight, the day he made his first kill. There was no reason for Thor to be so intrinsically linked to the thing in front of him but he was. Unjustifiably. Inexplicably.

How could it be standing there in front of him breathing and living and with blood beating through its veins while Thor was dead?

Loki stalked forward, like a predator advancing on its prey. The prey fired its golden shocks at him but Loki was prepared this time and he absorbed the damage without it slowing him down.

He struck out with an arm. The thing tried to fly over his head but it was too slow and Loki had it by the neck again, like an insect caught in a trap.

But there was no satisfaction in it. The edge of the raw fury grew worn by the gnawing instinct that something was wrong.

"Urk!"
The instinct became stronger and Loki’s doubt caused his hand to loosen enough to allow it to breathe.

“Is this what you needed me for?” the thing spat out. “Just to kill me personally?”

It was as if Loki’s hand let go of its own accord and his fury was replaced with uncertainty. Had Loki really said he needed it? For a moment, Loki wondered why he would bother to spin such an elaborate lie. Then it came to him. The thing in front of him was the one the Norns said could master the Time Gem – Stark was his means of killing Thanos. If he could wield the Time Gem, would that mean he could reverse this? Would Stark be able to bring Thor back? Loki could have laughed and screamed all at once. How could he have forgotten how much the Norns liked to mock him? Of course, the creature Thor died for would be the only one who might be able to bring him back.

Loki wiped at his eyes and turned his back upon the man. He had no wishes to see Stark’s face, not when it was an unpleasant reminder of his current reality. The man was infected with mortality. A single loss of temper could result in his death and with it, all hopes of bringing Thor back and seeing his mother again would die.

Instead, Loki carried himself to the edge of the precipice and sat, legs dangling so there was nothing but air between them and the far away ground, staring down the steep drop of the mountainside and snow and acknowledging for the first time which realm he had transported them to: Jotunheim.

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Loki had not realised that he had fallen into some sort of stupor until he was jolted out of it by a noise. It was quiet at first but it grew louder and louder and then he was able to identify it. It was the sobbing gasps of a man deep in grief. For a brief glorious moment, Loki didn’t understand where he was or who the noise was coming from and then it dawned on him that it was Stark and Thor was dead.

The realisation knocked the wind out of him like a fist to the stomach.

Something exploded and the ground gave a violent shudder accompanied by the unmistakable rumble of rockfall.

Stark must have been the culprit, Loki concluded with little feeling. But Stark was supposedly his biggest hope of survival, of getting Thor back, of seeing Frigga again, of taking his revenge.

Something inside of Stark – whether that was his mind or his abilities or some fundamental part of his identity – would allow him to wield the Time Gem. Whether or not Stark knew it yet.

The body that contained the mind was disconcertingly fragile. It could die, Loki knew, if it went without substance for a small number of days, if it got too hot or too cold, if it contracted a strange Midgardian disease… The list went on. A flash of an image: Loki hurling Stark's body out of a window, of his hand squeezing Stark's throat.

It would have been so easy.

But then there would have been nothing to wait for but an eternity in Helheim.

Loki picked up Gungnir and walked closer to the man.

Stark didn’t seem to notice.
"Stark," Loki said, his voice cautious.

There was no visible response. Stark’s armour continued whirring and his metal-clad hands clutched desperately at the icy rocks he was sat on.

"Stark?" Loki said again, louder this time.

Nothing.

Loki moved forward until Stark became visible, his body huddled on the floor, quivering with erratic breaths. Loki wondered how many of Stark's friends he had to watch die and had to pause to search for the words to coax Stark into cooperation.

“I know what it looks like,” Loki said quietly, “but it’s not too late for them.”

A wet strangled noise emanated from Stark’s throat.

“Not too late for them?” Stark yelled, his voice cracked and wavering. “Not too late for them? They’re dead!”

Stark's metal hands aimed unsteadily at him.

“For now they are,” Loki admitted. “But I wouldn’t recommend doing that.” He nodded to whatever it was that Stark was aiming at him.

Grief was pouring down Stark’s face and his whole body was vibrating with it.

“Really?” Stark spat out between gritted teeth. “Because I can’t think of a single reason why not.”

“Because I am the only person who can help you bring them back.”

Stark stilled. “Tell me.”

“I doubt that you’re in a state of mind to believe me. Perhaps–”

“TELL ME!” Stark demanded and he flew, knocking Loki backwards.

“Listen to me!” Loki hissed. “Do you dare think for a second that the loss of your friends even compares to my loss of Thor? Do you? I’d gladly watch you die for not dying in his place if I had not been informed of your role to come!”

Stark’s metal fist crunched into his face.

“You should be on your knees thanking me!” Loki snarled. “If it wasn’t for me you’d be dead along with the rest of them.”

“You had the Tesseract! You could have saved them all!”

“Even if I had the liberty of choice, what reason would I have to–”

Stark’s face was contorted with rage and he launched through the air, hurtling straight towards Loki and hitting him square in the chest.

Loki plummeted in freefall, Gungnir knocked from his grasp.

The wind roared in his ears and the velocity of the fall shook his flesh. If he was screaming, he
could not tell because he could hear nothing but the roar of air passing his ears. His hands clutched frantically, trying to find something, anything.

The Tesseract was still on top of the mountain.

Loki decided two things at that moment. The first was that he should have started using Stark’s name as a curse upon first meeting him, and the second was that he should have been more accustomed to the utter indignity and ridiculousness of being pushed from great heights by this point, given how much of a regular occurrence it had become.

There was little Loki could do but watch in anticipation as the ground grew nearer and nearer.

Colliding with the ground would not kill him but it was not the ground that was Loki’s primary concern. Loki’s main concern was the coniferous trees that often lined the bottom of Jotun mountain ranges and hillsides. If he was unfortunate enough to have one of the said trees come in between his landing and the ground, then he was certain that the Norns would see a fantastic irony in him dying by being impaled for the second time.

There were dark patches of green below him he could only assume were clusters of trees interspaced with areas of snow between them, and it was impossible to predict exactly where he would land as he plunged downwards.

The ground was closer now; it would only take a few seconds for him to make contact with it.

Loki squeezed his eyes shut.

Something grabbed him by the arm and he was abruptly yanked upwards.

Stark?

Then Stark let go and Loki fell into a heap on the snow, gasping for air.

"Now we're more even," Stark said, landing and flipping up his faceplate.

"Is this how you normally treat your saviours?"

"You abducted me, you didn’t save me – all you did was swap which insane supervillain I’d have to deal with. And I don’t know what the hell you want from me but you better get on with it."

Loki’s skin was coated in a layer of cold sweat and the rapid beating of his heart from the fall was yet to slow.

"The Tesseract," Loki croaked. "You have to retrieve the Tesseract." It would take far too long for Loki to walk back up the mountain.

"Right. Because you and the Tesseract were such a good combination last time."

"I need it. And if you wish to see friends alive again, you need me to have it."

"You think I’d trust you with that thing?"

"Trust that I have no desire to die. And my continued survival is intrinsically dependant on Thanos dying, which I believe is also within your best interests. The Tesseract is the only leverage we have over him—"

"We?"
“Oh, believe me, I like this less than you will. But yes, Stark, there is a 'we'.”

“So let me get this straight. All of a sudden you want to team up with me. You wanna play heroes? You really expect me to believe that?”

“Hardly,” Loki scoffed. "I am little more than a self-preserving monster, after all."

"Yeah, I might be able to buy that."

"Will you retrieve it then?"

“Do my eyes look glow-stick-of-destiny blue to you? You're gonna have to give me a decent explanation before I even begin to think about it.”

Loki did not like the idea of revealing too much information without Stark revealing information in return. “Are you familiar with the concept of Infinity Gems or Infinity Stones?” Loki asked instead.

“Er – vaguely.”

“Then you are aware that Thanos seeks to master them all, yes?”

“Thor’s briefing was kind of short– Shit! Vision! That’s why–”

“Yes,” Loki said, “the Mind Stone was what drew Thanos to your planet. Now he possesses three of the six Infinity Gems. Already he is almost unstoppable.”

“So cut the chase. Where do you think I come into this?”

“I will warn you of this once, Stark,” Loki said, “I do not take orders. And especially not from the likes of you.”

Stark rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I don’t exactly take orders either.”

“How audacious of you,” Loki said, his voice dripping with mockery, “refusing to listen to a superior being who not only has lived the length of your lifetime tens of times over, has far more intimate knowledge of the enemy than you would ever anticipate, who is the only living being the Norns informed of who is capable of stopping Thanos and how, and who – ah yes – also happens to be one of those said two people.”

“What – and I’m the other one, is that it?”

“Well, yes.”

Stark snorted. “Why the hell you’d class yourself as a superior being and whoever the fuck the Norns are can wait. What I really wanna know is what your plan is. Use the Tesseract to teleport yourself around and find the missing Infinity Gems before Thanos does and then have your little bad guy versus bad guy face-off? What's it that you want me for?”

“The Time Gem.”

"You want me to help you find some mystical gem,” Stark said flatly. “Because – hey, even if the thing exists – I guess I can see why you’d want it, you’d just be able to go back to before Thanos had the gems, and boom – problem solved.”

Loki blinked. "Yes. That would be the essence of the plan.”
"You're fucking insane!" Stark spat. "Your plan to defeat Thanos revolves around you somehow figuring out time travel."

"Actually," Loki said, "my plan revolves around you figuring out time travel."

Stark gaped. Then spluttered. Then he went into full-blown hysterical laughter.

"Do you… Do you…" Stark wheezed between laughs. "Do you have any idea how long people have been fantasising about inventing time travel? I mean – seriously? I know I'm a genius inventor and I'm very good with my tools but come on – even I couldn't just whip a time machine."

"I appreciate that this is no easy feat," Loki said stiffly.

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it. I don't even know where we are but even if I was insane enough to trust you – which I'm not, by the way – I don't have my tools. I have no workshop, no electricity, just fucking nothing out here. I can't even repair my suit, let alone invent a time machine."

"If we have the gem you would not be starting from scratch. Perhaps once you master it you will have no need of any such machinery."

"And you're not going down the DIY route yourself because…"

"Mastering a gem takes an enormous amount of power and energy and time that we do not--"

"Oh no wait – you don't think that you'll be able to do it, do you?"

"What? That is not what I--"

"That's why you're so sure you'll need me. I mean, you must only barely be able to use the Tesseract to teleport or whatever it does because you don't look so healthy after you do it."

Loki glared but it had little effect. "Are you going to retrieve the Tesseract or continue wasting more time? The longer you delay, the worse our chances of bringing them back become."

"What fucking choice do I have? If I go along with it, you've probably got some diabolical plan, but if I don't then I'll never know for sure whether I could" – Tony's voice cracked – "whether I could bring them all back. So I'm left with the fucking wonderful choices of either teaming up with you or waiting until my suit's heaters lose power and I freeze to death out here." Stark paused to take in his surroundings. "Speaking of surroundings – where the hell are we?"

"Jotunheim."

"Right. Sure. That's another thing I don't wanna have to deal with right now. You know what? I need a moment. I'm… I'm gonna go get the Tesseract. And not because you want me to. It's because I don't want anything worse than you finding it. And I'm not handing it over to you. No way."

"Truly, Stark, your genius astounds me. Not only are you refusing to hand over the Tesseract to a god who could just as easily tear it from your arms as I could tear off your arms, but you are also refusing to allow the only one of the two of us who can actually wield the Tesseract to teleport us away if it becomes necessary."

"Would you?" Stark asked.
“Would I what?”

“Would you hand over the Tesseract if you were me?”

“Given your situation, I’d at least make the appearance of being compliant.”

“Here you go then,” Stark said, taking exaggerated mocking steps backwards in the snow. “Watch. Here’s me. Making the appearance of complying. I’ll find you when I’m done.”

“I shall be locating Gungnir.”

"Who?"

"The sceptre I dropped after you flung me from the mountaintop, Stark."
Chapter 7

Loki stared at the footprints he left behind in the snow, circling around in meandering lines and leaving impure imprints in his wake. It felt strange to have weight, to leave something behind as proof of his existence. How could he still exist without Thor? He had never known life without Thor, and everything that Thor was shaped him into the monster that he had become. Thor had created the stirring need inside of him to prove that he was more than a little brother, more than a child who tagged along with his sibling, more than a nameless character in his brother's heroic tales. The more Loki tried to shine, the more Thor's shadow overcast until there was no option left but to combat Thor's brightness with a shadow of his own making. Loki was the shadow that Thor cast. Loki was Thor's polar opposite, and the more heroic the deeds his brother accomplished, the more terrible Loki made his own deeds.

What was a shadow without a source of light?

What was an object without an orbit?

Was Loki cursed to wander throughout the universe with no contrast, no source of comparison, nothing to strive to separate himself from?

Gungnir lay flat on the snow with a light scattering of flakes over the top of it and Loki picked it up with hesitant fingers. It was his now. He should not hesitate to take it. His fingers clasped more firmly around it and he turned to look for the metallic red and gold in midst of the blue and grey spectrum of Jotunheim's landscape.

There. It was the bright blue glow of the Tesseract underneath one of Stark’s arms that gave him away more than anything else.

Stark lay pitifully in the snow. Perhaps he thought that if he encased himself within armour for long enough, he too would become nothing more than a shell of unfeeling metal. Alas, the universe was not so forgiving.

"Pathetic," Loki spat once he reached Stark. It made no difference who it was directed at whether himself or Stark. "You can't remain there. The Jotuns will see you.” Stark didn’t move.

“Wonderful. Not only is the only man supposedly capable of assisting me to destroy Thanos prone to flinging me off mountaintops, but he’s also highly likely to end up inadvertently killing himself before he gets the chance to.”

"You think you have it bad? Are you kidding me? I’m not only stuck with the bitchy brat who went ahead and tried to take over my entire planet that one time, but I’m also stuck with the guy who could've saved everyone but didn’t!"

"Irrelevant."

"Every person I have ever known could be dead by now and that's all you have to say? Irrelevant? You think that an entire race of people is irrelevant compared to you saving your scrawny ass?"

"I barely had time to save you! Do you think if I had a single second to spare, Thor wouldn’t be here right now?"

Stark’s shoulders slumped with exhaustion. “I just don’t know. I don’t know what to fucking do.”

“If we get the Time Gem we can bring Thor back, bring everyone back. Reverse time, reverse what
happened, revive them."

"That's one hell of a big if."

"It is."

Tony laughed, high pitched and uncertain. "My best bet to save the universe is to bank on an insane alien with a serious god complex who's somehow got it into his head that I can just go ahead and build a time machine. How fucked is the universe?"

Loki pressed his lips together. "The sooner you accept that small odds are better than no odds, the sooner we can begin putting our plans--"

"--your plans you mean--"

"--into action."

"Go on then," Stark said. "What's your plan? Your short-term plan. Because right now we're in the middle of a frozen wasteland and some of those Yetins--"

"--Jotuns--"

"--have probably seen me flying around. I wasn't going for subtlety. A warning would've been useful."

"Do excuse me for not having the time to warn you of your visibility before you proceeded to throw me off a mountaintop."

"You had how many hours when you could have at least mentioned them?"

"As I recall, you were hardly in the mood to listen when--"

"Me? I was the one not in the mood? Who was the one who went full-on psycho and tried to strangle me?"

"I stopped! I stopped myself!"

"Yeah." Stark snorted. "Only because you remembered you think you need me."

"You have hardly proved yourself a worthy companion--"

"HA! A worthy companion!" Stark burst into peals of laughter, tears gathering in his eyes. "That's a good one. I think I'm losing my mind already. Maybe that's why you're so funny all of a sudden."

"Hush. We must either leave or find shelter before anyone sees us. If they see me, they'll most likely aim to kill me on sight, and I can only guess what they would do to you should they capture you. And that's the least of our troubles. If they realise we have the Tesseract, when Thanos comes he will have our trail and--"

"Yeah, I get it. Not good for us. Especially me. I'm stranded on an alien planet with an alien who everyone wants dead -- which reminds me -- what happened to you staying dead? And more to the point, now that I've had more time to think about it -- why the hell would I believe anything that comes out of your mouth?"

"As happy as I am to hear that your cognitive abilities appear to be functioning, we really do not have time for this."
“Then make the time because we are doing this. Now the shock’s wearing off, I’m starting to think that even beginning to believe you was a bad call. You do illusions, right? For all I know, every single thing I saw could’ve just been you. If you magicked Thanos up somehow – not that I’m admitting magic is a thing – and just made me think everyone died so I’d go along with everything and eventually make you a time machine… Big flaw there, by the way – might be overestimating me a bit. Which isn't something I admit often.”

For the first time, Stark was grinning. His voice was filled with a triumphant giddiness and Loki couldn’t quite figure out why it churned his stomach in such a sickening manner until he realised that Stark was just as desperate as him. The only difference was that Stark’s denial had warped his mind so much that it had fabricated its own convenient fiction, whereas Loki’s mind couldn’t help but fixate on the absolute truth of what had happened.

Loki had never been so acutely aware of envying a mortal before.

“But you underestimated me too because you never thought I’d figure it out, did you?” Stark took great delight in taunting. “So all I need to do is figure out how to break the illusion and get back.” Stark struck the ground with a fist and stared at the snow as if expecting it to vanish. “Huh. Feels solid enough. You must have actually teleported me then – so that means everything else before this planet was just you fucking with my head…”

Loki’s throat was tight.

“I wish that was true.”

Stark snorted.

“Like you’d have any remorse if it was. Like you’d care if Thanos wiped out the human race. What loss would it be to you?”

“My brother.” Loki’s voice cracked.

Something in Stark’s expression changed and his triumphant grin succumbed to the beginnings of doubt.

The sight of something moving through the trees was enough to disturb them from their impasse. The Frost Giants must have been coming for some time but Loki had been too distracted by having to deal with Stark to notice and they were too far away and too obscured by the branches for Loki to be able to estimate their number.

"Now look what you've done!" Loki hissed. "Quick – the Frost Giants must have seen you. Hand over the Tesseract and I can–"

“Bit convenient, isn’t it, that the exact minute I start to suspect, a big distraction happens?” Stark commented conversationally, taking a step backwards and holding the Tesseract behind him. “Oh no!” Stark had injected false horror into his manner of speech and held a hand to his mouth. “The illusionary monsters are coming so now I have no choice but to give you the Tesseract!” Stark marked the end of his playact with a smirk. “It’s not gonna be that easy to trick me.”

Loki unleashed a growl of frustration.

The sounds of feet on snow and the prowling of some sort of creature grew louder.

"Why are you so determined to get us both killed?"
“Drop the act. The only danger around here is me because now I’m just really pissed off.”

“Do you honestly believe that I could not have retrieved the Tesseract from the mountaintop by myself if I wanted it?”

“The Tesseract isn’t your end game.”

Loki made a move to snatch the Tesseract but instead of side-stepping, Stark flew upwards and out of reach.

The Frost Giants were so close that their voices were audible.

“Impressive,” Stark called down, “didn’t know you could do full surround-sound audio effects.”

“I can’t,” Loki said with loathing and made a gesture with his hand that vanished both himself and Stark from sight. “Stark,” Loki hissed to thin air, “we must leave.”

“Stop whatever mind-fuckery you’re doing and I’ll give you a headstart, how’s that sound?”

“Listen to me! None of this is false! Do you truly think illusions can feel solid?”

“You don’t have to illusion everything though, do you? Only enough to augment reality so all of it only seems real.”

Before Loki could reply, a Frost Giant emerged into plain sight over the other side of the clearing. It was far away enough for it not to hear them, but close enough to catch sight of the footprints in the snow that Loki had overlooked. No doubt it would call the attention of its fellow monsters to it.

Loki had to convince Stark. And quickly. But what could he possibly say that would be even halfway convincing? The answer was nothing. Stark wouldn’t accept the truth for no more logical reason than he didn’t want to, and if Loki openly denied he had deceived Stark then it would be instantly perceived as a lie. Loki would have to re-prioritise so that his immediate concern would be the two of them escaping the attention of the Frost Giants rather than convincing Stark of the truth. The truth could wait – the Frost Giants on the other hand...

“The Frost Giants are no conjuration of mine. You’ll find that they are very solid and very hostile. Whatever you might believe I have done, it will not harm you to choose a guaranteed safe option. Evade them. Don’t lose track of where I am. And—”

Loki was cut off by the impact of colossal-sized paws colliding with his back and landing with his face in the snow.

“Oh,” a deep voice rumbled from close behind him. “And there’s the other one.”

Loki pushed his head upwards to see that the distraction had cost them both their invisibility.

The Frost Giants surrounded them and they were not alone. They came with two beasts, two colossally sized wolf-like creatures with hungry hungry snarls.

One blast of Gungnir dealt with the beast that had knocked him over. Its rider came at him but Loki dodged to one side and took it by surprise by leaping on to its back, one hand clutching at its furs and the other conjuring a dagger.

The Frost Giants weren’t used to their enemies being able to come within such close proximity without freezing and Loki intended to use that to his advantage. But before his dagger found its
neck, the Frost Giant grabbed at his arm and propelled him forwards over its shoulder.

Loki landed on his feet this time. Then there were two of him, four of him, eight of him, all mirroring each of movement he made.

“Sorcery,” one of the Frost Giants growled.

Loki ran towards it and the other mirror Lokis scattered in different directions, each heading for a different target. He conjured fake daggers and projected them outwards so that each Loki threw out several blades as well. Only one dagger he threw was real but it hit his target, wedging itself deep in an artery in the giant’s neck.

Loki retrieved his dagger. Only another five of his illusions remained but even the Frost Giants were able to figure out the illusions only needed to be touched to be dispelled.

One of the giant’s eyes followed him and it must have deduced that only the original would be able to retrieve a solid object. Ice formations grew from each arm, a sharp scythe on one and a spiked club on the other. It sprinted towards him, faster and more agile than a creature of its size had any right to be.

Loki promptly vanished and the giant’s charge dwindled in its confusion.

Gungnir had had sufficient time to rekindle its energy since its last blast, so he took aim and the giant fell.

The group of giants came to a pause, unsure about how to proceed. It seemed that Loki had been distracting enough to make them forget that there had been more than one intruder upon their realm. He had an ally – at least, he was supposed to have an ally. Whether or not Stark was actually an ally was another matter, but Loki only had time for a quick sweep of the sky before leaping back into action when he failed to catch a glimpse of Stark.

Loki ran amidst the giants unseen, slashing and flinging knives where he might and conjuring brief flickering illusions of himself and his throwing blades to keep the giants confused. There were so many footprints in the snow that it made it almost impossible to distinguish his from the rest.

It was an effective tactic but it was very draining of both his magic and his physical exertion. Half of his daggers were wasted because the giants’ leathers were so thick.

One of them made a grab for him as he passed but he managed to twist himself free of its grasp before it seized him properly and the moment was so short that his skin retained its usual colour.

By Loki’s count, there were approximately eleven left.

It would be a long process of assassinating them from afar one by one until either he ran out of daggers or they ran out of numbers. He would rather have saved himself the energy and cost of his magic by slinking away into the trees, but if he did that then he might end up losing Stark for good. And speaking of Stark – where was he? Loki had glimpsed a flash of something that could have been one of Stark's blasts hitting one of the giants, but it had happened too quickly for him to be certain.

Another one of the daggers left his hand and a giant collapsed over the other side of the clearing, its blood spilling out onto the snow.

Another blast left Gungnir and hit its target.
The snow was getting very red.

Loki raised an arm to summon another dagger but then there was a sharp twinge of pain on the opposite side and something had seized his arm. Gungnir fell from his fingertips and he reflexly tried to wrestle his arm back but it only caused the sharpness to dig further into his arm.

Those somethings were teeth, Loki realised numbly, and they were dragging him from the outskirts and into the centre of the Frost Giants.

He hadn’t realised there had been more than one of the creatures.

He tried to conjure a blade to his left hand but nothing came. He must have used all his daggers.

One of the giants ran over to grab him by the other arm. Loki struggled and fought and tried to thrash his way out of their grasp to no avail. Another approached and seized his wrists together behind his back and the beast released his flesh from its jaws to bare its teeth in his face instead.

It shouldn't have been a relief that the giant was touching him over his armour rather than his skin but it was, just as seeing Stark finally make his appearance shouldn't have been a relief but was.

Stark walked in from somewhere behind the trees and held up his hands in an offering of peace.

Loki’s initial relief was very short-lived because in one of his hands, Stark held the Tesseract.

*Of all the races to show a magical blue glowing cube to,* Loki thought in despair.

"You want this guy gone?" Stark said, pointing to Loki and Loki’s previous relief vanished. He was not able to discern through Stark's faceplate what his intentions were. Had Stark decided they were allies or was Stark intent on seeing him suffer further? The Frost Giants stared at Stark, their faces stoic and revealing nothing. "I want the same thing as you. I'm gonna do you guys a favour and get him off-planet. If you'll let me."

"He has killed several of our number. He is an intruder who must be punished for his crimes."

"Trust me," Stark said, "he'll end up suffering for his crimes one way or another. Now – er, can I just..." Stark picked his way through the outer mass of the giants and moved to stand in front of the two that had a hold of Loki.

One of the giants that had seized Loki responded. "And why would we hold any value to your word? You are as much of an intruder as he is. If Asgard has so little regard for the terms of our treaty then we shall no longer continue to hold our ends of the bargain."

"Treaty?" Stark asked.

"He's not Asgardian," Loki said to them. "He has not broken any treaty."

One of the giants made a scoffing noise low in its throat. "Convenient."

"No," Loki insisted, "he is of Midgard. Look at his armour, listen to the manner in which he speaks and come to your own conclusion if you have the slightest capacity to make a reasonable deduction."

Stark lifted up his faceplate. "Yeah, hi. Earth-person here."

The giants looked at each other in wordless communication.
"If this is true then you, Midgardian, have committed no crimes against Jotunheim and are free to make your own way."

"No can do. Apparently," Stark said, directing a nod at Loki, "I need him."

Ally it was then.

"This one is ours," one of the giants grunted.

How Loki wished those words held less truth.

Stark sighed.

"I get it. More than you probably realise, I get it. You know, I'd probably do the same thing as you but you're not giving me many choices here. I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this. Watch this." A blast shot out of the palm of his hand and harmlessly hit the snow. "Now watch this. Do your worst, Friday." There were three blasts this time, all shooting out at different trajectories and colliding with three adjacent trees. "Now imagine that but instead I ask Friday to target all of you at once instead." Silence. "I don't wanna have to do that. Believe it or not, whether you survive who's coming depends on this guy right here being free or not. Tell you what – when we're done you can have him. He'll be all yours. But right now you've got to let him go."

Loki held his breath, hardly daring to believe that the giants might for even a second contemplate–

One of them made a throwing gesture with its hand and a fist-sized ball of ice shot out and narrowly missed colliding with Stark’s head.

"Take it that’s a no then."

Loki waited for the blasts but they didn’t come. Do it, Loki urged silently, do it and we can make our escape.

"Alright, guess you called my bluff–"

Another ball of ice shot out and hit Stark's forehead where it was still bruised and cut and beginning to swell. Stark hit the floor upon impact and Loki’s hopes collapsed along with him.

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Seeing the Tesseract in the hands of the Frost Giants sickened Loki almost as much of the thought of them touching him.

Using Stark as a hostage, they’d commanded Loki to remove his armour which they had claimed for themselves, along with Gungnir. His armour and Stark's armour were a part of the same pile kept in the arms of a Frost Giant, and the soft materials of Loki’s base-layers left him feeling very conscious of his new vulnerability.

They’d touched his things – his helmet, the Tesseract, Gungnir – with such casualness and callousness that he’d had to restrain himself from hurling insults at them.

He didn't. He had a distinct impression that shouting would only gain him a gag and Loki had no desire to be restrained any further than he already was. One piece of rope would be problematic enough but two was excessive. One secured his hands together and the other wrapped around his and Stark's torsos so they were forced to sit back-to-back on the back of the wolf-like beast pet of the Jotuns.
The beast liked Loki less than he liked it. It was nothing like a horse, although the Frost Giants used it like one. It seemed to deliberately move in such a way to make its spine shift uncomfortably beneath him and it growled and raised its hackles whenever Loki contemplated using his bound wrists to strangle it by the neck.

But whatever the creature was, it was obedient. However much it might have wanted to snap at them and knock their weight off, it refrained.

Stark was a deadweight but at least he was breathing. At the beginning of their journey, Stark would gradually loll more and more off to one side until Loki would have to attempt to recentre him by pulling his own weight against the rope to ensure that Stark would not cause them both to fall off, only for the process to have to be repeated again moments later.

Loki felt Stark stir behind him.

"Stark?"

He hadn’t much hope for Stark waking up so soon.

Stark's head moved again.

"Stark?"

"Mfft?"

"I'd recommend waking up."

"What?"

Good. Stark was conscious to hear exactly how displeased Loki was with him.

"It may shortly come to your attention that we have been captured."

Stark bolted upright and the movement caused the rope wrapped around Loki's torso to tighten.

"What?"

"Your little stunt with not handing over the Tesseract has resulted in the Frost Giants capturing us and tying us up on the back of one of their pet monsters."

"Shit."

"Indeed. Well done."

"Right. Because that was all my fault."

Loki would have given a pointed glare, but given that they were forced to face opposite directions, it would have served little purpose. Loki was forced to glower at the top of the beast's head instead.

"You completely disregarded everything I told you!"

"You killed how many of them?"

"You refused to so much as compromise when you started doubting whether the Frost Giants were real or not!"

"You kidnapped me and teleported us to the middle of their planet!"
"I had thought--" Loki broke off. What had he thought? Why had he chosen Jotunheim of all the realms to escape to? He supposed that given his history with it, it would be one of the last places Thanos would think to find him. "I had thought there might have been clues here," Loki opted for instead. It wasn't the truth but it wasn't exactly a lie either. It made sense the more he thought about it; during Loki's search for evidence of Infinity Gems, Jotunheim was the only realms he had neglected to research adequately.

"You might have given me a warning. You know, maybe don't whiz around the sky carrying bright glowing objects because it might attract someone's attention, that kind of thing."

"I hadn't thought to be your wet-nurse, Stark."

"Because giving me one single warning about what to expect on a planet I've never to been to is asking way too much. Have you forgotten I've never even left Earth before? You know if you actually asked me to help--"

"QUIET!" one of the Frost Giants to the side of them bellowed.

They settled back into the routine of doing their best to ignore each other’s existence and fell back in with the rhythm of the beast’s movement as it paced.

Their route took them up winding paths and down through valleys until the landscape became more and more barren. The snow on the ground became ice and they had to divert from the path to avoid a huge gaping chasm than ran for miles and miles. The wound in the realm's flesh was so deep that the bottom of it was not visible to the eye and once they passed the crater, cracks cut through the Frost Giants’ needle-like buildings and settlements without discrimination.

The Frost Giants walked beside them in solemn silence.

For a moment, Loki wondered whether the possibility of the planet opening up to swallow more of its surface should be something else to be concerned about. Then it occurred to him that it wouldn’t happen because he’d done this: this was his work with the Bifrost, not some freak display of nature.

It was odd to see tangible evidence that a single being, no, not just any being – himself – could cause such destruction on such a large scale.

No one spoke until they had travelled past it and the only thing distracting Loki from the laceration he had inflicted were the sporadic shudders that ran down Stark's back and every so often, the unnecessary twitches or rolling of the shoulders against his own.

"The only thing that could possibly make this any worse," Loki seethed in a whisper, "is being tied back-to-back with someone incapable of sitting still."

As if to irritate him, Stark's shivers began to come more regularly, sending tickling vibrations down his back.

Weak.

"Hey!" Stark raised his voice to address the Jotuns. "You guys want me alive, right?"

"Stark?" Loki questioned under his breath. "What do you think you are doing?"

Stark ignored him.
"You want to find out how I got here, what I have to do with him, and what the Tesseract is, don't you?" The Frost Giants did not verbally respond, but a number had looked to Stark with expressions that were not overt malice. "Which means you'll want to question us. Alive. And I wasn't lying when I said I'm from Earth – that's Midgard to you – and where I'm from we're just not that accustomed to the cold." Unsurprisingly, the Frost Giants did not appear sympathetic. "Hypothermia isn't ideal if you want me alive. And I'd prefer to avoid frostbite. I like having all my fingers."

The Frost Giant who dared command silence from them nodded to another who then removed the furs that covered its back and approached.

"Thanks," Stark said to it shortly after it disappeared from Loki’s viewpoint. "And while you're here, can you tell me what happened to my suit?"

Rather than replying, the giant slumped off.

"Trying to appeal to their better nature is futile," Loki advised.

"It got me warmth."

"Almost always futile," Loki corrected

"What about my suit?"

"They have it as well as my own armour within their possession," Loki explained as Stark wouldn’t be able to see for himself from his viewpoint.

Stark's spine grew stiff. "How'd they get me out? Did they damage it?"

"They managed to dismantle it by activating some sort of mechanism that caused your armour to unfold."

"What? They shouldn't have been able to do that. I guess my security must've got damaged pretty bad."

The next segment of their journey consisted of Stark inadvertently proving how futile trying to reason with the Frost Giants was by him insisting that they were actually there to save worlds. It sounded far-fetched and outlandish even to Loki’s ears, and it eventually resulted in Stark receiving threats of a gag. And then when Stark still did not receive the hint, it resulted in an actual gag. Loki supposed it had been inevitable.

Loki complied with the Frost Giants’ request of silence not out of fear of being reprimanded, but because he saw little point in either attempting to persuade them or attempting to communicate a plan to Stark. Neither of them were at liberty to so much as attempt an escape and even if they were, the Frost Giants were well within hearing range and would no doubt overhear their plans before they were able to enact them.

Besides, escaping would mean that they'd be separated from the Tesseract.

Appearing to be compliant prisoners would make escaping with the Tesseract easier later on, or so he hoped. At least the Frost Giants were unlikely to watch him continuously when they reached their destination. Their prisons would be much weaker than Asgard's, Loki reasoned, and far more primitive. Their realm had no core to draw its power from, not with the Casket of Ancient Winters taken, and so there would be no energy barriers to stop him, only physical matter and other Frost Giants who got in his way.
When Loki no longer had multiple Frost Giants watching his every move it'd be easy.
Chapter 8

Perhaps it wouldn't be so easy.

The Frost Giants hadn't seen fit to free them of their ropes, even after bundling the two of them into a cell. Loki supposed that it might have been flattering, how much they must have feared the risk he posed even when behind locked bars.

At least the Jotuns had not deemed it fit to starve them.

Two bowls of soup had been pushed through a hatch and then himself and Stark had to go through the tedium of attempting to coordinate their shuffling across the floor in order to get to the said food. The liquid was warm and salty and Loki was tempted to leave his bowl full out of spite and would have done, had his stomach not had other ideas.

Their cell was dismal.

The floor and walls consisted of uneven chiselled pieces of rock, as if the Frost Giants had mined the underground hollow and then neglected to bother making it the slightest bit hospitable. There were two windows high up, thick slabs of opaque ice that allowed blue and violet-tinted light to filter through, the only light to enter the cell.

Two buckets sat innocuously enough at either side of the cell but Loki desperately did not want to acknowledge them. Even in Asgard's cells, he hadn't been forced to degrade himself quite so much. Feeling something alarmingly akin to nostalgia for Asgard’s cells was a new low point and Loki despised himself for it. He blamed his unwanted introspection on Stark’s uncharacteristic silence, so quiet that it might have been easy to forget his presence if not for the light shaking of Stark’s body. Due to the Frost Giants allowing Stark to keep the furs they had given him, Loki suspected that the shakes might have had little to do with the cold but he saw little point in commenting on it.

"Are we just going to not talk about it?" Stark asked, the sound of his voice making Loki jump.

"Not talk about what?" Surely, Stark was not about to acknowledge what Loki had left unsaid.

"How much we fucked up."

Of course not.

"We?"

"Yes, we," Stark emphasised.

"You appear to have vastly underestimated the size of your role in getting us captured."

"Nope – I know exactly how much I fucked up, thanks. I had very good reasons for fucking up but it's kind of irrelevant at this point because we're here now, partially because of me. And yeah, I admit it, it might be mostly because of me, but you're partially responsible too."

"Assigning blame hardly matters at this point."

"Exactly. That's my point – or that was going to be my point. If we had a single good reason to trust each other, we wouldn’t be locked up right now. And I’m not saying we have to be best buddies and send each other Christmas cards. I’m just saying that not cooperating with each other is going
to make this Thanos thing so much harder than it already is. So if we want to go through with your batshit crazy plan because it’s the only one we’ve got then we need to fix that. Somehow."

**Somehow indeed.**

"I suppose this is an improvement upon you accusing me of fabricating this entire fiasco," Loki allowed, privately adding, *although being tied up together in a Jotun cell is not.*

Loki should have been angrier, should have been furious that the cost of getting Stark to finally believe him had come at the cost of their freedom. But Loki was too exhausted to deny that he wouldn’t have believed himself in Stark’s situation.

"I fucked up. What more do you want me to say?"

Loki doubted whether there was anything else Stark could have said, not that he wanted to admit it. An apology was hardly useful, particularly in their given situation, but at least an admission of fault meant there was recognition for the need of change. At least, that was a philosophy Frigga futilely endeavoured to install into Loki. *A true king admits his faults,* she had told him. But Stark was no king, Stark was a mere Midgardian mortal man who never had the burden of ruling a kingdom. No, Loki realised, only the burden of ridding the universe of Thanos with himself as his only ally.

"A plan of escape would be nice," Loki replied, half in jest.

Stark's huff of laughter was barely audible but Loki could feel it through the movement against his back.

"Yeah, a guy can dream. Makes me wish I still had Mark 42, I could just flash my hands and… Or I could if my hands weren’t all tied up. You got anything up your sleeve?"

"I have no more daggers to summon. The only weapons I have left to me are my illusions and my wits."

"You're the guy who managed to break out of a cell designed to contain the Hulk without breaking a sweat. If you can do that, Houdiniing your way out of this one should be a cakewalk."

Loki neglected to mention how much his escape had been aided by his blue-eyed subjects.

The Frost Giants were hardly renowned for their intellect, the only reason they had succeeded in capturing them was because of catching them off guard and vastly outnumbering them.

"If by that you mean escape then I am confident that my escape – our escape – will be inevitable."

Of course, the Frost Giants wouldn't waste their resources keeping the two of them locked up indefinitely. Loki and Stark would leave the prison one way or another – dead or alive.

"Good. Because the only plan that springs to mind is spending the next few days trying to rub through the rope using the rock around here. And that sounds tedious and not nearly Silence of the Lambs enough for your taste."

"A more elegant solution would be preferable," Loki said. Whatever they decided, they would have to act quickly. "If you would allow me to concentrate..."

To Stark's credit, he was able to fall into a somewhat brief silence in order to allow Loki to plot. Unfortunately, what he was not able to do was sit still. Muscles would twitch and flex in his back
whenever he fidgeted, hairs would tickle the back of Loki’s neck, and Stark appeared to find the idea of sitting straight inherently uncomfortable. It was maddening. Completely infuriating. But there was more at stake here than a loss of temper.

Getting captured by the Frost Giants like that had been at best humiliating and at worst potentially disastrous, but worse things could still happen yet. *Worse things have already happened* Loki’s mind whispered, *or have you forgotten so soon?*

Stark reached his limit and broke the quiet that had fallen between them.

“Who are the guys who got us anyway?”

“Frost Giants,” Loki answered curtly.

“Elaboration would kind of be helpful here.”

“They’re of a large size and are fond of the cold.”

“Funnily enough, I managed to work that one out myself. The name’s a bit of a giveaway. So... Backstory? I’m assuming there’s a backstory. Help me out here. Maybe if I know more I could actually come up with something.”

Loki let out a sigh.

“Fine. The Frost Giants are an ancient race who have the ability to manifest weapons of ice at will. They are neither forgetful nor forgiving. The Aesir don’t venture here for a reason; not only is it exceedingly dangerous, but it’s also against the laws of both realms and considered a breach of the peace treaty.”

“You guys don’t get along then.”

Loki scowled at the wall straight ahead of him. “How astute of you.”

Stark shrugged. “Just trying to find out as much as possible about my captors. Never know what details might be useful.”

“The Aesir and the Frost Giants have a long and blooded history—”

“—er, is that on both sides, because historically—”

“The Frost Giants are a race that needs to be kept under control. If their numbers become too high, they’re a risk to the rest of the Nine Realms.”

“How?”

Loki should have come to terms with how ignorant a Midgardian would be regarding the rest of the Nine Realms sooner.

“They wage war and destruction wherever they go.”

“So do you, buddy.”

“Do not presume to compare me to them!”

“Yeesh. Just calling out hypocrisy when I see it.” Stark waited for a response but he wasn’t granted one and so he spoke up again. “So that’s why they would’ve let me go if I hadn’t, you know,
threatened them. Because I’m not from Asgard.”

“Yes. But they have seen too much already. The sceptre I carried was... somewhat recognisable. And the same can be said for my armour. There are some here who may recognise my face.”

“Please don’t tell me you tried to pull the same shit here as you did on Earth.”

“I didn’t.” It was worse.

“So on a scale of one to ten, how futile would it be if I attempted to persuade a guard?” Stark took Loki’s silence as a confirmation of a no. “Bribe a guard?” Another no. “Befriend a guard?”

“You assume too much with your presumption that they so much as have a concept of friendship.”

“So trying to negotiate with them or come up with an agreement is out according to you?”

“It would be a waste of time. We have nothing they want. Aside from my head removed from my shoulders, that is.”

“Your head still looks pretty firmly attached to your neck to me.”

“Yes,” Loki curved his lips upwards bitterly, “because they have yet to figure out my true identity.”

“From now on I’ll just assume that every race has a reason to want to behead you.”

“Well,” Loki sighed, “you would not be wrong, for the most part.”

“Awesome. Anything else I should know?”

“Yes,” Loki said, ideas having inadvertently been spurred by thoughts of his own true identity. “I believe I have the beginnings of a plan.”

The ropes were the first priority. They needed to be off. But the ropes had a thick radius and were sturdily made. There was a solution to that problem – it was just a shame how repulsive that idea was.

Irrationally, Loki found himself grateful that Stark would be facing the opposite direction.

“I’m all ears,” Stark said.

"I need a Frost Giant to touch me."

“What?

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After having to push back against each other to stand up and position themselves against the wall, it was a waiting game.

The whole front side of the cells were barred, allowing any creature outside to see inside the whole interior of the cell. If one such creature was to pass their cell, they’d see one of the prisoners overpowering the other and repeatedly ramming the other backwards into the wall. And if they were to attempt to subjugate the prisoners so that one did not kill the other, they would find that their touches would pass straight through the prisoners. Of course, the touch of the real prisoners would not pass straight through whichever of the Jotun guards happened to enter.
Loki had little knowledge of where their cell was relative to the interior of the prison. The cells they had passed had been empty when they were first marched inside, and the layout of the passages was complex, with multiple twists and turn-offs in the underground system leading away into darkness. The true size of the prison was unknown to them, as was how many Frost Giants it contained, whether it be guards or other prisoners.

They’d have to improvise.

The first aspect of the plan followed as well as they had hoped. Stark's halfway convincing shouts of pain had drawn the attention of guards and two of them entered the cell, locking the door behind them before venturing further.

What exactly the Frost Giants would do to put an end to their apparent fighting, Loki had not been able to anticipate. Wrenching them apart would be impossible with the rope that bound them and removing the rope so that they could separate them would be idiotic, even for the Frost Giants.

It transpired that their solution was to freeze Loki.

Fortunately for Loki, it was the illusion of himself that received the brunt of it.

Loki took advantage of the temporary confusion and encircled the smaller one's neck with his wrists. The rope that bound his hands together pressed against its throat and as he did so, the base of his hands came into contact with its skin. Its skin was like polished granite, cold and polished and unyielding.

Loki didn't look down. He couldn't afford to look down, not when every second might have mattered so much.

The Frost Giant managed to let out a hoarse cry for help.

Loki's skin was crawling with blue.

The sooner he managed to break free of the rope, the sooner he could let go.

Loki pushed – not with his strength or with any of his limbs, but with something else that felt like a relation to his magic, something not quite the same but not entirely unfamiliar.

Ice erupted from his hands. It formed a shard between his palms and shot downwards to break through his wrist binds and then he pointed the shard like the tip of a knife against the Frost Giant's throat.

The guard remained still, its breaths coming out in short gasps.

But the remaining guard had seen him.

A pity, Loki thought. He discovered that the Frost Giant made a rather good shield. It was large enough to cover both himself and Stark if he forced it to, and it took the brunt of the blast of freezing cold that the other guard directed at them with its fingertips.

The guard circled around to get a direct shot at Loki. It didn't – Loki had turned with it so that the trapped guard was still between them. Stark stumbled slightly as Loki turned, enough to slow them down but not enough to unbalance them.

Loki and the guard were at an impasse but it was unlikely to last for long.
Loki pushed again and the rope that bound himself and Stark together split in two and there was a flurry of movement behind him that must have been Stark untangling them.

Loki shifted his grip so that his other hand was clutching at the armour the giant was wearing instead of its skin and warmth began to flood back through his veins. The blade felt cold now, like it would melt in his hands if he held it for too long.

"Stop where you are," the free guard commanded but its voice lacked authority.

"I think not," Loki replied.

The guard moved again but Loki, now unburdened with having another person tied to his back, was able to keep up with him with little effort.

With Stark armourless, it was a fight of two against one and Loki did not like those odds. There was nothing for it. He’d have to kill them both, starting with cutting the throat of the one in his arms first. The thought made him blanch – he didn't want its blood to touch him.

The guard did not attack with the Jotun between them, but it made no effort to escape or call out for more help. The other guards must have been too far away.

"Tie yourself up," Stark ordered the guard who was rounding on them. Has Stark lost all his sanity? Loki wondered. "Do it and your buddy here will live."

Loki grit his teeth in frustration. The Frost Giants were hardly a sentimental race, Stark was only wasting–

To Loki’s surprise, the guard complied.

"Good," Stark said, overseeing it as it wrapped a piece of the rope around its ankles. "Once you’re both tied, we’re heading out. So do us a favour and stay quiet. That knot needs to be tighter."

Stark was too close for Loki’s liking. One touch from the Frost Giant and he'd be frozen still or impaled with ice or worse. He should have warned him not to touch the Frost Giants – that was another oversight.

"Wrists next," Stark prompted, moving closer towards it.

Loki drew the tip of the ice flat against the throat of the Frost Giant within his grasp, close enough to draw blood.

"I've got a better idea," Loki interrupted before Stark got any closer. "You tie its wrists," Loki commanded the Jotun with the blade at its neck. It obeyed, eyes wide and filled with a naked display of fear that Loki had never seen before on one of their faces. "Hand over the keys. Not to me, to him," Loki directed, nodding at Stark. It did, fingers shaking. "Good," Loki said and drew the arm holding the blade back.

The Frost Giant opened its mouth and its eyes widened. They were wide and very very red. It visibly gulped. “Please – please don’t.”

Its voice had been higher pitched than Loki expected.

“Loki, you don’t have to kill him,” Stark urged. "He's just a kid – look at him. You could knock him out, take him with us to show us where we want to go, even use him as a hostage if you have to – just don’t kill him.”
“I’ll do whatever you want,” the Frost Giant begged, eyes frantic, “just let me live.”

“He might be able to show us where the Tesseract is.”

Loki paused for a brief moment. “I need a guarantee that it will stay quiet.”

"I'll stay quiet," it insisted, speaking so rapidly that there was barely any pause between its words, "I'll do whatever you want."

"I’m glad to hear it," Loki said after a second of hesitation and led it with him to crouch on the floor in front of the other guard. "Unlock the door, would you, Stark?"

Loki turned his back on Stark and forced a hand on the other Frost Giant, closing his eyes to the blue that must have been seeping into his skin. Slowly, he let the cold trickle out of his fingertips and accumulate on the lips of both the Frost Giants, building layer upon layer of sheets of ice over their mouths. They squirmed under his grip and tried to protest but Loki continued.

Loki stood up and waited for his skin to return to normal before he headed to the door, one hand clutching the younger guard’s leather and the other pointing the blade at the guard’s spine, not so much encouraging it forwards as he was giving it no other option besides impalement.

“What the hell did you just do?” Stark demanded once he had the door open.

“There is not enough time to explain. This one here is going to lead us.” He pushed the Frost Giant forward and hissed in its ear. “Try to trick us and I will kill you in the most painful and creative way I can think of. Now – the Tesseract.”

The Frost Giant made frantic gestures with its hands.

“I don’t think he knows what you mean, Loki.”

Loki sighed. "It was the bright blue glowing cube that was brought in along with us."

A light of understanding appeared on its face. It nodded a little and led them off in a direction to the right. Even through the fabric of the sleeve Loki used to hold the blade, it was so cold it hurt to grip and a drop of water ran down Loki’s wrist.

The passages were quiet, with only the mutterings of prisoners inside of their cells and the scampering of snow rats penetrating the eerie silence.

They proceeded further, taking another right and then a left that led them deeper underground. It was more difficult to navigate than Loki had anticipated so perhaps Stark had made a sound decision regarding using the Jotun as a tool to lead them to the Tesseract.

Lanterns were placed high up on the walls but they were unlike any lanterns Loki had seen before. The flames were shades of white and pale blue and lilac and he could have sworn they emitted coldness instead of heat.

After so long heading further downwards, they were finally led through passages that had an upwards ascent. The roofing began to lower and every so often Loki would have to weave around icicles that hung from the ceiling.

When they heard the echoes of voices, Loki began to suspect foul play and he whirled the Jotun around and pulled it into an empty passage off to one side. The Frost Giant stumbled and its footsteps echoed off the walls. Loki yanked the creature out of sight and Stark joined them in
hiding.

“Vildmund?” A voice called. Then it was joined by more voices, all calling the same name. The guards' wait for a reply stretched into silence.

Approaching footsteps, slow and quiet.

The guards were on alert.

Loki pressed the ice shard deeper against the Frost Giant's back and felt his hand becoming wetter but couldn't discern whether it was from water or blood after he had rendered the three of them invisible.

Then everything happened at once.

The guards – how many guards were there? – lurched into view, one with an ice mace extruded from one of its arms, another with a great club of ice, another with a spear. But there were more coming from behind them – how many, Loki could not tell. The passage was too narrow down their side and even if they remained invisible, the guards would surely run into them.

Without warning, a spike of ice shot out of the back of the Jotun in Loki’s grasp and pierced through his shoulder. Loki should have predicted it, should have foreseen that the creature would inevitably give them away, that it would lash out the moment it could, but it happened too quickly and he’d been too distracted by the rest of the Jotuns.

The Jotun launched itself away before the pain registered and produced more spikes from its fingers, using them to break away the sheet of ice over its mouth as it increased the distance between them.

“They're over there!” it shouted, pointing wildly at Loki and Stark.

The hole in Loki’s shoulder ached so violently that was difficult to move. Blood trickled down his chest and he clutched a hand to the wound.

The one with the mace ran forwards, weapon raised. The other one was not so far behind it.

“They have knowledge about the cube,” the younger one attested, eyes flickering to Stark.

A solid arm seized Loki by the waist and pulled him further back, forcing him to move. Stark didn't have the strength to carry all of Loki’s weight, but Loki was able to lean on him and stagger.

They didn’t make it halfway down the passage.
Chapter 9

Loki awoke to a pounding headache and shooting pains in his shoulder.

After careful prodding, he found tender bruising on his skull and a strange herbal smelling paste spread over his mostly healed shoulder wound.

He was alone in his cell this time.

There was little else but the pain and lingering memories of the sensation of being at one with the ice.

Loki crawled towards his cell door, peering out into the ominously empty hall.

“Stark?” Loki called, but it took just another glance to realise that the rest of the cells in the passage were empty.

The only answer he got was his own echo.

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Three Frost Giants waited for Loki’s answer from outside the bars of his cell door. As far as Loki was concerned, they could keep waiting.

“Who are you?” they asked again. Loki sat, back against the wall and turned away from them, making sure they couldn't see his face.

Softer footsteps approached.

“You saw him. He’s one of us,” the newcomer said.

“I am not like you!” Loki had not intended to retaliate but the words burst out of his mouth with such a ferocity that they brought him to his feet, yelling in the faces of the giants.

"Interesting." The newcomer looked Loki up and down. "But I suspect that’s not the complete truth. I heard you have a grasp of cryomancy and that your skin was as blue as our own. But you wear a disguise – the skin of an Aesir. That makes you not one of us; no Frost Giant would voluntarily disgrace themselves like that.”

Loki pressed his lips together to keep himself from screaming at them again.

“Your amateur ice play was the only real thing about you.” The giant moved closer towards the bars. “We’ve been analysing the items we took from you and they’ve led to some very interesting conclusions. We know your name as your companion ever so helpfully used it in front of us. We know you have ties with Asgard, and we know that a number of items within your possession could only have been acquired by a select few.” He cocked his head to one side thoughtfully. “It makes me wonder what you were hoping to accomplish here. Were you hoping to finish off what the Allfather started with the Bifrost?” Loki would have laughed in delight at their misunderstanding if it wasn’t for his fury. “What is the blue cube?” it asked. “Is it a weapon? Were you sent here to use it against us? How many has the Allfather commanded you slay? Who is your companion? Why do you travel with a Midgardian?”

Loki closed his eyes but when he opened them they were all still standing there.
The Frost Giant nodded at the others and when they disbanded it moved even closer, so close that its face was almost touching the bars.

“I remember your face from the last time the Aesir came to start a war.” The Frost Giant’s voice was less gruff than the rest but Loki did not recognise it in return. As they made eye contact, the giant placed a hand over the cell bars in a strange perversion of a gentle-looking gesture. “I know who you are. You are Loki, Prince of Asgard. There’s little point in denying it, the evidence is stacked high against you. In consideration of your inadvertent reveal of your true nature, I must admit that I find myself rather intrigued. Who are your true parents? We know that you and Odin do not share the same blood – not unless Odin’s greatest secret is that he himself is a Jotun.” The giant gave a wry smile of amusement.

Loki squeezed his eyes shut but he could still sense it there, observing him with unnerving calm.

“Assuming Odin did inform you of your true bloodline, of course,” the Jotun added.

He wouldn’t hear its words, Loki decided. He’d ignore it, he’d will it out of existence, he wouldn’t allow such a lowly creature to toy with his temper like that.

How desperate he was for it to be that easy.

“I’d prefer it if you voluntarily gave us an answer. Neither of us would much like the alternative.”

Loki’s eyes opened slowly. “And what would the alternative be?”

“Well, we know that you are a valuable and not to mention a most mysterious hostage. Your companion, on the other hand, we have no recognition for.”

“I assure you,” Loki said, “that he happens to be highly valuable.”

“We thought you might claim that. But we were hoping for some truth – a name isn’t too much to ask.”

Loki tilted his head upwards and met its gaze, fighting back the phantom taste of bile. “And if I don’t find myself feeling quite so generous?”

“There’s no need to look like that. We have no intention to harm him – we’re not monsters you know.”

No. We’re all monsters.

A scoff erupted from Loki’s throat, a retort that held no trace of humour.

“You’ve spent too long in Asgard.” The Frost Giant’s impassive mask broke when it sneered. “Did they disguise you or is it a disguise of your own doing, illusionist?” it asked and Loki didn’t answer, couldn’t answer. “Do you even know yourself?”

Loki turned his back on the creature. He couldn’t afford it seeing his face, it would reveal far too much.

When Loki was able to breathe steadily again, he turned around and picked at the grime under his fingernails in a display of forced nonchalance.

“You have strange methods of interrogation,” Loki observed out loud. “Most use the tactic of giving their subjects something to gain by giving answers. I would have thought you would have
started to see why by now.”

“Perhaps so. But I am sure you will understand why I chose this method soon enough. Are you going to answer my question?”

“You should be more specific. After all, you did ask several of them and I wouldn’t want to go answering the wrong one, would I?”

It remained stoic, entirely unphased by Loki’s sarcasm.

“Who is your father?”

“I,” Loki hissed, punctuating each word with a step forward, “don’t have one.”

They met gazes, Loki’s hands clenching the bars, and the Frost Giant looked him up and down with mock astonishment.

“Then you must bestow upon the rest of us the secret of existing without having to be conceived!” The giant dropped the charade. “The truth now. Who is your father?” He waited for a response but it was clear that he was not getting one, “I tried,” he eventually sighed, “to let you tell me voluntarily.”

Quickly, far too quickly, the giant reached through the bars and seized one of Loki’s wrists. Its grip was strong and blue seeped out and spread like an infection down Loki’s arm.

Loki wrenched his arm back but the giant was too strong and its fingers dug into his skin.

The giant stared intently at his face. “I had to see for myself when I heard about you. A Jotun wearing the skin of an Asgardian, dressed in regal armour and carrying Gungnir within his possession...” Loki was too busy frantically struggling to listen to it. “I assume you know as little about your own heritage as you do about our race, so allow me to explain: I am not doing this out of needless cruelty. The markings on our faces and bodies are as distinctive as the fingerprints that the Aesir have. Each bloodline has its own unique signature, if you will, its own shape that distinguishes it from the rest. The sigil of the mothers’ bloodline down our right side and our fathers’ down the left.”

The blue was rapidly creeping up Loki’s shoulder.

They waited. Loki had frozen and he stared helplessly while the blue advanced past his shoulders and made its way down his other arm.

It was a long time before either of them spoke

“We have a match,” the Jotun murmured, half dazed, not taking its eyes off one side of Loki’s face.

“What?” Loki’s voice was weak.

“I realised that you fit a very specific profile but I did not want to set myself up for disappointment. It has been a number of centuries since my little brother went missing, after all. We assumed you had died.” The giant’s lips twisted upwards. “But you’re alive and you’re here. You would have been too young to remember me but you called me Byle – your infant tongue couldn’t quite get the grasp of Byleistr.”

“Little brother?” Loki echoed.
“Are you telling me that after knowing you were adopted, it comes as such a surprise to learn that you have another family?”

It was all Loki could do but blink, stunned.

“This wasn’t how I imagined our reunion,” Byleistr said abruptly. “But I cannot set you free simply because we have the same blood. My honour as the Prince of Jotunheim is bound to my people first.” He finally took pity, letting go of Loki's wrist, and they both watched as the blue faded once more to white. “It pains me but it is obvious that you have no care for us, you who so vehemently rejects your true form and who slew numerous Frost Giants upon your capture. I need to know what you and your companion are plotting.”

Even with the blue gone, Loki could still feel it lurking under the surface of his skin, waiting.

“I have no cares for your claim nor your race. But,” Loki added, letting out a small laugh, “believe it or not – we came here to save us all.” Not that Loki would have felt particularly strongly if Thanos had destroyed the Frost Giants.

Byleistr scrutinised his face. “That’s quite a bold claim you have.”

“It is indeed.”

“Do you have a way of verifying that? Do not mistake me, under other circumstances I would have loved to have welcomed my little brother home. But I am no fool – I will not let that blind me. I have no clue as to your true intentions. I know that we are of the same blood, but that does not mean that we know each other as brothers do.”

"I'm not your brother!"

Perhaps it was unwise to remind Byleistr of that with such savagery. Perhaps Loki could have used it. Too late, it occurred to him that his anger had overridden his rationality.

"You were," Byleistr murmured, his mouth tilting downwards.

No – Thor was.

Then Byleistr appeared to remember himself. He dropped his hand and held himself straighter.

"Reverting back to your claim of intending to save... all of us, was it? Killing six Frost Giants who did you little harm seems like an unusual action to make for someone with such noble intentions. That won't be good for you. And you'll need to gather proof of your intentions. It'll be useful for your upcoming trial."

Trial? The Jotuns give their prisoners trials?

“I...” Loki began. "It would take me summoning the Three Sisters to prove my claims."

"That's unfortunate. You'll need another angle if you wish to have a solid line of defence – preferably one that can actually be attested to. Does the cube play into this?"

Loki went rigid. “It is imperative that you do not let any harm come to it.”

“And why is that?”

“The cube has... certain properties.” Loki chose his words carefully. He didn't want them to touch it, he didn't want them to know what it truly was. “And a will of its own. If meddled with in ways
that it doesn’t appreciate, it will cause chaos and destruction that could bring what remains of your cities to crumble."

"If I didn’t know better,” Byleistr said, almost conversationally, “I’d accuse you of trying to steer us away from the cube.”

“I confess it: I am. But that doesn't mean that I am lying. You have no way of verifying the truth without testing the theory yourself – but that would be incredibly reckless and an unnecessary risk, resulting in many tragedies for your realm.”

“Then tell me how to avoid the cube causing tragedies.”

“The answer is simple enough: avoid the cube.”

“Avoid one of the few pieces of tangible evidence we have?”

“Your curiosity isn’t worth the risk.”

Byleistr let out a huff of breath that was neither amused nor angry. “My curiosity has little to do with the situation. If you are telling the truth about saving us all, then we must assume there is a threat and take action against it. Likewise, if you are lying to us then we must take action against the threat – which would be you – accordingly. Either way, our realm faces threat and we need to prepare. It’s trying to establish what action in accordance that proves difficult.”

“I can imagine.” There was little sympathy in Loki’s voice.

“It would be so much easier if I could trust you.” Byleistr sighed.

Loki felt his stomach drop and then there was Thor, Thor standing outside of his cell and wishing with such similar weariness, I wish I could trust you. Thor’s words echoed around his skull, over and over.

“You can this once,” Loki promised, ”but never again."

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Three more days had passed. There had been no word either from or about Stark, and Loki could not say that he felt any significant improvements with his attempts to persuade Byleistr to trust him so that he could make his escape.

The talent required to earn the title of a silver-tongued lie-smith was both a blessing and a curse; his talents lent themselves well to persuading others of falsehoods, but rarely persuading others of the truth.

Still, luck was not entirely against him. There was somebody with enough reason to want to believe him, and that often made them considerably more pliable to persuasion. Yet with Byleistr, it only seemed to make him more hesitant. He had voiced that his own biases severely impaired his judgement and yet he still assigned himself to visiting Loki every day due to his irrational desire to connect with those who he believed shared the same blood.

The topic of their past appeared more often than Loki would have liked.

“I don’t even have the same name as the brother you remember,” Loki had told him on one occasion, and Byleistr had told him that names only held meaning to those that gave meaning to them. Byleistr was the sort to think himself wise and if Loki hadn’t met Laufey, he would have
assumed Byleistr was quoting his father. Perhaps it was the mother, whoever she was. Loki didn't care.

Loki fed Byleistr titbits of information about the Tesseract in return for information about his trial. He had to choose what information he revealed very carefully; too much and they would want the Tesseract for themselves, too little and they'd never believe him.

“The longer you spend dithering around the legitimacy of my trustworthiness, the further Thanos advances.”

“I know,” Byleistr replied.

Loki raised an eyebrow. Did that mean Byleistr believed him?

“I need to be certain,” Byleistr elaborated.

“And how will you achieve that? Apparently, my words aren’t good enough.”

“I’ve got a bargain I’d like to propose.”

Loki turned to face him. “Go on.” It wasn't as if another bargain could possibly be any more complicated than the one that brought him back from the dead.

“You might like this.”

“Then tell me.”

“If we send away the cube, we potentially bring about the destruction of our own realm if your claims about Thanos’s plans are true. If we allow you to carry out whatever plans you have, we may bring about the destruction of our own realm because of your own bias against our kind. We neither have enough time for me to teach you that we are not the monsters you think we are or for you to prove your true intent.”

Interesting premise.

“Do continue.”

“We have four things of yours that you want.”

“Four?” Loki asked, frowning.

“The cube, Gungnir, the armour, and the Stark man. And you have something of ours we want,” Byleistr continued, “but it is not here. I assume it’s locked up inside of Asgard's vaults.”

Ah.

“The Casket of Ancient Winters.”

They would have him bring them to Asgard just like last time. Did the Jotuns learn nothing? It was the same plot, all over again. Or was this a trap? Had Laufey said nothing of the plot before it had killed him?

“Based on what you’ve told us about the cube, I assume that you can use it somehow to manipulate the Bifrost.” Wrong. But better that than knowing it was space itself that the Tesseract manipulated. “Stark and your – or is it Odin’s? – sceptre will remain here. If you agree, we will not allow you to leave with the cube alone. I will go with you, along with my most trusted associates.
In that case, if you intend to use the cube to destroy us, we at least have a chance of stopping you. If we do not all return alive, my people will destroy your possessions and you will face your sentence. If we return alive and with the casket then you may have your other possessions back and we shall free you and your companion without a trial.”

“Without a trial?”

“There would be no need for your, as you have been so fond of calling it, 'doomed' trial. Returning the casket would more than compensate for the harm you have done us.”

Loki wondered if he would make the same claim if he knew it was Loki who turned the power of the Bifrost to Jotunheim.

“What happens if one of your associates does not return through no fault of my own?”

“As I have said, we will destroy your possessions and you will face your sentence.”

“You would kill Stark? A man who has done you no harm – a man who has even spoken and acted out against killing your kind? I thought you said you weren’t the monsters I thought you were.”

Byleistr’s lips grew taut.

“We do not kill our own kind. I do not relish the thought of Stark having to die, but his life is part of the insurance we need to guarantee the future survival of our race.”

Freedom never did come simply. They would have him betray Asgard in a way he had never done before, they would have him lead them to the heart of what Asgard guarded the most fiercely and take all they wanted. And Loki could not kill them for it, not until they were freed. Loki would have relished refusing Byleistr – no, not just Byleistr, the whole race of Frost Giants – but it would do them no good. This was the quickest route to freedom. The Frost Giants would never grant him his freedom otherwise, and they had grown blind to his illusions during Loki’s numerous attempts to win his freedom back. Either Loki would fail and all would be lost, or they would walk free. It would be a gamble, a roll of the dice. But if Loki did return to Asgard at least he would have the chance to say a final goodbye in the vaults before either all hope was lost or he and Stark would begin their quest.

“I mislike a certain one of your clauses,” Loki finally said.

Byleistr held up his hands. “What else am I to do? Without that clause, you could transport us to instant death, you could kill us the moment we leave our home, you could leave us trapped within the cells of Asgard.”

Loki would have loved to be at such liberty.

“I see you are not going to be persuaded otherwise.”

“No,” Byleistr said, “I am not.”

“Very well,” Loki sighed in resignation. “Those are the full terms?”

“Almost. After we’ve activated the cube we shall have until nightfall to return before action will be taken.”

“And I suppose this is the best offer I will receive?”
“It is the *only* offer you will receive. Oh, and Loki – I should warn you that we have not forgotten your domain over illusionary magic. My people will thoroughly check that I am indeed myself.”

“Guarantee that your people will not harm me and I will accept your terms.”

“Done. So long as you hold your end of the bargain, no Jotun is permitted to harm you.” Byleistr smiled. “My advisors will not be as pleased as I am. They believe this to be a foolhardy plan.”

“Your advisors sound wise.”

Byleistr laughed but quickly sobered once more. “They are. We have not forgotten that the last time some of our number were led into Asgard, they were slaughtered. We will not disregard the possibility of betrayal this time.”

“Neither will I, for that matter.” Loki had no guarantee that the Jotuns would allow him to walk free after they reclaimed the casket for themselves, nothing apart from their promises. Promises were unreliable and were far too easily broken. “Betray me and the Jotun blood I have spilt previously will seem like nothing more than a minor tip of a drinking glass.”

“What reason would we have to betray you? Unlike Asgard, we are not in the habit of executing our prisoners, and it would be far easier to keep you imprisoned here than risk breaking into Asgard’s vaults with you. Are you trying to dissuade me? Once a deal is made, it is final.”

“Perhaps I’m dabbling more in honest conversations,” Loki remarked offhandedly.

Byleistr's red eyes glinted with something. Loki would have called cautious fondness if it had been on the face of any other being.

“You’re not how I remember you,” Byleistr said after a long moment.

“I don’t remember you at all.”

"I had the most naive notion that I would recognise my long-lost brother the instant we met eyes."

*I'm not your brother*, Loki thought fiercely. Although maybe he had been once, long before he became himself, before he was developed enough to even have thoughts of his own. He didn't trust himself to speak, not when he needed Byleistr to want to keep his end of the bargain.

“Brothers and strangers are not mutually exclusive,” Byleistr said. "I hope we can become more than strangers. But more than that; I hope I can trust you. I hope that we can trust each other.”

Thor had wished to trust him too and Loki could not forgive him for it.
I believe the last chapter contained the last scene beta-read by the wonderful EmuSam. Credit is due. I just wanted to give my extra thanks for discussing time travel theories with me, sharing theories and ideas I would have never thought of, helping shape this story into something so much better than what I started with and their interest and questions making me want to further up my game.

Lying to Byleistr was not quite the same as lying to most people. Byleistr sought information regarding the small details but failed to gain an oversight of the larger picture. For instance, Byleistr questioned everything about their route, how many guards they were likely to encounter, what illusion Loki would place over them and how they would escape if the plan failed, but he made the assumption that Heimdall would be at his post, that Odin still sat the throne, and that finding the casket amongst all the other relics would be easy.

Loki was not about to correct Byleistr's mistakes and inform the Jotuns of exactly how vulnerable Asgard was. Instead, he made no mention of the wards that would have faded when the Allfather froze. What he did mention, however, was how the defence of Asgard's vaults was centred around preventing people from breaching the entrances rather than appearing in the middle of the vaults. It was for that reason that breaking into the vaults would be the simplest part, assuming luck was on their side and only a few guards would be patrolling the interior. However, the accompanying party of six Jotuns added complications; Loki had only ever used the Tesseract to teleport two people at one given time before, and he suspected that the extra strain would cause the effects of teleporting to be worse than usual.

And they were.

It knocked the breath out of Loki and caused him to keel over with the mind-numbing agony of it.

He could not say how long he was stood like that, hunched over in pain with unvoiced screams on his lips, but once the worst had passed and he could form coherent thoughts again, it brought him some satisfaction to note that the other Jotuns had fared much worse than he had. By the time Loki had straightened up, two of the Jotuns were lying on the floor, fingernails scraping against their scalps, biting their lips to keep from crying out.

Byleistr placed the Tesseract in his satchel and offered a hand to pull the Jotuns still regaining their breath up from the floor to their feet and when the entirety of the group was upright, Loki cloaked them with invisibility. He hadn't offered the Jotuns the same courtesy the last time they followed him into Asgard.

Keeping six – no, seven, including himself – large and unfamiliar forms invisible was costly to his magic. It was depleting more rapidly than he would have liked. Disguising or concealing a singular object was not too difficult, but making the object or person disappear from sight altogether was another matter, particularly when there were several at once. Only once Loki had briefly scouted ahead to check whether any of Asgard’s guards were a concern did he let the invisibility fall.
It was no mistake when Loki claimed ignorance of the casket's precise location; he had been earnest in his unsaid desire to say a goodbye while he was here. And for that, he needed to visit the Basin of Souls.

"Is there a system for how the relics are stored?" Byleistr enquired once the full scope of the sheer amount of artefacts began to hit him.

"That would be far too logical," Loki replied.

"Then we should quicken our search by splitting the party to search separate isles," Byleistr concluded. Upon seeing Loki's expression, he added, "Not you, Loki. For obvious reasons it would be unwise to separate from you."

Despite his lack of surprise, Loki's temper burned underneath his skin. He wanted his visit unsupervised, he couldn't let the Frost Giants see him vulnerable and he wouldn't betray Thor by bringing him the Frost Giant who claimed to be his brother before so much as a moon phase had passed since Thor's death.

"I suspect that it may be this way," Loki said stiffly, leading Byleistr and his two accompanying Frost Giants in a direction to the left while the others headed down an aisle the opposite way.

"Asgard would benefit greatly from having a numerical system," Byleistr commented as if he – a Frost Giant – had unique insight to offer on the subject.

"Perhaps it is a strategy to keep our enemies from stealing our relics from us," Loki responded dryly.

"You know as well as we do that it was Asgard who stole the casket from us."

Loki did not deign to answer. The Basin of Souls had come into view, sitting underneath shelves and shelves of miniature bottles and antiquities.

As Byleistr and the two remaining Frost Giants began to scour through the piles and piles of items in the aisle, Loki took the opportunity to send a decoy to search nearby and made his way towards the basin.

It was stone, with the bowl standing on the neck of a carving of the world's tree, the branches opening and spreading out towards the brim to signify that the souls within it were beyond the reach of the Yggdrasil, like leaves flying upwards in a breeze.

Loki had been forbidden from going near it as a child but that hadn't stopped him; it had only piqued his curiosity and made his visits more covert. Even so, he had been careful. Very careful. He never touched the water, he only watched the surface ripple as the forms of the souls waiting for Odin's verdict grew restless.

Loki gripped the brim and leant close to the surface. The water level was higher than he remembered ever seeing it, the obsidian giving the illusion of the base being a dark bottomless void. The souls were anything but dark; they darted this way and that, leaving glowing tendrils in their wake. They were forms of colour, each soul like a drop of ink spreading through a liquid, but upon closer inspection, the forms were not as ambiguous as they first appeared. It was a type of pareidolia; similarly to how clouds often bore a resemblance to shapes, the forms had faces.

Loki had been so sure he'd be able to identify Thor immediately. Thor's colours wouldn't be anything but red and gold.
"Thor?" Loki whispered, too desperate to feel foolish.

The souls stirred, dashing deeper down and scattering like a disturbed school of fish.

It wasn't fair. If the Frost Giants broke their word then Loki wouldn't have the means to return with Gungnir. This was most likely his last chance to see Thor, to say a final farewell. He could have made his mother happy – he could have made them both happy. And for selfish reasons he would have said something, anything, to alleviate the guilt that ate away at him. He'd let Thor die; Thor deserved to know why. Thor deserved to know that Loki hadn't betrayed him in the end, that Loki had been trying to fix it, trying to fix everything.

And look where that got me.

Loki would have promised Thor he'd pay Thanos his dues and he would have meant every word of it.

Except that he couldn't find Thor.

He heard a cry from somewhere behind him but ignored it.

He had to find Thor. He had to tell him–

"The casket," Byleistr breathed from somewhere behind Loki. One of the Frost Giants had returned with it in hand. They weren't supposed to find it so quickly, Loki had banked on having more time. "Loki, come and look at this."

Loki's fingers twitched.

But Thor wasn't there. Loki doubted he would find any other answers in the water and so it was only with the utmost reluctance that Loki complied, merging with his double.

"Is this it? The Casket of Ancient Winters…" Byleistr's voice was filled with such a sense of wonder that it filled Loki with dread. Byleistr didn't wait for an answer. The blue was a darker tone than that of the Tesseract's, richer and deeper. Dark clouds stirred within it like the container encapsulated a portion of Jotunheim's sky. "It's beautiful," Byleistr murmured. "More beautiful than I remember."

No Jotun should be allowed to touch it, Loki thought. He'd betrayed each and every family member but nothing – not the treason, not the lies, not the breaking of Asgard's laws – had felt like truly betraying Asgard up until now.

This is no betrayal, Loki was forced to remind himself. Allowing the Jotuns to reclaim the casket could make all the difference to Asgard's survival if they let him go free. This is to save them. To save us all.

Byleistr's voice dropped and he muttered something inaudible to one of his companions before raising his voice. "Loki – we must go."

Loki didn't want to leave. He needed to find Thor. Until the council or whoever controlled Asgard ordered something else to be forged, without Gungnir there would be nothing to direct the souls to their next plane of existence. Something must have happened to Thor. The Soul Gem, Loki realised, feeling sick. Thanos could have–

"Loki?"
Loki shook himself out of his trance. Later. He’d need to figure out the puzzle later.

"Of course," Loki replied. He had intended to keep his voice level but even to his own ears, it sounded strained.

The nausea grew at the sight of the one who claimed to be his brother being alive and whole and intact when his true brother’s soul – the very core of Thor’s being – was inexplicably gone.

The nausea burned to anger.

As Loki made his way back, he made a movement so fast that it went entirely unregistered. The Jotuns were too mesmerised by the casket to pay him much mind and so long as they thought he would do their bidding they would not notice him slipping an arrow tip from the shelf into the palm of his hand.

The smallest weapons were the easiest to overlook.

Loki handled it with care, careful not to let it draw his own blood.

"Are you ready?" Byleistr asked when Loki reached him.

"Oh, yes."

"Good. We need to find the others before we depart."

They headed back in the opposite direction, Loki surrounded on all sides by giants. Byleistr strode next to him and Loki used the natural movement of swinging his arms as a disguise to scratch the surface of Byleistr's arm with the tip.

It was only a light scratch but it would be enough. And better still, the Frost Giants would not realise what had happened until Loki was gone.

"My apologies," Loki said, frowning at his nails as if they were the culprits.

"No matter."

"Wait!" It was the Frost Giant who had located the casket. Loki hadn't recognised her as a female but when he examined her face he saw that clues were there. Without warning, she hit the top of Loki's hand and the arrow tip fell from his fingers to the floor. Her hand shot up and she pointed a blade of ice at his throat, echoing a movement so strikingly similar to Sif that it would have made Loki laugh in any other circumstance.

"I have kept my end of the bargain." Loki reminded them."You did not specify that I couldn't retrieve items from the vault if I so wished. I am not the one breaching on breaking the terms of the bargain." He turned to Byleistr. "You gave your word that your people would not harm me."

"And they won't as long as you fulfil your end of the bargain." Byleistr nodded to the one who held the blade to his throat. "It is unsafe to remain here. We will deal with this when we return."

The giantess scowled and her arm moved a fraction. Whether it was to relent or attack, Loki would never know because whatever movement she might have made was interrupted by the more startling revelation that they were surrounded by approximately fifteen of Asgard's guards, all with swords drawn and shields in position.
Within a fraction of a second, each of the Jotuns formed weapons of ice at will.

“By order of the king—” a guard began to declare.

“What king?” Loki scoffed.

“We hereby shall confine you to Asgard’s dungeons for trespassing and attempted thievery. Resist and we give no guarantee of your life. Drop your weapons and we shall ensure your survival.”

Loki would rather not fight them if he had to, not when the guards were doing nothing more protecting Asgard. Instead of fighting, Loki chose to use his words and for once, it was not as weapons.

"Is this how you repay those that prevent Asgard's vaults from being stolen from?" Loki demanded.

The guards hesitated and after a short delay one of them called out, "We know how much your word is worth, Loki Lie-smith. Apparently, even your own death was a lie."

"What sort of way is that to address your king?" Loki asked. The guards momentarily hesitated and Loki allowed himself a laugh of delight. "By rights, the throne has fallen to me now, has it not?"

Byleistr let out a chuckle.

“You stop your cackling.” The commander of the guards turned back to Loki. "Whatever claim you might have was annulled when the Allfather sentenced you as Loki Laufeyson. Now, surrender your weapons. All of you."

Byleistr laughed again and jerked his head at his hands. "You cannot expect us to drop our limbs at will."

The commander regarded him coldly. "Ice melts. Someone fetch some torches."

Byleistr's face paled and he delicately placed his satchel on the ground and the giantess followed suit with the casket.

The commander must have identified Byleistr as the leader of the Jotuns because he beckoned Byleistr to move towards him. When Byleistr did not, the swords drew closer. Then Byleistr obeyed, his arms returned to normal.

Loki stared. He hadn't anticipated that move. Frost Giants were hardly known for being compliant creatures. Byleistr would have been better off fighting, even if some of his companions closer to the swords would have lost their lives for it.

Then the remaining two Frost Giants who had searched a separate aisle made their appearance. They emerged from behind, clubbing a number of guards who remained oblivious to their presence before the rest noticed.

Loki sprang into action, making a dive for the Tesseract and clutching at the three remaining Jotuns as he did.

Another one of the guards let out a warning as he did so but it was too late – they were gone.

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The last thing Loki had expected was returning with something alarmingly close to willingness.
Incidentally, his return was the last thing the guards had expected too.

He could have left all the Jotuns to Asgard's guards. He could have made a dive for the Tesseract and taken his chances finding Gungnir and Stark and his armour all by himself. He would have had to fight more Jotuns along the way, but with their prince gone the realm would surely be in disarray. Loki would have the means to escape in the same strike as ridding the Frost Giants of their beloved casket. It would have been almost perfect if his odds of success were higher.

And yet...

Loki blamed his recklessness on being caged for too long. It was a prettier lie than the need for survival.

He appeared back in the vault, crouched in a ready position. He was further ahead than where he had been before and the bright light of his reappearance alerted the entirety of the room to his presence.

He sent another three Loki's running out, each in a separate direction. One to Byleistr, another to weave around the guards, and another to appear to assist with the fighting Jotuns.

Loki himself went for the casket. He ducked and dodged in order to not give away that he was solid, and when he seized the casket he stored it away in his pocket dimension, preferring not to think about the last time he had held it.

The rest was easy.

The guards couldn't predict where he would reappear and given that Loki had at some point during his life visited almost every point in the room, he had free reign of the entirety of the vaults.

He returned the last remaining companions of Byleistr's in another move and then when he came back for Byleistr, he hesitated long enough before leaving that one of the Asgardians had time to spit, "Traitor!"

The last words they heard from Loki before he disappeared once more were, "I suppose it does seem that way, doesn't it?"

Chapter End Notes

The whole Basin of Souls thing is not in any way part of Norse mythology or the Marvel universe (as far as I am aware) in case anyone is wondering.
Chapter 11

After Loki handed over the Casket of Ancient Winters, Byleistr granted him everything he said he would.

Loki could not help but be astonished. He had half expected something to go terribly wrong, for the Frost Giants to take the casket and then leave Loki to rot in his cell.

Stark, Loki had noticed, must have had his injuries healed. He was waiting outside the entrance to the vault the Jotun’s used to store their prisoner’s belongings while Loki put his armour on again.

Byleistr had sent the remaining Jotuns away and stood fidgeting with his hands.

"Loki..." Byleistr began. "Before you go, I want to thank you." Byleistr wouldn't say the same thing after he realised what Loki had done to him, at what the true cost of retrieving the casket came at. "The casket will allow us to restore our realm to what it once was, given time. I..."

Byleistr bit his lip. "I didn't introduce you to the rest of our family because I wanted to see who you were first. I didn't want to introduce you if you would only bring them pain. But if I was to tell them that you are here I am sure they would love to meet you."

"I don't want to meet them." Loki made no effort to keep the frostiness out of his voice.

Byleistr's mouth tilted downwards."Why not?"

With all of his possessions reclaimed and no other Jotuns nearby, Loki saw no reason to remain on civil terms.

"I do not care for them. I do not care about them. And I have far more pressing matters than meeting a family of--"

"–meeting your family, you mean."

"You're not my family!" Loki snapped.

"No," Byleistr allowed. "But we could be family again if you let us."

The Frost Giants were the last people Loki had expected to show such a display of such sentimental weakness.

"Believe me, neither of us want that."

"Why wouldn't we? You could have left us all back in Asgard but you didn't. I consider that a steady improvement. You kept your promise to us."

It was as if Byleistr was compelled to keep pushing.

Loki had one last wound to inflict.

"Yes, I kept my end of the bargain." Loki watched Byleistr closely, ready to feast upon the sting his betrayal would leave. "But you should have been more specific, my would-be brother." That particular claim he could never forgive Byleistr for. "The bargain was that I bring you all back alive, but you failed to specify what condition you should be brought back in."

Instead of pain or anger, all Loki received was confusion.
"What do you mean?" Byleistr asked.

"Take a look at your arm."

Byleistr complied and then realisation began to dawn upon him.

"It's more than a scratch, isn't it?"

"Yes," Loki confirmed, revelling in Byleistr's growing horror. "The arrow tip that scratched you was poisoned – well, poisoned or cursed. I do not know which."

The Allfather's collection of rare enchanted items was more vast than his collection of poisoned items, taken in an attempt to learn the secrets of the dwarves and elves. Odin had not been successful in that venture.

"But why?" Byleistr blurted out. "What could you possibly gain from doing that to me?"

"I had hoped for some satisfaction," Loki said. "I'm uncertain as to what symptoms you will have but I would imagine you shall find out soon enough, give or take a few weeks."

For a long moment, Byleistr stared at the scratch. Then his shoulders sagged and when he spoke his voice was barely audible.

"I should have given you more time," Byleistr murmured.

Loki could hardly believe what he was hearing. He'd wanted pain, he'd wanted blind fury, he'd wanted Byleistr to curse his name and denounce any claims of kinship he might have claimed. He wanted Byleistr to raise his fists and grab him by the throat and give him a good excuse to relentlessly attack. Not this. There was no satisfaction in this.

"I'm sorry," Byleistr said, leaving Loki utterly bewildered, "I should have known this would be harder for you than it is for me."

Loki's mouth hung open. Had the infliction caused Byleistr to completely lose his mind?

"I suspect it'll spread slowly," Loki warned.

"Is there a cure?"

Loki shrugged. "Probably, somewhere."

"It would be a lot easier to forgive you if you helped me find it."

"Forgiveness?" Loki scoffed. "What makes you think that I want forgiveness?"

"I don't know." Byleistr eyed him warily. "You're clearly desperate for something."

"Whatever it is," Loki answered with forced iciness, "forgiveness isn't it."

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Loki would have thought that he'd be used to seeing disappointment directed at him – that was the part of the ordeal that shook him. Byleistr had no right to be disappointed; he should have been furious, he should want Loki dead, he should have wished he'd they'd never met. But instead, Byleistr's verdict had been a resigned one. Loki had deliberately put the life of the Prince of Jotunheim at risk and the penalty paid should have been more severe than banishment. But by
minor technicalities, Loki had kept his end of the agreement and therefore if the Jotuns were to harm him or not allow him to go free then it would break the terms of the bargain.

The only circumstances under which he'd be allowed to return would be if he was to somehow cure the poison or lift the curse or whatever ailment he had caused.

It didn't make any sense.

Gratitude was one of the last things Loki wanted to owe the Jotun who claimed to be his brother. The very word resonated a dull ache inside of him each time he heard it. The fact that it had been a Frost Giant insisting upon that particular claim only added insult to the injury.

Even though Byleistr's final verdict had been fair – more than fair if Loki was being honest – it still was not good enough. They would need access to Jotunheim. Jotunheim was a logical location to try searching for the Time Gem and without finding it, they'd be as good as dead. But Byleistr was hardly likely to grant them what they needed after Loki’s moment of spite-fuelled recklessness.

“Could have given me a little warning,” Stark grumbled, interrupting Loki’s musings and forcing Loki to tear his eyes from the view of the sea meeting the horizon.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tesseract teleportation isn’t a relaxing way of travelling. I mean, sure, it’s quick but it feels like I just got hit by three hangovers at once.” Before Loki could respond or pause to contemplate how differently the Tesseract must have been affecting Stark, Stark continued talking. “Okay, I have, like, a hundred questions. The first being where the hell are we? Looks like California but um” – Stark took notice of two of the moons that were still visible in the daytime sky – “not.”

“Alfheim.”

“Any particular reason you decided we needed a beach vacation?”

“This was the safest location I could think of. Its inhabitants are not hostile, it is far from Midgard, it has a large natural food supply...”

“Guess it’s more tourist-friendly than the last planet you zapped me to. I’d choose this over the planet that rivals Narnia for its winter any day.” Stark toyed with the helmet in his hands, tossing it up and down. “How the hell did you get them to let us go, anyway?”

“I negotiated.”

“Huh. Didn’t know you had it in you. How exactly did you manage that? And while you’re at it – what’s next? Finding the Time Gem, right? Where do we start?”

“I...” Loki licked his lips before admitting defeat. “I am not sure. It would have been useful to be able to search through Jotunheim’s history but...”

“Take it your negotiations didn’t go to plan then.”

“No, Stark, my negotiations did not entirely go to plan.”

“What makes you think it’s even there anyway?”

“The Norns showed me a vision.”

Stark blinked. “All of this was based on whoever the hell the Norns are showing you a vision?” His
tone was incredulous.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“What is it then? Cultural differences? A my gods-verses-your-gods type of thing? Did you gaze into their crystal ball, get your tea leaves read, maybe a palm reading if you paid a bit extra?”

“The Norns need no such devices. Their vision extends further than that of you or I and they have the ability to see all the branches of the past, present, and future as they weave the—” Loki broke off once he caught sight of Stark’s expression. “I see that you are sceptical.”

“So you woke up one Christmas morning, threw open the window and decided to buy Tiny Tim a turkey.”

“Excuse you?”

“It’s from— Actually, never mind. The thing is that back on Earth, seeing visions is the kind of thing you’d need to see a professional about. So yeah, you telling me that all of this is based on you seeing a vision makes me sceptical. I trust hard facts. Visions on the other hand… They’re unfalsifiable, non-repeatable, and have I mentioned completely subjective already?”

“If I desired criticism of the only lead we have on the Time Gem, I would have requested it. I know what I saw.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll humour you – for now. Things are different on your magic fantasy Viking home planet. So what happened next?”

It still brought a bad taste to Loki’s mouth to have to give up the leverage over Stark the extra information had given him but Loki saw little choice in the matter, particularly regarding the disaster of their capture on Jotunheim.

“I did not have as much time as I would have liked when the Norns finally deigned to visit me. They informed me of both of our roles to come and of your peril. One of them allowed me a brief glimpse of where the Time Gem is. I saw snow or ice and some sort of temple and assumed Jotunheim was the likeliest location.”

“But Jotunheim can’t be the only planet with snow and ice, right? Based on what you’ve told me, the Time Gem could even be on my planet.”

“Unfortunately, you are correct,” Loki sighed. “There are countless places where it could be. But Jotunheim must have a history of ancient artefacts, many of which we know little about in comparison to the other realms. It would have been advantageous to be able to search there.”

“How though? These are planets we’re talking about – we can’t just hope we’ll conveniently stumble across it.”

“Objects as powerful as the Time Gem leave clues wherever they hide. I spent a long time trying to trace the location of the remaining gems but had little luck. Myths and legends of powerful objects are a good place to start to try to find Infinity Stones recorded in history. I scoured stories of all the realms with stories to tell – all except Jotunheim. I am of the mind that Jotunheim may have some of the answers we need.”

“What are we doing here then?”

Loki fidgeted with fingers before admitting, “They would not be so forgiving upon my return.”
“You can make us invisible. And you can teleport wherever you like. Can’t you just take us to the opposite side of their planet?”

“My affinity with the Tesseract is somewhat limited. I can only travel to a place I have pre-existing familiarity with.”

“Huh.”

“And since I have only visited a very small number of locations upon Jotunheim, this does present certain complications.”

“Just how badly did you negotiate?”

“I got us out alive.”

“And with a lifetime ban by the sounds of it.”

“He took too much!”

Stark eyed Loki warily. “Right... So what did you do?”

“I poisoned him. Or cursed him. I am not sure which.”

“Er, who exactly?”

“Byleistr. Their prince.”

“Awesome. Another one of your great plans? You knew we needed the Frost Giants to let us search their planet. Attacking their prince isn’t going to make them like us.”

“I know that!”

“What did you go and do that for then?”

“My brother” – Loki’s voice was shaking with suppressed rage – “has been dead for less than a week and one of them tried to claim his place.”

“So skipping over how much of a terrible idea that was and how much he probably didn’t deserve it, it’s done now. I hope you know how much of a stupid move that was. So what do we do next?”

“I don’t know.”

Stark glanced around. “At least no one’s around to have seen us teleporting. You sure there are no creatures lurking around somewhere behind the cliffs you should warn me about?”

“The elves may recognise me but they are not actively hostile.”

“Elves,” Stark echoed. “As in the pretty with pointed ears sort of elves?”

“Why, would that offend your delicate sensibilities?”

“Seems a bit clichéd, doesn’t it?”

Loki muttered something under his breath that sounded like something along the lines of, "Only a Midgardian..."

"So – a plan," Stark said, sitting himself on the sand without a care for how the sand would get in
Loki sat down somewhat more delicately and traced his fingertips in the sand, allowing the grains to scatter in the light breeze. He had done a rather magnificent job of putting a halt to the research when he scratched the Jotun prince and had little to lose by seeking an alternate plan, even if his pride made it difficult for the words to leave his mouth.

"I am open to suggestions," Loki said.

"Look – alien planets are your area, not mine. I'd never so much as left my planet before you teleported me away like some sort of dark kidnappy version of Doctor Who."

Loki was fully aware that Stark did not have more knowledge of the Nine Realms than he did, yet what should have been Loki’s advantage was not helping him.

"How would you normally go about solving a similar problem if you were left to your own devices?" Loki asked.

"If I didn’t have anything to prod I guess I’d do the research first."

"I poured over a variety of ancient texts and articles and I had other scholars scouring texts too to search for any possible links to the Time Gem. Between us we found nothing."

"Then I’d hack to do some digging on stuff I’m not supposed to know."

"Believe me, I was in a position of great advantage and very little information was unable to be accessed."

"Then I’d do some primary research. If I was looking for a specific object I’d be asking myself how it could be traced. I’d want to know whether it’d only be found in a particular area, whether it emits some sort of energy, whether I’d be able to design something that detects that energy, that kind of thing."

Stark's last sentence had grabbed Loki's attention. "And would you?"

Stark looked slightly uneasy. "Maybe. It depends on the gem, I guess. But if it's anything like the Tesseract, it should be emitting a pretty powerful energy signature."

"And would you be able to create a device that detects energy signatures that are similar to the Tesseract?"

Stark gave it a moment of thought.

"Not without my workshop. And I'd have trouble with scale. Trying to create a device to detect one specific signature across the whole of a planet would be difficult enough but I couldn't just whip up something that scans planets hundreds of thousands of light years away."

"Perhaps that is our next course of action then," Loki said and his voice lacked its usual bitterness.

"Yeah, because trying to take apart alien tech worked out so well for me the last time I tried it."

"I assume that was the fiasco that resulted in creating the thing you call Vision."

Stark frowned. "How’d you know about that?"

"Thor can be rather careless with the information he gives." Loki's face fell. "He could be, I
meant."

"Yeah my timing is probably shit as usual but he also mentioned something about you being dead."

Loki was too exhausted to bother denying it. "I was."

"Was? People don't normally just stop being dead."

"I made a deal. We're not the only ones who want Thanos to be brought to an end."

"What did you do – sell your soul to the devil or something?"

"Hela, actually. And I did not sell it per se – she will have a slight claim on it when I die, and if we fail she will have a larger claim on it."

"What did Thanos do to piss her off?"

"He thinks himself a worthy suitor, she disagrees."

"That's a sentence you have to follow up on. Don't leave me hanging."

"He has a habit of demanding her attention each time he kills. The worthier the soul he brings her, the more he will flatter her, or so he believes."

"Wait a second. Are you telling me that's the reason?" Stark's eyes were blazing and his jaw was tense. "My friends are dead all because he's got the hots for her."

"That's the truth of it."

There was a long pause.

"I'll kill him for this," Stark vowed.

"Not just you."

They sat in silence as they watched the tide grow slowly closer in soothing laps, providing an odd contrast to their mood.

"Is that our next move then?" Stark's voice was serious. "Go back to Earth and try to invent an Infinity Gem detector?"

"It could be. But we must wait until we are certain that Thanos and the Chitauri are no longer present on your planet."

"And how will we know?"

"He will lead his army to another realm and there will be word of his next invasion before long."

"So we just sit here twiddling our thumbs and let him kill more people?"

"We'll undo it. We'll be able to undo everything he's done once we have the Time Gem at our disposal."

"If, you mean. And you're saying we just sit back and bank millions of lives on that?"

"Jotunheim is the nearest realm to Midgard, it is likely that he will attack there next."
Stark stared incredulously. "I still can't bank all their lives on the assumption that we'll actually be able to travel back in time."

"I don't see what else you can do."

"Can't you just keep teleporting back to Earth to see when he's gone?"

"It's too much of a risk. Thanos wields the Power Gem and I know little about its abilities. It is possible that he may be able to detect large sources of power through it, and if he was alerted to the presence of another Infinity Gem so close to him, he would stop at nothing to get it. And if the Chitauri were to get a hold of it…"

"But you could just teleport away if things go south, right?"

"Assuming the Power Gem has no hold over the Tesseract. We cannot afford to make that assumption. If the Power Gem is able to prevent the Tesseract from working, I would have all but handed Thanos another one of the Infinity Stones."

Stark grew quiet, lost deep in thought. "So what it all comes down to are these Norn people. They're the only ones that seem to know where the Time Gem is. Can't you just message them somehow? Ask for a better vision?"

"Would that it was that simple," Loki sighed. "I do not know where to find them. It is believed that many millennia ago they dwelled upon Nornheim but the Three Sisters grew weary of beings constantly asking of their fates and for favours so they hid themselves. Most believe that they no longer live on any realms but exist somewhere within the roots of the Yggdrasil."

"How'd you find them the first time then?"

"I didn't," Loki said. "They found me."

"And there's no 1800-Norn hotline you can call?" Stark asked and Loki shot him a look that questioned his sanity. "No way of getting in touch somehow? No other mysterious but convenient entities you can talk to instead?"

“None as useful.” Loki paused to think. "There are some who say that my fa– that Odin traded his eye at a well in order to gain his wisdom, the wisdom that supposedly made him the wisest being the Nine Realms has ever known. But he has neither confirmed nor denied the theory."

"Sounds shady as hell. What would a well want with a guy's eye?"

"I don’t know, the stories of Mimir’s well are likely hearsay."

"Have you got a location?"

"I came across a number of texts speculating about where it is, but I do not know of the precise region."

Stark shrugged. "It might be worth a shot. Do wells accept credit cards? I mean, we’re not asking for all the wisdom in the universe so the knowledge of one stone shouldn’t cost that much, right? But we should warn them – the Jotuns, I mean. If they're next on Thanos's hit list they deserve the chance to try to prepare or escape or–"

"There is a high probability that they will kill me on sight." Assuming that Byleistr had informed the Jotuns what had been done to him.
"What about me?"

"In between their rekindled love for the casket and having me introduce poison or some sort of curse to his system, Byleistr had other things on his mind than the Midgardian accompanying me. He failed to specify what exactly the terms are regarding you."

"Great. I shouldn't be killed on sight then."

"They could still capture you."

"They at least deserve a warning. And I wouldn't let them capture me this time."

"Oh, really? And how do you propose to do that without putting a halt to our plans?"

"You're holding the Tesseract right now. You could teleport me there and it'd take me five minutes tops."

"And how would you return? Apparently, I cannot go with you without risking my own hide and you cannot wield the Tesseract. You would be stranded on Jotunheim with no allies and no one to prevent you from dying. Not to mention how much of a risk you would be posing to yourself by venturing there alone."

"You managed to open a fucking wormhole with that thing in New York so I'm sure teleporting one guy remotely shouldn't be that difficult for you. Give me a specific time and place and I'll be there when you open it."

"Do you have any notion of the kind of power I needed on top of the Tesseract itself in order to achieve that?"

"Um – yeah, actually. I'm kind of a pro on that topic since it was my power you helped yourself to."

"And where do you propose I get the extra power from, hmm?"

"Hooking the Tesseract up to my arc reactor would be risky, even by my standards. It'd help if I knew what all these alien races use as their power."

"Perhaps I would have suggestions if I deemed it necessary. You returning there is an unnecessary risk. A hundred things could go wrong – the Jotuns may hold you captive again, they could kill you on sight, you may freeze to death before being found, you–"

"I'm not that fragile. And I wouldn't hold back this time if they attacked me."

"If you die, Stark, we both do. Thanos will inevitably win if you die. And if you die, who would be able to save your friends?"

Stark pressed his lips together but his face was hard and resolute. "I'm not going to just sit back and relax on the beach as they die. And while I'm warning them, I can ask about stones with weird powers and whether they know anything about a well. I need to do something at least."

"No," Loki said, "you do not. That is ridiculous honour speaking – honour that will get you killed and then it won't just be you who dies but all of us. And what good would your honour be then?"

"I don’t think I’ve ever been accused of being honourable before."

"You would be risking the lives of every living thing as well as any chance of bringing your friends
and Thor back, do you understand?"

Stark met Loki’s gaze. "Teleporting around the universe is new to me but apart from that, I do stuff like this all the time. I can pull this off. I've got good gut instincts, I wouldn't have made it this far if I hadn't. The Frost Giants really didn't seem that unreasonable. Me going over there isn’t breaking any treaty or violating any terms so they have no reason to attack me – I’m not gambling with lives by going there to talk to them."

"And I suppose you will refuse to cooperate with me if I neglect to follow your whim?"

Stark was taken aback. "I get accused of being petty a lot but I'm not actually that petty. Apparently, I have to cooperate with you to stop Thanos – people have and will die if I don't. All I can honestly threaten is me resenting you more than I already do."

"Oh, spare me."

"So what do you say? Can you figure something out to get me there and back?"

Loki closed his eyes in resignation.

"I'll owe you a favour," Stark said. "A massive favour. You'll love hanging that over my head."

"Fine."

Stark blinked, taken aback. "Fine?"

"I said fine! But we must take every precaution if you insist on being so reckless."

"We? Did I hear that right?"

"I can't risk sending you off to another realm alone, can I? What if you don't return and I can't find you? What do I do then?"

"I'm touched."

"Don’t be. I need you alive to guarantee my own survival."

"And you're going to avoid being killed on sight, uh, how exactly?"

With a smooth gesture of the hand, Loki vanished from sight.

"Fair enough," Stark said.

***

Their return to Jotunheim was short. Loki transported them to an area obscured from the main city by mountains, gave Stark firm instructions to use his weapons to kill if necessary, and to not allow himself to be trapped this time.

If only commanding it would make it so simple.

After that, it was a matter of pointing Stark in the right direction, watching him fly off, and waiting.

The waiting was the worst part. He had nothing but what he assumed to be his better judgment muttering that this was a bad idea and that he'd just allowed the only person who could save Thor
to walk to his death. And for what? So that the Jotuns had more time to prepare for war they'd
inevitably lose or to flee? He didn't care about the Frost Giants. He'd tried to kill them all, once.
But in that case, why didn’t poisoning his would-be brother bring him any satisfaction? Why did
the thought of the hole he tore in their world fill him with unease? Why did he allow Stark to risk
everything if he did not care at all? Perhaps if Stark succeeded it would make their alliance less
uneasy and therefore the odds would be considerably more in their favour. Yes, that must be it,
Loki decided.

Stark had been so certain that he'd survive this. Loki hoped he was right and he could scarcely
believe it when he spotted the red figure with a golden streak trailing it in the sky less than a few
hours later.

Stark landed in front of him and flipped up his helmet. "Vanaheim," he announced. “We need to go
to Vanaheim.”

So they did.
Chapter 12

The exertion from using the Tesseract caused Loki’s vision to swim with the blurred greens and browns that formed the canvas of the untamed forests of Vanaheim. But that was good; less adverse effects meant that he must have been becoming more accustomed to the Tesseract and vice versa.

Loki shortly became aware of other sounds, of Stark’s laboured breathing, of the chirping birds of the forest, and the gushing of streams from somewhere out of sight.

"Stark?"

"I'm fine." Stark’s voice emanated from somewhere below him and Loki glanced downwards to see the man sprawled inelegantly on the ground. "It's nothing. I'm getting used to it. Slowly."

"Why Vanaheim?" Loki asked, now that they were here and Stark had finally seen fit to stand up. "What exactly did they tell you?"

"They said the well was here."

That hadn’t been an answer Loki had anticipated, although he could not say precisely what answer he had been expecting. And their answer only seemed to raise more questions. When was the last time the Frost Giants had unsolicited access to other realms? How did Jotunheim have that knowledge while none of the other realms did anymore? Why would they voluntarily give up that information – and to Stark of all people?

"And what of the gem?"

"They didn't know anything about it." Upon seeing the look on Loki’s face Stark added, "And no, I wasn't obvious about it. If Thanos asks them about anyone searching for the gems, they won't point to us. Here's to hoping he doesn't ask them about any powerful blue cubes they might have seen floating around – er, other than their casket thingy, I mean."

Loki’s fingers played with Gungnir as he considered the possibility that the Jotuns may have been toying with them, but they had few other options than to see for themselves. "Were the Jotuns specific about where the well is? Vanaheim is a large place." As if to illustrate his point, he motioned to their surroundings. The two of them were stood reasonably high up a hillside in a clearing formed by piles of rock and rubble, the forests sprawled out below them, covering the ground like a blanket of dense moss.

Loki’s last visit had been centuries ago when the Allfather had sent him and Thor on what was supposed to be an educational itinerary of the Nine Realms, or more accurately, only the realms that Asgard had allied itself with. Each realm had presented Asgard’s princes with a show of their finest offerings and the ancient temples and ruins had been the Vanir’s. Thor, naturally, had been far more interested in hunting in the forest than the history of the Vanir and–

Loki cut his trail of thought off.

"Yeah, they said something about how it was supposed to be miles behind the Temple of Sara. Or was it Saga? Saya? I don't know, something like that."

“Sága,” Loki corrected automatically. How the ancient Vanir managed to seamlessly blend their architecture and sculptures with waterfalls had made the visit a memorable one. "And they offered
you that information for free, did they?"

"I had to make a couple of promises I don't mind keeping."

Loki narrowed his eyes. "Like what?"

"Got a couple of commissions here and there, nothing major. And no – I'm not designing weapons again."

"What else?"

"Are you sure you want to know? You'll hate this."

Loki's mouth thinned. "Tell me."

"Byleistr wants me to keep you alive–"

"Ridiculous," Loki snarled.

"Yeah, I know. I was going to have to do that anyway if it came to it. But he seems to think you have a decent chance of fixing what you did to him. I hope he's right."

"I–" Loki tried again. "I am cursed with imbeciles."

Stark rolled his eyes. "I guess it figures that only a god would have more of a god complex than I do."

Loki shook his head in an attempt to shake off thoughts of Byleistr and took a few strides ahead to view the landscape. "The temple of Sága, you said?"

"Yup."

"I know of its whereabouts. I can transport us as close as possible but it will still be a long journey ahead of us through the forests."

“Go ahead.”

***

"This way," Loki said, locating the nearby sounds of running water. "If we follow the river it should eventually lead us to the temple. And are you going to insist on wearing that thing the entirety of the journey? Surely the risk of overheating outweighs what protection it would grant you."

"The suit’s got air con and it keeps away the creepy crawlies. But this would be over a whole lot quicker if I ditched the walking part of the walk and just flew."

"I am aware. However, not all of us have the ability to fly and I have no desire for you to lose your way. It would be unwise to risk more delays."

"Worried I'll leave you behind?"

"Hardly. The jungle is too compact you to fly through. You would have to fly above the canopy and the leaves would obscure your view of the river which is our only source of navigation."

"You know my suit has inbuilt radar, right?"
"Regardless, you would risk being seen. There are still a number of Vanir who never left the forests and I have no wish for a repeat of Jotunheim." Loki eyed Stark's armour. "I don't suppose your armour has ways of rendering you invisible to the naked eye."

"Not yet. I've been busy, you know with invading alien armies, world threats, that kind of thing."

It was a slow walk. Their route was ever meandering and they had to carefully pick their way over stray roots and rocks on the forest floor. The humid air was filled with the loud thrum of insects and high up in the canopy, birds of all colours called out to one another. Occasionally, they would spy something larger swinging from tree to tree and Stark would stop to gawk at it until it disappeared from sight again. It did not take long for Stark to begin to fall behind and Loki blamed the armour equally as much as the man’s short attention span.

“Do keep up,” Loki urged.

“I didn’t design the suit for taking hikes through jungles.” Stark pointed upwards. “Are those alien monkeys?”

“If I tell you yes, will your pace become faster?”

“Not all of us have legs as long as yours.”

“Your legs are also fully dressed in metal armour while you attempt to navigate your way through a Vanir forest. You are being absurd.”

Even Loki’s leathers were beginning to make him uncomfortably warm in the heat and he had been forced to magic away his metal garments in the bounds of his pocket dimension, where he could summon them again later.

“Hey – I saw the size of that mosquito earlier. I’m choosing a layer of metal over a layer of insect repellent we don’t have.”

As they walked further into the heart of the forest it became almost impossible to gauge how much time had passed. The leaves above them were so tightly packed together that they barely allowed any light to filter through. Multiple times Stark had fallen behind and Loki found himself more and more frequently having to wait for the man to catch up with him or else the two of them would be separated with no means of finding each other.

“It would be beneficial to pick up speed,” Loki reminded Stark once again upon the umpteenth time he had to pause for Stark to reach him. “Not only is it advantageous to get as far ahead of Thanos as we can with regards to the Infinity Gems, but there are also many predators within these forests and it would not do to have you face them alone.”

Stark held a hand to his heart. “Why, Loki,” Stark mocked, “it’s almost as if you care.”

“I have told you on numerous occasions the importance of your survival, it is self-preservation and–”

“Yeah, I know, you’ve only told me a hundred times how bad it would be for the rest of the universe if I massively screw up and die prematurely.” As if to prove a point, Stark almost tripped over a stray root. “See? I’m better in the air. You’ve been keeping the river on your right since we started and you still have no idea how far off the temple is, do you?”

Loki refused to admit that Stark might have been correct.
“Then what are you suggesting?” Loki asked.

“I fly overhead, get Friday running and see what she finds.”

“Friday?”

Stark gestured to the helmet he taken off. “She’s my AI.” He glanced at Loki. “How do I explain artificial intelligence to an alien? Does sentient tech mean anything to you? She’s basically a very smart piece of programming that does things for me, only it’s more complicated than that.”

Loki slowed his pace. “And what would this device of yours be able to find?”

Stark was positively smirking. “Not sat-nav location, that’s for sure. Water – check, stone – check, people – check.”

Loki could not deny that those particular abilities would come in useful.

“You do realise that there are predators above the canopy, not just below, and they are ones you would have to face alone.”

“What are we talking here? Giant birds, giant bats, pterodactyls, that kind of thing? If it’s gonna get all Jurassic Park up there at least I’ve got my repulsors.” Stark rubbed his gauntlets together. “If you’re feeling left behind I’d offer to carry you,” Stark said, "but nah. Something tells me you wouldn’t be a friendly back passenger.”

It did not take Stark much more effort to persuade Loki to come around to his point of view after that comment.

***

The air had grown so thick with humidity that Loki could have sworn that each time he took a breath he inhaled more water than air. It was difficult to tell whether it was darker because of being deeper inside the forest or whether it was due to the sun rescinding. The quiet had been pleasant at first, although it was not possible for the forest to be truly quiet. Aside from countless numbers of insects and birds, Loki also had a few mishaps with a couple of snakes and spied the occasional ape staring down at him from the high up nests. A thick layer of mud coated his boots that squelched with each step and his skin itched from insect bites. The itching provided such a strong distraction that he failed to notice immediately when the noises of the animals had ceased to be.

The silence was broken by a shrill call emitted by small monkeys with feline-like tails and bright yellow eyes scampering downwards from the upper branches of the trees, causing Loki to startle. The same call was echoed by other monkeys higher up and there were so many of them migrating down that it looked like an avalanche of the creatures.

The forests of Vanaheim could be a very dangerous place, he had been trying to explain to Stark, even for the Aesir. Even for the Aesir, Loki would have explained, as if he was one of them. Loki of Asgard was a lie and Loki of Jotunheim had been a lie of his own invention – he was of neither.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by inexplicable weight of being watched by something.

Instinctively, Loki called upon his armour. He surveyed his surroundings but could not find the source of whatever had its eye upon him. He crept forward but his stealth was hindered by the loud sounds his boots made as he lifted them from the mud. He stopped moving, some base feeling telling him to anticipate the sudden movement or pounce of a predator.
Loki’s body disappeared. He had no desire to battle with a beast today – it would do nothing but slow down the journey. Once it failed to find anything of interest it would leave, Loki was sure of it.

A rustling sounded from the bushes.

Silent, he had to be silent.

It was in that silence that Loki heard the faintest of noises, a high-pitched humming and then a loud whirring noise and the branches of a tree only a couple of meters away exploded.

Loki recognised that whirring noise. Before he had time to identify the culprit, the metallic red and gold of Stark's armour fell through the canopy.

Stark righted himself in the air and greeted Loki with a wave. Loki found himself wishing that he could crumple the armour with the intensity of his glare alone. Then it occurred to him that Stark was waving at him. At him. Had his concentration slipped or was it a mysterious power of Stark's heavily customised armour that was allowing him to be detected?

"Could have warned me about the giant killer owls," Stark commented. “Oh – and by the way, you were being stalked by something big and panther-ish. Don’t worry, my dramatic entrance made it scarper.”

That explained the feeling of being watched – he had been.

“I suppose that was your plan all along then,” Loki said sardonically.

“You think I plan things? I’m flattered.” Stark lowered himself to the ground. “Anyway, while you were busy being stalked by giant jungle cats, I found the temple. At least I think it’s the right temple.”

“How far away is it?”

“Not far.”

“Show me.”

***

The stone walls of the temple had been so overgrown that it disguised it as a part of the jungle and it wasn’t until they had walked right up to it that the limestone became visible through the gaps in the ivy. If it hadn’t been for Stark’s technology, they might have walked passed it. The entrance, what used to be a large open arch, was concealed by hanging vines and barred by branches that they had to push out of the way to make their way inside.

Even inside, greenery had made its way in through cracks in the floor and places where the rock had crumbled. Paintings of the Vanir and beasts of the forest and their legends still remained on the walls, although the pigment had long since faded.

“Bet archaeologists would get a kick out of this,” Stark muttered to himself.

“What a shame it is that I did not think to bring any along with us,” Loki replied, though his sarcasm lacked its usual bite. Truth be told, Stark probably wasn’t wrong. The temple was so hidden that it would not surprise Loki if the Vanir had been unable to find its location since they barred its entrance, and it was common knowledge that there were still hundreds and hundreds of
similar structures waiting to be rediscovered or reclaimed by the forest.

Multiple archways marked the separate chambers and tiles engraved with animals lined the ceiling and floors. The designers had managed to construct a complex system composed out of the channelling carved in the floor that was interconnected with the waterwheels stationed higher up and other objects so eroded Loki could not identify them. The system scaled the walls and the floors, weaving through floor layers, stretching from room to room, ornamental while still retaining a strict sense of symmetry and purpose. The specifics of that purpose was a mystery but it must have long since been rendered functionless because the ducts contained only dried muddy remains.

“Huh,” Stark commented, “that’s actually kind of impressive. Oh, and by the way, Friday couldn’t find any traps.”

“Traps?” Loki had been so distracted by the mystery of the purpose of the channels that he had forgotten about the possibility.

“I figured it’d be a good idea if this is going to get all Indiana Jones. I’ve had enough exercise without having to run from giant boulders who’ve got it in for me.”

“That’s... oddly specific.”

“It’s a classic. It’s an Earth-movie thing, you wouldn’t get it. Not unless you spent your world domination attempt very differently than how we thought you did.” Stark paused mid-step.

“Speaking of planet specific things – is there anything Friday wouldn’t know to scan for here? I don’t want this to turn into another case of some alleged curse that’s actually just really nasty bacteria lurking around.”

“Is this your roundabout way of asking whether there is anything magical you may need to be cautious about?” If it was, it was surprisingly sensible for Stark.

Stark pulled a face. “Yeah, but whatever it is, I’m not calling it magic. Magic breaks the laws of physics by definition. If something appears to break the laws of physics we need to revise our understanding of physics, not just claim it’s ‘magic’.”

“Maybe it is you that needs to revise your definition of magic.” After all, the important thing about magic was that is only needed to appear to go against nature to be considered magic. “But in answer to your original question, I do not know of anything and I have not picked up on anything that feels magical.”

Loki’s words seemed to be more of a relief to Stark than they were to himself. Illusions were Loki’s area of specialisation, not the meticulous craft of magical observation and analysis; although that was not to say that if something was emitting magic strongly enough he would not be able to detect it – like any other sorcerer, Loki had a grasp of the basics of multiple classifications of magic.

He followed Stark through rooms of varying sizes until they found themselves in a larger chamber that was distinguished from the others by how dark it was. The channels remained around the perimeter and higher up on the wall a carving of a huge stone tiger roared. There was a small set of steps on all four sides that led down to the middle of the room, and there at the centre was a well. It looked so innocuous that it would have been easy to overlook and it was only at closer inspection that eroded symbols and carvings became visible in the stone.

“So we’ve found the well. We think. Now what?”
“I would assume the first step would be retrieving the bucket.” Loki rotated the ever so stiff handle and the bucket rose into view after many turns, precariously suspended by a rotting rope. Loki grasped the bucket and stared into it, unsure of whether he would be faced with water, another face, or some sort of vision. Instead, all he found was dried mud caked to the bottom of the bucket.

Stark peered over Loki’s shoulder and clapped his hands loudly, causing Loki to startle.

“Well – no pun intended – we know what we’ve gotta do now, don’t we?”

Loki waited for Stark to elaborate.

“Oh, come on,” Stark drawled. “This is a classic! If video games taught anyone anything, it’s that random bits of mysterious engineering don’t exist for nothing.”

“Are you suggesting that we attempt to repair–”

“Got it in one. Good thing of one us is one hell of a mechanic.”

***

Loki did not enjoy getting his hands dirty.

Stark seemed to take a particular perverse pleasure in the prospect of Loki making his hands unclean, but refusing to cooperate on that basis alone seemed rather petty given what was at stake if they failed to find the gem. So it was for that reason that Loki had spent what must have been a good few hours locating all of the outer entrances that should be allowing the water to flow inside of the temple and clearing whatever was blocking them, be that stone or mud or vegetation, all the while becoming increasingly convinced that this was not what Gungnir was supposed to be used for.

Despite cautiously using Gungnir as a blasting tool and then kicking whatever debris that remained out of the way, earth and mud and clay somehow still ended splattering his face and hands and leathers. To make matters worse, it started raining – not heavily enough to wash him clean, just enough that it made him feel sticky somehow, and instead of the mud being in splatters, it had diluted into a layer that coated him and he had absolutely nothing he could use to wipe it off.

In short, Loki was not happy.

When he returned, Stark was virtually perfectly clean, perfectly dry, and perfectly content lounging on the stone floor in one of the first few chambers.

Loki glared at him. Then he realised that Stark must have done at least an adequate repair because the waterways appeared as if they might actually be able to function.

“Oh, hey. You done, Blitzen?”

“Yes,” Loki replied, his voice somewhat clipped.

“I finished a bit ago. Would have been easy work if I had my tools, all it needed was some reconnecting and a few tweaks here and there.” Stark leapt to his feet. “This whole thing is great – it’s basically a giant circuit board. Substitute electricity for water, wire for channelling and those things right there” – Stark pointed to one of the waterwheels – “are some nice old-fashioned components. Got a couple of outputs here and there” – Stark gestured to a couple of stone blocks Loki had previously assumed were purely for decorative purposes – “but my money's on the tiger for the main output.”
“How long should it take?”

“We need a heavier flow of water first. Shouldn’t take long – we’re in a rainforest, after all.”

***

Life returned to the temple slowly. The trickles of water were distant at first but then they grew heavier and heavier until Loki was able to follow the water as it travelled through the ducts. The flow became faster and faster and then one of the blocks Stark had identified as an output suddenly had a small fountain shooting out of the top of it and one of the waterwheels began to turn, causing the sound of something large grinding to emanate upwards from a floor below them.

“Stark,” Loki said, blinking in surprise. “I do believe you have actually done it.”

“I might be on an alien planet but this – figuring out how stuff works, solving puzzles, fixing things – this is my element."
Chapter 13

All of it, all the drinking fountains and wheels and weights, all of it held nothing in comparison to the chamber that housed the well.

Thin curtains of water fell over the archways, the stone altered to make the cascading water form flowing images of men and women as it fell. The light had been manipulated to reflect off of the smallest of droplets on the walls, making them look like galaxies as they glinted in the darkness. Huge fountains – not just functional drinking fountains but fountains projecting water at heights taller than Loki – sprayed liquid at the main feature of the chamber: the stone head of the tiger. Water thundered out of its mouth so violently that it caused steam to rise all around it, giving it a dragon-like appearance, and the pool the water crashed into had somehow been orchestrated into a whirlpool that sucked the water below.

"Kind of makes me want a continuously vomiting tiger back home," Stark remarked and then his face fell at the mention of his home planet. He launched into his next sentence, the words flying rapidly out of his mouth: "I’m kind of impressed guys this far back managed to grasp water pressure this well. I’ve got to hand it to them, they managed to make a whole hydro-powered system that filters their water, powers the grinders on the level below, goes into what I’m assuming are their equivalent of water-jet cutters, and makes kick-ass décor."

“It’s more than that,” Loki said, his suspicions becoming firmer. “The water must be systematically becoming more and more infused with whatever powers allow the user to converse with the entities within the well.”

“Let’s hope it’s not DMT.”

Stark strode to the well and lowered the bucket while Loki briefly considered asking for some sort of elaboration before dismissing Stark’s comment as another one of his Midgardian references.

“Do you want this or should I?” Stark asked once he had brought the bucket back up.

“I shall take it.”

Loki at least stood some chance of recognising the entity and not infuriating it before anything useful could be accomplished.

Loki took the bucket and stared into it, evaluating his options. The stories had never made it clear how exactly the entities within the well had been communicated with. What if the bucket was not even involved? Feeling like something of an imbecile, he quietly addressed the bucket. “Mimir?” He sounded ridiculous even to his own ears.

“I don’t think the bucket’s listening.”

Loki shot Stark with a glare. “I realise that.”

“So what’s plan B? I’ve gotta say, I just hope it’s better than plan A – plan A was just you talking to an inanimate object.”

“Maybe,” Loki said, “if you refrained from blabbering–”

“–hey, I don’t blabber–”
“–for so much as a fraction of a second I would be able to have a moment to myself in which I can actually think without being interrupted.”

Loki turned his attention back to the bucket. If the purpose of the bucket was not to act as a means of verbal communication then there were a number of obvious alternatives, drinking the liquid being the most obvious but also the most dubious. Neither of them had thought to clean the mud from the bottom of the bucket and specks of dirt were floating around in the otherwise perfectly clear water.

Loki tried pressing his face against the surface of the water and opening his eyes to look underwater, Disappointingly, although perhaps not unsurprisingly, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Stark snorted. “This is why these guys need an email, a cell phone number, a friendly receptionist to point you in the right direction – just something.”

It was fortunate for Stark that it would go against Loki’s own best interests to harm him. Instead, Loki, in what he considered to be an admirable show of patience and virtue, determinedly ignored him by recalling what little of the rumours of Odin’s trade with the well he had heard. Would Loki also have to make some sort of sacrifice? Was that what the bucket was for? For him to place his sacrifice inside of and lower down into the pit of the well? But what good was a deal when one person had already paid the price without establishing what they would receive in return? Even the Norns understood the basic principles of a deal: the deal was made and then the cost would be paid, not the other way around. And Loki could hardly imagine the Allfather sacrificing his own eye on anything less than a guarantee that he would gain all the wisdom he desired.

Minus climbing down the inside of the well himself, Loki resigned himself to the fact that his only idea left to try was by drinking the water.

He eyed the bucket sceptically.

His first mouthful was not as bad as he had been anticipating and the water would have been pleasantly sweet if not for the occasional bit of dirt that floated within it. As he swallowed, he could feel the dirt sticking to the back of his mouth.

“That good, huh.”

“It’s the mud that is unpleasant, that is all,” Loki said, fuelled by his need to deny Stark of whatever potential delight he might have found in Loki’s misery. He leant forward to take another mouthful and as he did, the ground seemed to tilt towards him.

“You know, if it’s that bad I could do it. I spent a lot of years downing drinks most people wouldn’t even hold under their noses.”

“No.” It was too late anyway, the effects had already begun. And the magics of the water were unlikely to be designed for mortal forms to withstand.

Loki forced himself to drink again.

“Have it your way. Must admit, I’m not exactly used to the role of being the sober guy.”

Loki opened his mouth to respond but found that he did not have the coordination to force sounds out of it and when he blinked the darkness of his closed eyelids remained even after he opened them again.
Um.” Stark’s voice trickled through the darkness, sounding muffled somehow. “You don’t look so great. Demigod first aid isn’t a thing they teach on Earth, you’ll have to help me out here.”

It took an embarrassing number of attempts for Loki to vocalise the words. “Supposed to be like this,” he finally managed. “I think.”

“Right. Er, recovery position? Water? No. That’s what got you into this—”

Stark’s voice was abruptly cut off as water rushed through Loki’s ears.

Something swirled in the darkness but Loki could not identify it. It was like trying to peer through an inky black screen but as Loki’s eyes adjusted, it became apparent it was the silhouette of a man. Loki was suddenly aware that there was not much space between them. They were penned in by stone that encircled them. The only source of light was a soft glow from somewhere above them and as Loki glanced upwards, he saw that there was a volume of water suspended above them with nothing visibly stopping it from drowning them.

Was this the bottom of the well? But how had he–

“Who goes there?” the man called, his voice hoarse from disuse.

“Who asks?”

“An intruder,” the figure identified him rather than answering Loki’s question, drawing closer.


The man was close enough that that Loki could map his wrinkles and a large scratchy beard dominated the lower half of the man’s face. He frowned, not with anger, Loki decided, but with thought.

“It has been a long time since anyone last sought a bargain with me.” The man’s cheeks had the same gauntness his eyes did.

“It would imagine it has been a long time since a person last stumbled across your well.”

“They used to visit me every day.” His tone was wistful. ”They used to worship me. They drowned me in gifts that went beyond gold and silver. Why has it been so long?”

There was pain and hurt in his eyes, Loki saw.

“You truly don’t know?”

“It is my curse. I may give knowledge and wisdom but can never claim it for myself.”

“The Vanir did not abandon you – most fled or migrated for one reason or another and many of their temples were left behind. Your well is not as easy to locate as it once was.”

The man, Mimir he must have been, nodded gravely. “Your news saddens me. What it is that you want?”

“One piece of knowledge. That is all.”

“I am listening.”
“The knowledge of the whereabouts of a certain stone.”

“I presume it is no ordinary stone.”

Loki smiled wryly. “It is not. It has many different names but I know it as the Time Gem.”

Mimir’s face showed no signs of recognising the name, only curiosity. “Then you must give me a gift that I deem as a suitable trade for my service.”

“Very well. I have access to all of the vaults of Asgard and I could reward you with gifts greater than all the previous ones you have ever received–”

“I am afraid you misjudge me. Gold has little value to a being such as myself. What good is gold to one who cannot exist outside of these walls? My riches only come in the form of what the object brought the individual.”

“I am… not quite following.”

“If your gift brought you great happiness then it will bring me great happiness for a time. If the gift symbolises hope to you then it will embody hope for me.”

“I can offer you…” Loki trailed off. What did he have to offer? “My sceptre.”

Mimir eyed it once. “I hope you understand that I have little need for weaponry. I trust that is more than a weapon to you?”

“It is,” Loki said. “It belonged to the king of Asgard. It belonged to Odin – it belonged to… It belonged to my father. It’s a relic of my last betrayal of him and his last betrayal of me.”

“Hmm…” Mimir held out his hand, an invitation to hold Gungnir. Loki lay the shaft in his palm and when Mimir opened his eyes again they were alight. “This is a rich item,” he finally said.

“The sceptre for the knowledge of exactly where the Time Gem is, yes?”

Mimir smiled, almost gently. “I am afraid your timing is rather unfortunate. This will be the first item I have had to consume in so long and I can only guess how many centuries it will be until my next visitor.”

Loki faltered. “What do you want?”

Mimir revealed his teeth. “More.”

“I…”

“I want everything you have.”

Loki stared at him in dismay. “Everything?”

“All of it.”

Did that mean Mimir knew about the Tesseract? Did he know where Loki had it stored away?

“No.”

“Then we have no deal.” Mimir had dropped the courtesies and all that was left in his voice was an icy chill.
“I don’t have anything else to give you.”

“Yes you do,” Mimir said, and for half a heartbeat Loki thought he was going to claim the Tesseract for himself. "You have your armour.”

Loki blinked at him. “You want my armour.”

“That’s correct.”

Without Loki’s permission, Mimir touched one of the metal plates with a finger. Loki took a step backwards.

“What could you possibly get from my armour?”

The man licked his lips. “Your identity. Your image. You and you alone made your armour into an icon to be feared and revered across realms and across races. It is no ordinary armour.”

Loki did not like this but he saw little choice.

“The armour and the sceptre then, in return for the whereabouts of the Time Gem.”

Mimir nodded and offered out a hand. When Loki shook it, it was cold and slippery and wet and rough all at the same time.

“It is done,” Mimir said as Loki’s armour and the sceptre vanished.

Loki allowed a moment to pass, waiting.

“No,” Loki said, panic beginning to take root, “you still haven’t told me where it is, that was the bargain we–”

“I have kept to my end of the bargain. I have made it so that you know where your precious Time Gem is, all you have to do is think about it.”

*Think about it?* As if Loki hadn’t been thinking of anything else.

Mimir sighed with bliss. “The gifts do always taste better when they’re willingly given…”

Loki stiffened. No, he couldn’t, he couldn’t mean–

With a jolt of panic, it occurred to Loki that he did not know how to leave.

“I do have to apologise,” Mimir said, his sincerity overridden by the raw hunger in his eyes. “I do not normally treat my patrons in such a way but I have been so hungry…”

Mimir lurched towards Loki, one hand outstretched.

Loki dodged backwards and hit the wall of the well behind him. He tore off to one side but it did him little good. The space was too small. Mimir turned and took another step and his clammy hand gripped Loki by the shoulder. Loki sent a kick to the man’s stomach but it was like kicking stone. He wrestled with the hand, breaking free and then running two steps and then three and then he conjured doubles in desperation but they wouldn't appear and–

Mimir was gone. Loki paused. Why would Mimir vanish? His answer came to him when the water above him stirred and started spiralling into a vortex, water pouring from where the tip of the vortex met the base of the well. It was up to Loki’s boots and then his waist and then he was
swimming, desperately kicking to keep his head above the water. Then the rest of the water above
him crashed down and he could no longer breathe. It was all he could do but swim up and up
and then he saw Mimir reforming at the centre of the vortex and Mimir's hand grabbed his leg and
dragged him back down. Bubbles escaped Loki’s mouth as he let out a shout and kicked. He was
running out of air. He kicked again but it was feeble against the water and the strength of Mimir.

Mimir pulled him further down and one of his hands grasped Loki’s face and then Mimir was
moving in closer and closer and Loki couldn’t escape his grip and he couldn't reach the Tesseract
and–

Loki retched.

The water he had drank splattered the stone floor of the chamber. Loki barely had time to register
that he was no longer in the well and no longer drowning before something was in his throat,
pushing further and further back until he retched again.

It was only when he finished he realised the thing in his throat had been Stark’s fingers. Stark
moved out from behind him and stood up as Loki sat gasping to reclaim the air he had lost.

“Did I make the right call?” Stark asked.

Loki sat with his head between his knees, waiting for the dizziness to stop. He slowly raised his
head, wiping at his mouth. “Yes,” Loki panted. “Yes, you truly did.”
Chapter 14

“Are you good?” Stark asked after they had made their way back into the first room of the temple.

Loki forced himself to nod. “I am unharmed.” Stark shot him a look and opened his mouth as if to say something but then thought better of it. “There was… a complication,” Loki admitted.

“Yeah, I got that,” Stark said but his words were not spoken harshly. “Go on.”

Loki pressed his lips together. “Myself and Mimir came to an agreement: I would give Gungnir and my armour and in return, he would give me the knowledge of where the Time Gem is.”

“That explains the sudden wardrobe change. What happened then? Did he take your stuff and do a runner?”

"Not exactly," Loki said stiffly. “He claimed to have withheld his end of the bargain before…”

"Before he attacked you?"

"Yes. Unprovoked, I should add."

“What an asshole. I hope you roughed him up real good, Reindeer Games.”

Loki responded with an unamused huff.

Stark opened his mouth again. "So we're back to square one. We've still no idea where the Time Gem is.”

“None whatsoever, thanks to Mimir. Its whereabouts are…” Loki trailed off. As he had been speaking, something inside of him, for a lack of a better term, felt as if it had been awakened. Whatever it was was internal and it could feel and detect and direct and it was as if Loki had inexplicably gained a whole new sense he had no name for. Except that it – whatever it was – felt far. Whatever he was detecting felt far away. “The Time Gem,” Loki started and he could feel the thing responding, becoming stronger, more acute. Loki stood up abruptly and whirled around.

Something was inside his head.

“Erm, you’re not sounding like your usual eloquent self.”

Something had been implanted into his mind.

Was this Mimir’s doing? Was this what he had meant when he said that he had given Loki what he needed to find the gem? Was meddling with his mind Mimir's twisted idea of giving information?

Instinct made him want to rip it out. His fingertips itched to tear and tear until the alien thing inside his head was gone. His mind was a prison of his own making but at least it had been that – completely his own. Even Thanos hadn't bothered to fully breach the walls of his mind, but then again, he hadn't needed to; not when he had the object that allowed him to acquaint himself so well with the very core of Loki's soul and made him an offer he knew he couldn't refuse.

For one long moment, Loki was furious and horrified all at once.

"Er… Loki?"
“I think Mimir might have held true to his end of the bargain after all,” Loki said darkly.

It had taken a great deal of explaining and Loki, who usually had little difficulty finding the exact words and phrases to communicate what he desired, struggled to put into words how the thing in his mind felt. In the end, he had to settle for an analogy, comparing the thing to a compass, only one that was invisible and relied on feeling rather than reading. It pointed, he suspected, to the Time Gem rather than north, and instead of navigating in only two dimensions, his compass pointed in three and allowed him to gain an impression of the distance too.

“Where’s it pointing?” Stark had asked as soon as Loki had finished his explanation.

“Far away,” Loki said. “the gem can’t be on this realm.”

“Which one then?”

Either the compass was not precise enough or Loki was not attuned to it well enough, or more likely a combination of the two.

What later followed was the process of attempting to align a rudimentary drawn map of the Nine Realms with where the compass was trying to direct him, made less tedious by Stark speeding the process with his own calculations based off the position of the sun in the sky. It was Stark who reached an answer first, and when he did Loki groaned at loud.

Niflheim. He’d have to return to Niflheim.

***

Leaving Stark behind was hardly ideal but it would be even less ideal for Stark to freeze on Niflheim. The man had admitted that the heating mechanisms within his armour had been powerful enough to keep him warm on Jotunheim but they were not designed to withstand temperatures that much more extreme.

The most efficient course of action would be for Loki to teleport himself and see how feasible it would be for him to locate the Time Gem by himself and produce an estimate of how long it may take. Meanwhile, Stark would wait in the otherwise empty temple.

“I need a wash anyway,” Stark commented half-jokingly. “Shame I don't have a razor.”

Loki gave a nod and just before he made to leave, Stark cleared his throat.

“You better come back,” Stark said, the intensity of his gaze not matching the lightness of his tone. “Because I’m a bit screwed if you don’t.”

“You have my word,” Loki promised, very much aware that his word alone was probably not particularly reassuring for the man who would otherwise be stranded on an alien planet. “In event of me not returning before nightfall, fly and follow the river upstream and you will come to find Vanir civilisation. They would take you in.”

“Awesome. Maybe I won’t end up becoming Chuck Noland after all.”

***

Moisture froze on Loki’s eyelashes and the wind beat the exposed skin of his face. The Time Gem was closer now, much closer. He’d had a couple of false starts where he was forced to teleport to other sides of the realm to check whether it would be less distance away but the strange thing was
that there was no noticeable difference. Wherever Loki walked, the pull of the gem was somewhere equally deep beneath him.

The compass had narrowed down the location of the stone but it would not be able to assist with identifying a route to reach it.

Loki searched the surface of the realm for an entrance to the underground but the thick blanket of fog made it more likely he’d fall down one before spotting one.

With vague hopes of happening to stumble across something, Loki walked. He walked over hills and down valleys, around huge walls of stone and ice and skidded over frozen lakes, always heading further and further away from where he had left Odin. He could not walk indefinitely, he knew, but his blood and higher tolerance of the cold would give him more hours than Odin had before he too would freeze.

When the cold had started to cause his hands to vibrate and redden, he spotted a feature in the landscape that seemed slightly… off. It was a large stone pillar in the distance peaking above the fog, cuboidal in form and the very vertical way the pillar was stationed made it appear as if it had been deliberately placed some time ago rather than occurring naturally.

Loki was certain he’d spotted another similar such stone on the other side of the realm too.

Loki began his walk towards it and before long he could sense whisperings of magic in the air that grew stronger and stronger the closer he got. The magic felt neither harmful nor friendly, but somehow not neutral either. He had never thought to encounter such a thing on Niflheim. Magic, by definition, was not naturally occurring – which begged the question of who or what could have possibly have woven the magic. No life could survive on Niflheim for an extended length of time without succumbing to the cold. That pillar shouldn’t have existed.

What was its purpose?

Was it a lure? A monument? A landmark?

And who had created it? Were they intending to return or were they long since dead?

But it all came back to the question of what it was all for. Loki was forced to ask himself what he would possibly want a huge stone for if he had the ability to move them at will. If he didn’t have the Tesseract, he supposed one might come in useful for acting as a marker. Niflheim would be the perfect place to store something, to hide something, to keep it hidden from almost any being and virtually guarantee it would remain undisturbed. There were not many in the Nine Realms who would have been able to detect such subtle magic and far fewer who would be able to wander Niflheim for long enough to discover it.

Maybe it marked a hiding place. It was a stretch perhaps, a leap of the imagination to make something fit, but it was enough that the pillar was at least worthy of investigation.

Loki had arrived at the pillar and if he listened hard enough, he could hear it whispering in a language that he could not understand. The sounds were harsh and urgent and the sibilance hissed in his ears. How ancient must the language have been for the Allspeak to be unable to translate it for his ears? Surely Odin, with all of his powers, must have been able to detect the magic – why hadn’t he ever mentioned it? Odin’s omissions stung less than they used to but they still stung all the same.

Loki’s skin was becoming bluer – not Jotun blue, but blue from the cold, and his teeth chattered.
With trembling fingertips, he stretched out a hand to touch the stone.

In retrospect, touching something infused with a magic he knew nothing about was a terribly unwise decision, but nothing appeared to happen.

His hands were numb but as he smoothed his fingers over the surface of the stone to attempt to wipe away at the frozen coating of snow and ice, he felt warmth beneath his fingers. The warmth was not all originating from one point, instead there were little patches of it, spread out here and there in lines and dots and curves.

_Runes_, Loki thought, but none that he could recognise. They were so many of them all crowded together it was next to impossible to distinguish one from another.

He closed his eyes and felt for the magic with his mind again. It was stronger now and more tangible, but it was so foreign to him that he had the sensation of looking at something without seeing it, like he could sense it was there but could not make out the details, and when he tried to reach for it with his mind it was as if his magic slipped straight through, like he was trying to hold smoke in his hands.

If only he could understand what the magic was communicating, what it wanted. The runes might have held an answer if he was able to read them but he was not able to identify them by touch alone.

The cold stung his eyes so much that it caused them to leak and the droplets froze on his face.

_Time to leave_, he decided.

***

When Loki returned Stark sat, eyes glazed, methodically breaking a twig into smaller and pieces before adding it to the pile next to him. There was no practical purpose to it, at least none that Loki could see. It was a distraction, a need to mechanically repeat an action again and again in order to prevent the mind from thinking. It seemed that Loki was not the only one who found destruction cathartic, and it was only because Loki had caught Stark on such unawares it occurred to him that Stark was almost as desperate not to think about what Thanos did on Earth as he was.

Loki took a step closer, forcing his foot to fall louder than it normally would have done.

Stark's mask of nonchalance slid into place and Loki saw for the first time that Stark had more armour than his metal one.

Stark brushed the pile of twigs aside.

“Got anything?” Stark asked.

“Yes and no,” Loki replied. “I know of the Time Gem’s location but not of how to reach it.” Loki proceeded to give an overview of what he had learned, interrupted intermittently by Stark’s further questioning.

“So the runes might be a major clue,” Stark summarised. “Either that, or they might be something completely irrelevant, but I’m choosing to ignore that possibility. All we’d need to do is make them legible and figure out how to translate them.”

"Oh?" Loki asked sardonically. "Is that all?"
"I'm thinking this is one of those problems blowtorches fix."

"A blowtorch," Loki repeated.

"Yeah. I'd have to amp it up a bit, obviously."

"You could create fire that could survive Niflheim?"

"Maybe, depends what tools are available to me. Blowtorches aren't your typical fire; the heat is made from an exothermic reaction of highly combustible gas you point at whatever you want to warm up."

"If you say so. But it doesn't seem wise to point something like that at unknown magical runes without knowing how they may react."

"Fine then, I guess we can do it the boring way."

"Which is?"

"To get Friday to take a look at it. My suit's gonna need a minor upgrade if I don't want to end up freezing to death."

Loki pressed his lips together. "We can't risk going back to Midgard, not enough time has passed yet."

"Are you telling me there's nowhere else in the universe--"

"--Nine Realms--"

"--that has soldering irons?"

"I am not familiar with the term. Perhaps they go by a different name in other realms."

"Okay, I just need something I can use to melt tin or lead and apply it with precision. All I need to do is cut off the temperature restrictions and make sure I'm not going to accidentally turn the rest of my circuits to sludge when the suit heats up. It'll be a shoddy job but it'll do the trick."

Loki frowned. "The dwarves specialise in metals but I doubt they know of these circuits you speak of. It may be possible that they have tools you could bend to your purpose."

"Dwarves." Stark blinked. "Are we talking the short fighty beardy type guys or just the short guys?"

"It is true that they are fierce warriors, yes. And yes, many of them sport beards."

Stark sniggered.

"I fail to understand what is so amusing about the situation," Loki snapped.

"It's just" – attempting to explain himself caused Stark's laughter to grow – "it's just so fucking clichéd."

"Clichéd," Loki repeated flatly.

"You wouldn't get it, it's a pop-culture thing. Dwarves are like the Tolkien fantasy race. See what I did there? No, probably not."
Loki sniffed. "Your Midgardian tales probably have origins of truth somewhere in them."

"Probably," Stark admitted, "but that doesn't stop it being funny. So these dwarf guys... Are they enemies of yours too? I gotta ask."

"No. Being a Prince of Asgard makes me a somewhat recognisable figure but they are considerably less likely to recognise me without my armour."

"Could be worse. What planet are we hopping to this time? Because, you know, as much as I love being the first human on every planet you dump me on, the side effects aren't so pretty."

Loki did not bother to correct him about being the first human on realms outside of Midgard. "Nidavellir. The realm is the richest source of metal in all of the Nine. It only stands to reason that they are the most talented weapon forgers."

"Do you know who you're speaking to? I'm kidding – I retired. Sounds good so long as I'm not going to have to mine my own metal."

"I doubt that will be necessary." Loki held out the Tesseract for Stark to grab the other side of. "Are you ready?"

"Anything else I should know before…"

"Just don't irritate the dwarves or draw unnecessary attention to yourself."

"Hi, I'm Tony Stark."
Neither of them so much as stumbled this time when the Tesseract teleported them.

They arrived on the outskirts of a dwarven city, a cluster of grey stone structures elegant in their cuboidal simplicity. There were almost enough towers and buildings to form a horizon line, and entrances to the underground were dotted around the valley, sturdy wide doors that led to huge underground chasms and mines large enough to fit the royal palace of Asgard inside them multiple times over.

"That's funny," Stark commented, nodded ahead at the city, "I was kind of expecting a cesspit of Ye Old Taverns. What are they using as stone blocks? Granite? How are they managing to use that as their primary building material? It can’t be easy to shift around. I’m not seeing anything around here that could be used as transport. Horses wouldn’t be able to lug that weight around. Do they even have horses?"

"Hounds," Loki replied.

"Hounds," Stark repeated. "Are dogs not menacing sounding enough for them? They do realise they're not the only ones with canine companions, right? Are you saying they're small enough to ride their dogs like horses or they're more like Eskimos riding chariots running on husky-power? And I’m assuming the dogs – fine, hounds – have nothing to do with the granite. But either one makes one hell of a mental image."

"You are being ridiculous."

"We're in generic fantasy adventure land and you think I'm the one being ridiculous? Ridiculous is a thing I keep having to redefine every single time we hop planets. I'm half-expecting someone to leap out from behind us and heckle us with a quest to slay the dragon who’s kidnapped some royalty."

"On Nidavellir?" Loki scorned. "Even if they had royalty, they'd be much more likely be stolen away by some sort of rogue earthworm."

"That's... mildly horrifying." Stark stole a glance at the nearest mine entrance as they passed it. "They might wanna call in Agent J to talk to Jeff."

“Stark – if this another one of your Midgardian—”

“Yeah, yeah, another one of my Midgardian references. It’s just this sci-fi flick and there’s this giant worm and chaos and... You know what? They should just work on their worm problem.”

"You say that as if they haven't been trying for millennia."

"Again - mildly horrifying. Take any animal and make it huge and it's suddenly so much more horrifying." Stark veered off-path to avoid walking within close proximity of another mine entrance. Loki did not bother to inform Stark of how rare those sorts of creatures were and how solid the doors barring the entrances were. Watching one of Earth's mightiest heroes balk at the thought of oversized carnivorous worms was the closest thing Loki had had to entertainment in a long time.
As they walked, Stark reeled off question after question, more often than not neglecting to pause between them for Loki to answer them. It was only when they were halfway towards the city Stark thought to point out, "We might stand out a bit."

"Yes, Stark, that thought had occurred to me."

"So are you going to..." Stark waggled his fingers in a way Loki could only assume was supposed to connote magic.

"I have little choice. With their access to the Bifrost still not regained, any person above what is considered to be normal height would stand out somewhat more than usual. And that's assuming they don't recognise me."

"Without the horn attire, you're practically cuddly by comparison," Stark said and the phrase *mildly horrified* was brought to the forefront of Loki's mind. "More like The Count from Sesame Street instead of full-on Dracula."


"How big are they?" Stark asked, too curious to be truly fearful. "Do they have teeth? Does one worm become two worms if it’s cut in half?"

Being left with the prospect of a choice of facing a constant stream of questions or something more entertaining on their walk to the city, Loki chose the latter and proceeded to fabricate stories of the giant worms that inhabited Nidavellir. According to Loki, there had been a plague of wars between the dwarves and the worms, a never-ending battle for the underground that had only come to a close when the dwarves had banished the worm-king to Midgard. Loki had been in the middle of inventing a tale about a revolutionary dwarven woman who had disappeared centuries ago down one of the mines only to reappear riding on the back of one of the worms to take her revenge on those who had given up on finding her when Stark interrupted him.

"Where exactly are we heading, anyway?"

Loki had gotten so used to the flow of his story it was only when Stark spoke that he realised the man had managed to stay quiet for more than a few minutes at a time.

"I was hoping to come across some sort of forge. I expect they may have the materials you require."

"Take it they're not gonna be impressed with a cheque. What can I say – I forgot to pack my dwarf money. Is there some sort of intergalactic currency exchange? Because if there isn't, you guys should probably figure something out. Don’t suppose you’ve got any dwarf money jangling around at the bottom of your magic wallet dimension?"

Loki shot Stark a particularly scathing look. "Oddly enough, dwarven gold didn't seem like a necessity for me to have on my person before I left Asgard."

"They're going to be a bit pissed if they catch us stealing, aren't they?"

"There is a simple solution to that problem–"

"Yeah, yeah, don't get caught," Stark finished off. "Shame we don't have a guy who can make us invisible or anything."

"About that," Loki said. "I have a slight alteration."
"Are you messing with me?" Stark demanded, after having glimpsed his own reflection. "I get this--" he gestured at his new face "--while you’ve made yourself into dwarf version of James Dean."

"All so it does not arouse suspicion if the hounds react to us," Loki said primly.

"Yeah, disguising as dwarves might be necessary but what you did to my face isn't. That was a dick move by the way."

"All for the purpose of blending in," Loki replied innocently. Then he dropped the facade. "I’m not sure what else you were expecting. I’m hardly going to go out of my way to humiliate myself. And besides," Loki added, "a more desirable illusion is a privilege to be earned rather than freely given."

"Oh, I get it. So if I'm a good boy and do everything you tell me with no questions asked I get to not look like a Neanderthal. Yeah, not gonna happen buddy. Boy, I bet you could’ve had some fun in school with those powers of yours."

"About those powers of mine..." Loki said, nodding to the rapidly approaching gateway. "You may want to lower your voice when discussing them. I know subtlety is hardly your forte but it would be advantageous if you didn't begin our entrance to the city with a loud announcement that we are both wearing illusions."

"Alright, alright. Point taken. One question though: am I supposed to feel a tingling sensation or something? You should give me a complete list of possible side effects because – seriously – your illusions can’t have been tested on humans that thoroughly. I don’t want to come out in rashes or something."

"They're illusions," Loki scoffed. "Illusions alone cannot possibly physically harm you."

"Good to know."

They rounded a corner and passed underneath a bridge that skimmed the top of Loki’s head before they emerged on the other side to an empty market square. The forge was harder to locate, probably having been placed further away so as not to allow the noise to disrupt trade too much. Along the way, Loki could not help but notice how few dwarves there were around. Being late evening, seeing less dwarves was expected but for it to be deserted was not quite as anticipated.

"What's with ghost town?" Stark asked, apparently having picked up on the same notion that the place was strangely empty.

"I don't know. This is not normal."

There was tension in Loki's back as he walked and every so often he succumbed to the urge to glance over his shoulder. There was nothing to see but the rigid stone walls staring back at him. It was too quiet.

Loki strained his ears but failed to hear anything worthy of notice. Had he been wrong about where Thanos would head next? Was it too late for the dwarves? Were they walking towards the very thing they needed to avoid? No, Loki decided, they couldn't be; there would be unavoidable evidence of destruction instead of nothing but silence. Smoke and cities laid to waste and piles and piles of fallen warriors. Besides, if it was Thanos then the Chitauri would probably have made an
appearance already.

It must have been something else, a different unforeseen threat.

"Be on your guard," Loki warned.

Stark nodded once.

They passed through deeper into the city, keeping eyes peeled for some sign of life, for the origin of the thing causing the back of Loki's neck to prickle, for anywhere where they could possibly find what they needed and leave as quickly as possible.

Was there the sound of something from the distance or had it been Loki's imagination? Loki looked to Stark to see whether he had observed anything but he appeared not to have done.

The streets narrowed. Some of the first and second floors of the buildings on opposite sides of the path were joined by crisscrossing platforms and footbridges that would be perfect points to ambush from.

"Stark?" Loki whispered, flicking his eyes upward and hoping he would take his meaning.

"My scanners aren't picking up anything up from there," Stark answered.

Loki supposed that was probably a good thing but it still took some effort to force himself to walk at a slow and measured pace. If he was to be attacked, he would rather be ready.

A footstep fell; it was neither his nor Stark's. Purely out of reflex, Loki went to summon his knives but his hands came up empty; he still hadn't found any replacement daggers. Stark whirled around, his palms aimed.

Another footstep, one that dragged rather than fell this time.

Loki would have to use his bare hands if it came to it. He wasn’t fond of that prospect.

There was a scuffling noise, closer this time, and then a figure lurched in the shadows, its back hunched over and its hands clutching at the nearest wall.

"You..." it began. It moved closer, stumbling into the moonlight. "You..." the dwarf tried again. "You got any more of the mead?"

Loki could smell the alcohol on her breath from where he stood.

“No,” Loki replied curtly.

The dwarf frowned at him, more out of confusion than irritance. “I don't believe you.”

“No, really, I do not. Now, if that’s all then we shall be on our way.” Loki turned and made a move in the opposite direction, trusting Stark to follow.

“Do you, then?” the dwarf asked Stark instead.

Stark held up his hands. “I’m all out.”

Whatever inclination Loki had to trust Stark to leave the obviously intoxicated dwarf well alone had been a foolish one.
“I had some! I had some just now and I put it down somewhere while I went to get more gold and now it’s gone and I can’t find it but I had it right there!” She pointed at somewhere in the dark alley she stumbled out of.

“My drinks used to wander off all the time,” Stark said.

She nodded vigorously. “They do that, don’t they? It’s so strange. But I– I should get back now. I don’t wish to miss the steak.”

“Fair enough,” Stark said with a breath of laughter in his voice. Loki rolled his eyes and backtracked. Humouring her would get them nowhere.

“Stark,” Loki whispered in his ear, “this has gone on for long enough.”

The dwarf spotted it. “I’m drunk, not blind,” she insisted. “And you’re being rude.”

Stark let out a snigger.

Loki straightened his spine. “My…” he fumbled for an appropriate term to call Stark – ‘ally’ would hardly seem appropriate to an outsider even if it was the most accurate term. “My companion and I have a rather urgent matter we must attend to.”

She grinned lopsidedly. “Yes, you both need an urgent amount of drinks. Neither of you’ve drunk enough. Aren’t you celebrating? The whole fucking city is celebrating. Hel, the whole realm is celebrating.”

“For once I came to the party instead of having a party come to me,” Stark remarked.

“Stark – now is hardly the time–”

Stark held up a hand. “I’ve got this. I speak drunk.” Stark turned to the dwarf. “We’re new here. Heard all about this party and wanted in – well, I wanted in, he on the other hand… Anyway, I bet you probably know the city really well, right?”

She gave another vigorous nod.

Stark faltered in his lie, uncertain of how to proceed. “Help us out?” Stark asked. “We’re looking for a friend of a friend. Some sort of blacksmith that lives somewhere around here. Sound familiar?”

“You mean old Steelhands?” she asked after a moment of thought.

Stark snapped his fingers. “That’s the one.”

“Lives on the other side of the city. Let me think… You go past the square and over the bridge and under the lake and then you get to this crossroad where you go…” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “Left?” She bit her lip. “Might be straight on. I’d know if I was there, I promise. Actually – you know what – I’ll come with you. How’s that sound? And I’ll make sure you drink enough on the way. I’m nice like that. I’ll be the best kind of guide, I promise.”

***

As far as Loki was concerned, the dwarf was the worst kind of guide. Their only essential criteria was for her not to ask too many questions and to be able to lead them to the forge. Admittedly, she could do both of these things – it was just a shame that she loved the sound of her own voice
almost as much as Stark did. It was also by her insistence that they had travelled by some sort of mechanised cart to reach the city centre and it was not a method of transport Loki had been forced to endure before. The dwarf took the front, forcing him and Stark to have to sit uncomfortably close in the back, the cramped seating forcing their knees up high. Whenever they rounded a corner, one of them would inevitably end up being shoved into the other and it was for that reason Loki sat with his elbow pointed out, his other hand gripping the handle that was placed too far down to give him any proper leverage and stained with what must have been years worth of build-up of grease.

“So this must be how they carry all that stone,” Stark said, half to himself and half to Loki, quietly enough that the dwarf would not hear over the noise of the steam and the wheels on the tracks. “Explains a lot. Wasn’t expecting it to be so eighteen-hundreds though. Don’t get me wrong – they’ve got more advanced tech than Vanheim but I was expecting something a bit more, I don’t know, otherworldly, than steam-powered public transport.”

“Oh dear,” Loki sighed, “I must have performed poorly in my duties of being your own personal chaperone and guide to the Nine Realms.” He let a pause pass. “I hope that you are not expecting an apology because a realm failed to match your unfounded expectations.”

“And yeesh, I was only making an observation.”

“Yes, well, your comparison to the Vanir was somewhat skewed as you have only seen ancient Vanir technology in an underdeveloped region – it is primitive by the standards of the modern Vanir. And may I introduce you to the concept of filtering? You see, for every thought that you have, only a select few manage to make it through to escape out of your mouth.”

Stark grinned. “This is me with my filter on.”

“In that case, I dread to think what it would be like without it.”

The cart gave an unexpected jerk and Loki’s elbow collided painfully with Stark’s armour.

“Karma,” Stark taunted, and Loki rolled his eyes skyward.

The smell of metal and rust and oil lingered on Loki’s clothes after they had exited the cart. Their self-proclaimed guide proved to be as much a hindrance as she was useful, frequently delaying them whenever she caught sight of an acquaintance or events and tournaments going on, and her persistence in trying to persuade them to partake in dwarven ale or mead was exhausting.

The city centre was the heart of the celebration and it was so loud Loki was surprised he hadn't been able to clearly hear it from where they had started. He had never seen so many dwarves in one place before. They weren’t solitary creatures but they normally preferred to live in smaller numbers, in villages or towns scattered across Nidavellir. The dwarven cities were few and far between but this one, if Loki recalled correctly, was a capital.

Loki was able to credit the dwarf with directness in her route at least, although that meant that himself and Stark had to attempt to navigate their way through the crowds completely avoiding even the slightest accidental brush of other dwarves. It would hardly do for either of their illusions to slip surrounded by what must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of dwarves who were neither friend nor foe.

The stench of ale and sweat and cooking meat was worse than the noise. As they approached the central square, the chanting and singing and raucous laughter grew louder and louder until they had
to shout at each other in order to communicate. The ground was filthy, strewn with dropped and moulding bits of meat, glass bottles, and sprays of what Loki suspected had been vomit. Loki could not miss the irony of what must have been such a huge celebration occurring only weeks before Thanos would invade. It made him question what it was all for.

“Must be one hell of a party,” Stark remarked in Loki’s ear. The dwarf was ahead of them despite her height barely surpassing Loki’s midriff and she turned to ensure they had not fallen far behind.

Stark’s stomach let out a loud grumble that could be heard even over the loud commotion.

“Tell me those are edible for humans,” Stark begged Loki, pointing at a table containing a pile of barbequed stakes and bread.

“I believe they are,” Loki replied. “If you are able to take some for yourself for later without revealing yourself or losing us then feel free to do so.”

“I wasn't asking permission, I just wanted to know if I'd get food poisoning.” Stark veered off to the left, narrowly avoiding a flying stray axe from what Loki assumed must have been one of the dwarves’ notorious axe-throwing competitions. Nidavellir must have been the only realm on a par with – if not worse – than Asgard for its mindless glorification of displays of strength and fighting prowess.

Walking in perfect balance had caused so many to attempt to force drinks on Loki that he had almost subconsciously adopted a slightly drunken swagger in order to avoid it; there were only so many instances of narrowly avoiding having dwarven ale of all things break his illusion he could take. But by the time they reached the forge and weapon smith, his swagger had disappeared, much to the dwarf’s disappointment. Even more to the dwarf’s disappointment, so had hers.

“Excellent,” Loki said when they reached the stone path to the entrance. He supposed she might bid her farewell quicker if he said his courtesies. “We are most grateful.”

She lingered for long enough that he feared she had not taken the hint.

“It has been no trouble. Did we ever introduce ourselves? I don’t think we did.” She held out a hand. “I’m Luckypicker.”

Loki had a brief moment to wonder whether she had earned that name or had bestowed it upon herself.

“Jadecloak,” Loki lied, desperately seeking an excuse to avoid touching her hand. He pointed at Stark to stall. “And this is… Ironforged.”

Stark gave her a wave but she still had not withdrawn her hand.

“You’ll have to forgive us,” Loki apologised, “it is the nature of our trade that we come into contact with the sickly very often. We ourselves have built up a tolerance over the years but others are not so fortunate.”

Success – she retracted her hand. “So you’re healers then?”

Loki loved it when others embellished his own lies for him. “Yes.”

“Got any cures for the morning after?”

Loki gave a polite but wry smile. “Contrary to popular belief, more ale is not the cure.”
Luckypicker chuckled. “Damn.”

“I know, right?” Stark interjected.

“If it’s all the same to you,” Loki said, “we would best...” He made a motion with his hand that indicated to the building ahead of them.

“Oh,” she said. “Yes. Of course.” She leant an elbow on one of the posts by the path. “I can’t believe you came all this way and you’re not celebrating. It’s not every day the Bifrost’s connection to us is repaired and we can trade with other realms again.”

Ah. That explained a lot. Although it was quite an ominous indicator of how seriously the dwarves were taking the threat of Thanos – assuming that the council had not passed the warnings and necessary preparations off as madness. But Loki didn't have the time to do anything about that now.

“The celebration lasts for a while longer, does it not? I am certain we shall have opportunity yet. Until then, thank you and farewell.”

“Farewell,” she said before turning and heading back the way she came.


“What?”

“For a guy who potentially poisoned a guy, you have impeccable manners. When it suits you, natch.”

Loki shot Stark a quizzical look. “It’s hardly a rare trait. Would you rather have me be rude?”

“Probably wouldn’t work out well for the rest of us.” Stark glanced at the door and then back at Loki. “You reckon they’re out?”

“It looked as if the entire city was at the festival. With any luck, the owner and whoever else occupies the building should be too.”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out. We going in incognito?”

“Remaining undetected is preferable, yes.”

Stark appeared to be waiting for something. “So are you gonna work your magic on that lock or what?”

“Weren’t you listening when I told you my primary school of magic is within illusions?”

“I was, actually. Then I remembered how you escaped that cosy little glass cell of yours on the helicarrier.”

“What you may remember is not always what transpired,” Loki said. He had done a fine job of tricking the Avengers and the organisation that held him into thinking that he had somehow magically opened the cell door. Magic had been involved, yes, but illusions alone could not open doors – people could. But the words that left his lips were more honestly spoken that what he had intended and they wrenched the memory – his memory that wasn’t even true, the memory of something that never happened – of Thor throwing him from the Bifrost to the forefront of his mind. The worst part was that he couldn’t tell if the memory was entirely his own doing, or
whether it was another thing he had Thanos to thank for. Or maybe the worst part was that after he realised his own mind had tricked him, alone and forgotten by all but Frigga in one of Asgard’s cells, the memory was no less vivid or real.

And to think Loki had once assumed his mind was his own.

“Alright, I guess if you’re going to go all cryptic on me, I might as well do it myself,” Stark said, jolting Loki out of his thoughts. Stark aimed a fist at the lock, a motion that Loki was now very familiar with, and a bright red light shot out in a beam. Where the light touched, it ate away through the door and Stark was able to draw holes in the metal as easily as making lines with ink. The light stuttered and Stark cursed, giving the top of his hand where the light was emitted from a tap. He resumed his work but the light remained intermittent, flickering in and out of existence with a will of its own. “Must have got damaged in the battle. Friday – why didn’t you tell me?” The invisible voice’s response was too quiet for Loki to hear. “Oh. You did.” Stark poked the circle he had made and it fell to the floor before he reached in and undid the latch. “We’re in.”

They went inside into what must have been the shop front and Loki closed the door behind them. The walls were coated in diagrams of armour and weaponry and a selection of the blacksmith’s finest armour hung from the ceiling on hooks. There was a door on either side of the counter and no indication of which one led where.

"I'll take that one." Stark said, nodding to the door on the left before disappearing through it.

Loki ducked as he entered the door on the right-hand side and wandered up the stairs, his footsteps falling soundlessly on the floor.

He focused his senses but did not detect any other traces of magic within the air. When he reached the landing at the top of the stairs, there were another five doors and a number of sketchy family portraits nailed to the walls facing him. The floor must have been the living floor – continuing further would serve no purpose.

He retreated back to the shop floor and took the door on the left instead.

The sight that greeted him was not an encouraging one.

Stark was frozen with his arms raised while two dogs, each one more than half of his height, were growling and raising their hackles while advancing on him.

Stark must have heard something on the opposite side of the room because he whipped his head around at Loki’s entrance.

The dogs could be easily defeated, with the press of a button or whatever it was that Stark did, he could have had the animals dead and lying at his feet within seconds. Loki was fast beginning to lose count of the number of times he wished fervently that he had not lost his daggers. It was not their bites that he dreaded, although they would be painful, but their barks that acted as an extra layer of security.

Loki held still but one of the dogs, a large brown one with thick fur like a mammoth, was on to him.

"Stark," Loki whispered, hoping that his interruption would not set the barking off, "whatever you have planned, do it quickly. And quietly."

Stark appeared to do nothing. He spoke no words, made no gestures, and none of the mechanisms on his armour appeared to move. Then two pulses of energy shot like singular blasts of air at each
hound.

It wasn't enough.

The first was pulse stunned instantly, the second shot missed.

The remaining hound unleashed a long howl upon seeing its fellow companion fall to the ground before Stark shot at it again and it joined it on the ground with a dull thud. But it was too late – another hound, one from a house on the same street, had begun howling and it was not the only one.

"Stark – be quick!"

More howls sounded, and another and another and–

"Shit!" Stark began digging frantically through a pile of metal in the corner and another cacophony of howls began, echoing from further and further away. The fact that no dwarves had rushed downstairs demanding to know what exactly they were doing proved that they must have not been in – either that or they must have been very deep sleepers.

"Is that all you require?" Loki asked.

"Nope. Need a soldering iron." Stark began rummaging through some drawers. “It’s probably going to have to be a makeshift one. And I’ll need a heat source.”

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Loki returned after having pushed benches in front of the door to delay the return of the occupants, should they make their appearance before they had finished.

The hounds looked as if they were merely asleep, their breaths deep and even. After having decided that he’d rather have a door between them, Loki shifted them into the main shop floor and when he returned to the backroom, the howls outside had died down and Stark had already fired up the forge.

Stark stepped out of his armour and it unfolded around him, metal plates sliding backwards and tidying themselves underneath each other in a way that made the metal seem elegant in a way metal should not be, leaving the suit of armour open and poised in position behind him.

“What?” Stark asked. “Do you all still have to do it the slow way on Asgard?”

“Not if you have magic,” Loki replied.

Stark rolled up his sleeves. “Nifty.”

“Tell me,” Loki said, “has your armour always had the ability to stun?”

Stark shrugged. “Not always, no.”

“It surprises me that–”

“Some of us aren’t quite as stab-happy as you, you know.”

“I was going to say that it surprises me that this has been the only time I have witnessed you using it.”
“Oh.” Stark looked away and poked at the metal in the bucket with a pole.

“Besides,” Loki added, “I think you will find that I rarely use my daggers to actually stab.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re one pedantic son of a bitch?” Stark asked but there was humour in his tone as he gave the liquefying metal more of a stir. “Slice-happy just doesn’t have the same ring to it.” He pulled out the pole and lent it against the wall. “Alright, the lead's pretty melted. Help me lift this up?”

Loki gripped the legs and Stark hooked his arms underneath the shoulders and together they lifted the armour so it lay on the top of a workbench. The armour was surprisingly light, Loki realised, and even though he would have been able to move it on his own without any strain, it was quicker with two of them as the awkwardness was anchored to the size rather than the weight.

Loki could do little but watch as Stark began to remove sections of his armour with a delicate care he hadn’t known the man possessed. There were hundreds of thousands of miniature components inside it, as complicated as the mapping of veins, and yet Stark must have known the precise purpose of each one because he began to cut away at a short number of wires without hesitation. The words I hope you know what you are doing were on the tip of Loki’s tongue but the more he watched, the more transparent it became how little the words were needed.

It was the intricacy of the operation Loki questioned when Stark brought a standard pair of nails and, with both hands gloved, dipped one of them in the liquid lead.

Stark let out a sigh. “This is nowhere as good as a real soldering iron. Sorry Friday in advance.”

“Not a problem, boss,” a female voice said, emitting from somewhere within the armour and making Loki startle.

Stark held the nail over one the plates and used the other to encourage drops to fall off, forming lines with the lead that connected and held different pieces together. He repeated the process, focusing on minuscule sections one at a time.

“It’s just a case of reconnecting some components on the failsafe circuit board now,” Stark said, as if that explained everything.

“Ah,” Loki said, as if he understood.

“I’m not gonna be able to fix the laser though. I don’t have the parts here.”

Stark resumed using the nails and lead, such primitive tools for such precise work. Loki hadn’t realised Stark possessed the capacity or the patience for it. How long exactly it took he could not have said, but it must have been less than a few hours which Loki spent bracing himself for either the hounds awakening or the family who presumably lived upstairs returning. In the end, it turned out that neither had been needed.

“Finito,” Stark announced. Loki had been so convinced they’d have to face some sort of conflict before leaving that when Stark claimed he’d finished making the necessary adjustments to his armour, he almost didn't believe him. “Not bad for a guy who’s gone over twenty-four hours without sleep, huh?”

It wasn’t until the word ‘sleep’ was mentioned that Loki grew more aware of how much the exhaustion of travelling via the Tesseract, as well as every task they had accomplished since leaving Jotunheim, had taken its toll.
“We should probably remedy that,” Loki said.

Stark looked affronted. “It’s not until you get past forty hours that you’re at risk of hallucinating. I’m good for a while yet.”

Loki wasn’t convinced but he did not want to admit that his own state could hardly be described as good. “We have no inkling how long we will have to search Niflheim for. It would not be wise to continue without resting and eating a full meal.”

The prospect of food appeared to gain Stark’s attention more than the prospect of a night of rest because he dropped any resistance he might have had towards the idea and complied well enough with Loki to steal enough gold from the shop to pay for a night at an inn and more.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to buying_the_space_farm for not only filling in another one of my 'insert pop-culture reference here' notes with something I’d never think of but also for supplying most of the dialogue around it.
Chapter 16

Loki had slept intermittently, repeatedly having his sleep disturbed by drunkards and the sound of Stark moving through the thin wall between them. The bed sheet itched and the bed creaked loudly each time Loki so much as moved a limb. Despite that, and the multiple times he had got up in the night to double check that the door was locked, it was still a better night’s sleep than any he had on Jotunheim.

The curtains made a poor job of blocking the light and so it was still very early in the day when Loki resigned attempting to resume sleeping and left his room to knock on Stark’s door. Loki was not a fan of company in the early hours of the morning but his stomach was making certain demands of sustenance and he did not wish to leave Stark alone and without an illusion masking which species he belonged to for long.

Loki had assumed the noises he heard must have meant Stark was awake, but the length of time it was taking Stark to reach the door suggested otherwise.

“I was of a mind that we should eat again before leaving,” Loki said by way of explanation.

There were rummaging noises and then the turning of a key in a lock. Stark opened the door, dressed only in his very rumpled clothing, and blinked blearily at him.

“Allright– Just…” Stark rubbed at his eyes. “Give me a moment.”

When they made their way down to the ground floor, they were the only guests at the tables – the others were presumably either nursing themselves after celebrating for most of the night or were still celebrating.

They claimed a table in the corner and ate in silence. Loki had just finished off his second helping of lamb pie when Stark saw fit to speak again.

“Niflheim next, right?”

Loki put down his cutlery. “That is correct.”

“Can we do a bit of shopping first? I could really do with a toothbrush. And deodorant. And clothes if they’ve got any that’ll fit – mine have passed the point of being stale.”

Loki took a swig of water. “I fail to see why not. I could do also do with purchasing more daggers and supplies of food and drink.”

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"There’s desolate and then there’s this," came Stark’s comment when they arrived upon Niflheim. “It’s more than desolate – it’s utterly uninhabitable. Speaking of which, your armour appears to be coping with the current climate."

"Yeah, I noticed that too." Stark took a few steps forward. "So is that it?" Stark demanded, nodded at the stone pillar they had arrived in front of.
"What do you mean, is that it?"

"I'm disappointed. It's kind of anti-climatic, don't you think? I was expecting some sword sticking out of it or for it be spouting a magic frozen waterfall or something. Not just... a big cuboidal rock."

"How hard it must be for your overactive imagination to be the bane of your existence."

"You've probably been around a while, right? How quickly have people run out ways to call you a sarcastic asshole? Because I'm gonna take a wild guess and say not long."

"Then perhaps your overactive imagination would give you an advantage."

Stark gave him an odd look. "Did you just give me a free pass to call you a sarcastic asshole?" He didn't wait for a response. "Anyway, Friday – do your thing. Scan Loki's favourite rock."

Loki was not able to hear the machine's response.

"Are you kidding me?" Stark blurted out. "Loki – there's nothing there. You brought me all this way and made me adapt my suit to withstand this climate just to visit some rock because it gave you the heebie-jeebies."

"No." Loki shook his head. "There is something more – I could feel them underneath my hand, things shaped like runes."

"Friday got nothing."

"They felt warm to the touch – isn't this machine of yours able to detect heat?"

"Yeah and she's still not getting anything from that rock."

"Then try something else." Loki's tone was harsher than he had intended."

"I have been. I don't know what else you want me to do – it's just plain old obsidian."

"And there's nothing carved into it? No traces of anything being emitted from it whatsoever? Are you absolutely certain?"

Stark circled back around the other side of the pillar. "There's nothing on it or coming from it – nothing that Friday's picking up on anyway."

Loki examined the pillar more closely, his fingertips hovering over its surface. The runes were still there, he was definitely not imagining it. "Your technology must not be able to detect these kinds of magical energies."

"Maybe," Stark allowed. "I really hope you've not just found yourself a nice rock. As far as rocks go it's a pretty solid piece and I don't blame you for taking a shine to it but..."

Loki bristled. "I am not inventing this!"

"Okay, as far as I can tell there are only a few possibilities here: either you're desperate enough to convince yourself that you found something, you're lying and this all somehow a part of some scheme, or there actually is something there and neither of us can prove it. The question is how do we find out which option it is?"

Loki ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know." Then out of sheer desperation he added, "Did
"Well, Friday? Did you?" A pause. "Yeah I know I told you to scan the stone but you're supposed to be able to use your initiative from time to time. I thought I added processors so that you’d– Oh right, another thing that must’ve got damaged in the battle." Another pause and then he spoke to Loki. "So… Good news and bad news. Good news is you might be sane after all. Bad news is that whatever this thing is, we’re standing on it and it goes out for miles. It kind of looks like a network of lines on the ground all centred around that thing," Stark said, jerking a thumb at the pillar, "so I’m gonna go on out on a limb and suggest we don’t keep standing on it."

Loki hesitated. Would it be better to slowly edge off the network, with a decreased chance of remaining undetected, or to disappear as quickly as possible?

There was a barely perceptible tremble in the ground they were stood on.

Stark appeared to have made up his mind.

“Right. I’m gonna count down from three, grab you, then fly up. Then you can do your thing with the Tesseract.”

Loki did not like the idea of being grabbed and hoisted off the ground but he liked the idea of remaining where he was even less.

“Very well,” Loki agreed, even if it was somewhat terse.


Loki braced himself.

His familiarity with Stark’s armour was enough to know the noises his boots were giving off were not the noises they should have been making. He just about had time to register that the sparks or burning fuel or whatever force Stark used to propel himself were only enough to raise Stark a few feet from the ground before the ground fell away beneath them.

Then Loki was falling, his arms flailing, desperately trying to grab something, anything, but there was nothing but ice and a black abyss below him. He fell further and further, descending into the darkness. Then his arms, purely by chance, finally latched on to something and he was grabbing at an overhanging rock sticking out of the edge, his legs dangling beneath him. The impact had jarred his shoulders but it was all that kept him from plunging further down. Loki’s feet scrambled for a hold but they kept slipping off and he could feel his arms above him slowly losing their grip on the stone.

Don’t look down. Don’t look down.

His panic was making him clumsier. The stone was too rounded for a proper grip and when he tried to pull himself up his arms started sliding. Loki forced himself to stop. He wouldn’t let go – not this time. He needed to think rationally but the threat of the vast emptiness was enough to install terror.

His pulse was so loud it was all he could hear.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he shifted one of his arms away from the edge. There. It was a far from perfect placement but it was more secure than it had been, secure enough to allow him to inch out with the other hand and feel for something he could properly grab on to. Too rounded– No, that
Loki had found himself a small vertical crack, just about wide enough for him to fit the side of his hand into. He pressed in, jamming his hand between the two sides of the rock and gave an experimental tug on it. Good. It would hold. Loki took a deep breath and heaved himself up.

He came to a ledge, panting and lightheaded and rubbing the back of his hand. It was only then when he thought to look for Stark and found him, to his relief, way above him, having just hoisted himself to a ledge of his own.

“Stark?” Loki called, his voice echoing off the walls.

Loki could just about make out Stark holding a hand to his chest.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Where are—” Stark looked down to where Loki was stood. “Oh, there you are.”

There was a moment of silence in which they both tried to get a better grasp of their surroundings. If it hadn’t been for Stark’s armour they would most likely have been in almost complete darkness, and the light distorted the shadows of the rocks, making them longer and rougher and more jagged. Loki couldn’t see where the darkness ended, there only seemed to be more and more rock that ran deeper and deeper through the ground. He was too far down to be able to make out how far above him the surface was and the air smelled differently, somehow sharp and stale at the same time.

“Any more clever ideas?” Loki asked, having to raise his voice for Stark to be able to hear. There was another rumble and Loki automatically clung on to the stone, preparing for the worst. It was only when it became slightly darker he realised it must have been the opening in the ground closing again.

Stark ignored Loki’s sarcasm. “Well, I’ve got an idea. Not sure how clever it is though.”

“My thrusters can’t combat icing this bad... But they were able to keep me up off the ground so they should be powerful enough to stop me hitting the bottom.”

Loki’s mouth fell open. “Your plan is to let yourself fall?”

“Well…” Stark said and Loki felt immediate trepidation when he detected what might have been sheepishness in Stark’s voice. “I was thinking I should grab you first.”

“What?” Loki squawked.

“No, no – listen. We can’t climb out of here, not when the ground’s gone and sealed itself shut and it being as slippery as it is. And that means we’re probably doomed if we try to climb down too. If you were going to Tesseract yourself out of here then you would have done already but you haven’t.”

“Of course I haven’t – I cannot guarantee that I would be able to return precisely enough to land on this exact ledge.”

“See? So falling is the most logical option.” Stark’s claims did nothing to soothe Loki’s skepticism. “Look – the thrusters should be powerful enough to stop us colliding with the bottom, they’ve got that must juice at least.”

“I don’t like it.”
“I’m not a huge fan either to be honest. Am I coming to you or are you coming up here?”

Loki eyed the gap between them. It was longer than he would have liked but he was painfully aware that out of the two of them, he was the only one who could actually feel the rock underneath his fingertips. Plus, he had the Tesseract. If he fell, he could still teleport himself away. If Stark fell, assuming he survived, he would have no way of getting back to him.

“I will climb up to you but I have a slight amendment to your plan.”

“What’s that then?”

“I suggest we avoid the falling part altogether,” Loki said. “I could easily teleport the two of us out of here once I reach you.”

“I thought you wanted to find a way to reach deep down into the planet? This looks like a pretty good way to me. I don’t see how else we’d get that far, apart from going through the giant hole that opened up.”

“Opened up?” Loki repeated. “It didn’t just happen to open up, Stark. It hardly did it for our own convenience. I would call it a rather dramatic attempt to end our lives by having us fall to our doom.”

“Maybe it wasn’t an attack.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“It didn’t attack you when you touched the pillar and it didn’t attack me when I was scanning the pillar. It only started doing something when we picked up on the network we were stood on.”

“Your point being?” Loki asked.

“My point being is that I’m thinking it wasn’t an attack. I’m thinking it was a defence. I mean, if this thing leads to an actual Infinity Stone, it figures it should have some pretty extreme security defence measures in place, doesn’t it? And it only started getting way worse when I activated my boots. Maybe it thought I was trying to attack it with fire or something.”

“That is what you’d be staking our lives on? A hunch that all of this has been the result of ancient long-forgotten defensive spellwork?”

“Uh, yeah. And Friday’s been able to estimate your weight so she can give you the proper data now she’s been able to make the calculations.”

“Numbers in an equation are unlikely to change my opinion on the matter.”

“Well, either way, one of us is going to have to get to the other…”

Loki supposed he should have known that just as he had gotten to a safe space, he would be forced to leave it.

“Give me a moment,” Loki said.

“I could climb to you if you do don’t want to. I mean, if I fall off I’m not going to collide with the ground or anything.”

Assuming there was ground there. Loki forced himself to believe that there must be ground somewhere beneath them otherwise he would never want to risk moving.
“Yes, you may survive it,” Loki agreed, “but you would more than likely be stranded if you did.”

And with that, Loki began to make his way, carefully selecting his handholds and footholds. He had a couple of nasty surprises when some of the holds were looser or more slippery than he had been anticipating, but he had managed to regain his balance well enough. The worst section involved a particularly awkward traverse where his weight was entirely on a barely perceptible ridge and he had to cling to the underside of an overhanging bulge to steady himself as he edged his way along. He had been paying so much attention to remaining balanced that it surprised him when he looked up to see that Stark was not so far away.

Loki could almost taste the irony in that it was only after he had come this far that practically all the usable holds had disappeared.

“There’s a nice bit you’ll be able to hold on to just above you,” Stark informed him.

One more move and he’d be able to reach it. Loki felt around for something, anything, he could possibly hold on to in order to move higher.

His fingertips were so cold.

“Stark?” Loki asked, still searching the rock and only finding either flat areas or creases that were too small to be of any use to him. “Do you see anything I could use?”


Loki stared at the offering. He didn’t want to have to trust it. His entire instinct was screaming at him to stay exactly where he was, but even he couldn’t do that infinitely.

“Let’s not make this 127 Hours, alright?”

Loki forced himself to grab Stark’s wrist. His skin had become numb enough that it barely registered the metal. Stark’s other hand closed over his wrist and then Loki pulled himself upwards until he was able to join him on the ledge.

There was barely any space. Stark had shuffled to the side as much as possible but they still ended up pressed arm against arm.

Stark flipped up his faceplate. “Worth checking out, don’t you think?” Stark said, staring below them. “A little adrenaline rush for an Infinity Stone doesn’t seem like a bad trade-off to me.” His light-hearted tone failed to match his expression, his eyes wider than they should have been and the muscles in his jaw clenched tightly.

“Assuming this does lead to the Time Gem.”

“Only one way to find out. Friday’s found so many passages that it’s basically a huge maze down there.”

"A labyrinth. You are telling me that Niflheim has a giant underground labyrinth carved out of ice and rock. And what makes you think there aren’t any further defensive spells in place? For all we know, going down there could be a suicide mission."

“Why would they bother making this place accessible if they didn’t want anyone to be able to touch the Time Gem? If it’s there, there’s got to be a way to get it.”

Loki pressed his lips together, avoiding looking downwards. Not that it made any difference, up,
down, left, right – all of it looked the same.

“Come on,” Stark pleaded, “this is the closest we’ve come to finding it. You can’t back out now. What’s wrong? You don’t like the dark? Neither do I. You don’t like falling? Neither do I. You don’t want to have to trust me?”

It took Loki a second to find his voice. “Of course I don’t.”

“Well guess what, buddy – neither do I. You know what we can both trust? These calculations. The fact that we both know the other wants to survive. We both want the same thing – for now at least, it doesn’t matter what happens after – and that thing right now is getting our mitts on the Time Gem. I guarantee there’s no way we’re going to hit the ground. And if we get too close, you’ve always got the Tesseract.”

Loki let out a resigned sigh. “I still don’t like it.”

“Join the club,” Stark said. “But in all seriousness, was that a yes?”

“Fine,” Loki snapped, unable to shake the feeling he would come to regret it.

Stark blinked. “Oh. Okay then. Good. Erm – can I just…” Stark turned Loki around by the shoulders and wrapped his arms underneath Loki’s. “It’s a good job you’re facing away.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t want you attempting to burn a glare through my skull, that’s why.”

Loki was having to settle for glaring at the gaping hole beneath them instead, although perhaps staring at it was not such a good idea.

“Okay, we need to jump off the edge,” Stark announced and Loki’s breathing quickened at the thought of it. “I’m gonna count down from three. Three. Two. One–”

Loki’s stomach dropped.

There was nothing beneath him and the only thing stopping him from falling alone into the void were Starks arms wrapped around his torso. The metal had never felt weaker and Stark only had the strength of a mortal and it had never seemed so hopelessly inadequate. The air rushed past his ears and he had no sense of how much closer to the bottom they were, no sense of how much time had passed, only that they were so so very deep underground and that they were somehow still falling. They had been falling for so long that Loki’s eyes began to play tricks on him and made him see distant galaxies in the blackness and then his breath went from rapid to erratic and then it felt as if his lungs weren’t working at all and Stark was squeezing him too tightly and not tightly enough and–

They were no longer falling.

Stark released him and Loki found solid ground underneath his feet and then his lungs started working again. Loki stumbled to lean against a wall to regain his breath and it wasn’t until moments later that he was coherent enough to notice Stark doing precisely the same thing.

The light in the centre of Stark’s chest illuminated the chasm, the glow reflecting off the shards of ice. What had been walls of ice closer towards the surface had become a mixture of raw rock and blackened soil, and there ahead of them was an archway that under no circumstances could have occurred naturally. Loki stared at it in shock. He had assumed the shaft they had fallen down must
have been magically altered, but to have discovered something completely manmade was another matter entirely. Who or what could possibly have built it? Casting spells was one matter, but to remain for the length of time it would take to build something was something else altogether.

Loki was reluctant to name the thing inside of his mind a compass, but he failed to conjure a more appropriate word for it. Whatever it was – the compass then – felt lighter, as if being closer to the gem made the weight of it decrease.

“We’re nearer,” Loki finally said.

Stark's head shot up. “Hm? Oh. Good.” He took a look at the archway. "How'd that happen? I thought no one was supposed to be able to stay here for long."

"As did I."

Loki inspected a column holding the archway up, running his hand closer to the surface. "There are more runes."

"Great. What's this? A 'he who enters must undertake three trials to truly test the worthiness of his soul' type thing?"

"It could well be," Loki replied, entirely serious.

"Oh boy." Stark ambled closer. "Given both our histories, let's hope it's not that."

Loki made a humming noise of agreement.

The runes too small and too eroded for each one to be properly distinguished, but Loki managed to detect a few he recognised as bastardised versions of runes he was already familiar with. They had a number of extra lines and were positioned slightly differently to what he remembered from his years of studying, but some were still decipherable nonetheless.

"Er, I suppose you guys don’t have a space-version of Google Translate?"

"The Allspeak acts as a means of translation but most of these runes are indecipherable. There's Berkkanan, the symbol for new beginnings,” Loki explained, his finger hovering over it. "Algiz, a token for protection. And that there... Well, if the components hadn't been separated, it would have been Perthro."

"Which is?"

"Perthro normally denotes the interaction between choice and fate."

"Huh. That doesn't sound as ominous as I was expecting. And Allspeak explains why all aliens speak English. I've been meaning to ask. What's that like - a Bablefish shoved in your ear?"

"Are you stalling?"

"By rambling? Probably. Alright, let's go. I can ask more questions later."

Loki had half been expecting something to happen when they crossed the threshold of the arch, but to his surprise, nothing did – or, at least, nothing that they could perceive happened anyway.

The walls were made of black obsidian rather than pure ice and they had been smoothed flat to form a rounded passage.
"I hate caves," Stark announced and it was loud enough that his voice was echoed back to him several times over.

"Subtle as ever, Stark," Loki sighed. If there was indeed anything existing down there then they would surely be alerted to their presence now if they hadn't done so earlier.

"Friday – do your thing." Stark listened to his machine's response. "Okay, if there is anything down here then it's not giving off any heat signatures – endothermic or exothermic or otherwise. And I don't want to– I'm refusing to think about how many miles down we are." He paused again to listen. "Out loud, Friday. It's kind of rude to carry on ignoring the current company, don't you think?"

"According to my scans," a female voice said from the exterior of Stark’s armour, “you are surrounded by approximately ten square miles of tunnels."

"Shit," Stark said. "That's a lot of digging they did."

"Assuming they dug at all." When Stark looked at him oddly Loki elaborated. "Some types of magic are more destructive than others and vice versa. I suppose it's not impossible to think whoever built these tunnels might have had magical means of doing so."

They began walking through the tunnel and reached a fork in their path.

"Is your machine able to see if there are chambers and rooms here as well as passages?"

"I am, Mr...?"

Loki ignored its attempts to pry his surname. "It's Loki," he answered instead. "And are there?"

"I can identify multiple structures that appear to be chambers. There are 157 above us and 23 much larger ones on this level."

"Take an extra look out for anything even remotely resembling a trap, Friday," Stark instructed. "Tripwires, pressure plates, holes in the ground, you name it."

"Of course, boss."

"That’s my girl." Stark turned to Loki. “So now where? Is your inbuilt Time Gem compass pointing you anywhere?"

"As it happens," Loki admitted, pointing straight ahead at the wall, “it is pointing me towards that direction."

“Shame your little brain plug-in doesn’t come with built-in navigation. I guess we’ll just have to work around that one. Friday? Little help? Picked up on any unusual readings?"

"There are large energy emissions I am detecting coming from a chamber I estimate to be in the centre of the maze, boss."

"Sounds promising. What do you think, Loki?"

"I believe it would be worthwhile to investigate the source of these emissions."

"Great. Lead the way, Friday."

"Calculating." A number of seconds passed. "Follow the passage and take the first right."
Loki and Stark obeyed, taking numerous turns and twists that led them further and further into the labyrinth. The more they walked, the more increasingly convinced that something was watching them Loki became. The feeling was so intense that even Stark had grown quiet. Their journey took them through wider open cavities, around frozen waterfalls, and skirring over solid underground lakes.

Loki’s fingertips had gone completely numb.

"I need a moment," Stark announced abruptly once they had reached a darker and narrower section of tunneling, taking the opportunity to sit on the ground.

"By all means take your time at leisure, it isn't as if there is any reason for us to hurry."

"Shut up," Stark snapped, sounding oddly breathless.

To the surprise of both of them, Loki actually did. For a short while at least. "For a man who flies around inside of a metal suit of armor, it shocks me that confined spaces bother you."

"Yeah, you need to give me alcohol to get my whole sob story."

"Shall we?" Loki was not, as Stark had probably hoped, referring to the intake of alcohol, but with proceeding with their journey.

"I just– I just need to get my breath back, that's all."

Their brief interlude did not last long and after a few more turns they were, for the first time, faced with a solid round door carved into the stone that Friday prompted them to enter as if it was that simple. The issue was that the door had no handle, no hinge, nothing that could possibly be used to open it. The only feature that marked it as a door was its ornate frame and a sleeping gargoyle-like face carved where a knocker should have been.

"If we find the Goblin King on the other side of that door, so help me."

One of the door's eyelids twitched.

"Stark," Loki murmured in warning.

"What?" Stark took a closer look at the face and when he spoke again, his voice had taken on a new curiosity. "Did that just move? Holy shit – is this what I think it is?"

"Shh!"

"You can't expect me not to be excited by a magic talking door if I come face to face with one."

The door interrupted him with a wide yawn and it opened its eyes, its pupils slowly moving between the two of them.

"Hey, what's up?" Stark asked it before it had a chance to speak.

The door scowled at him, the furrows in its face morphing into deep lines that shadowed its eyes. "Who are you to ask?"

"I'm Tony Stark." Stark held out a hand and then hastily pulled it back when he realised the door had no appendages it could have shaken.

"Why is it so cold?" the door moaned and then eyed Loki. "And who are you exactly?"
“I am Loki, of...” Loki trailed off. Loki of Asgard had long since become a distant dream.

“Well then, Loki Of and Tony Stark, what is it that you’ve woken me up for?”

Loki cleared his throat. “We wish to pass.”

The door rolled its eyes. “Well you’d better get on with it then.”

Loki suppressed his profound exasperation. “Yes – about that. We were wondering if–”

“No,” the door interrupted.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said no,” the door emphasised. “My duty is not to make this easy for you. If you cannot figure it out then you are not worthy of passing, it is as simple as that.”

“Figure it out?” Stark repeated. “Is there some sort of puzzle? Is there a password or some sort of clue we're supposed to solve?”

The door clicked its tongue. “If you are expecting any help from me then think again.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t talking to you, Hinge Meister.”

The door gave a haughty sniff.

“Well...” Loki said thoughtfully. “This door must be able to listen and speak for a reason; I suppose the key to this must rely on that somehow.”

“Oh well done,” the door scorned. “Any being possessing anything remotely resembling a working mind could have worked that out.”

Stark squinted at its jaw. “Does this thing have teeth? If I put my hand over its mouth, is it gonna bite?”

“I wouldn’t put it past it,” Loki replied.

“I am right here!” the door said indignantly. It did, as it turned out, have teeth.

“Yeah, like either of us were at risk of forgetting.”

Loki left Stark to continue arguing with the door, taking a few paces back to examine the walls surrounding the door but not finding anything that appeared to be indicative of a clue. Was it possible the clue was hidden? Perhaps it was concealed underneath stone or within the black ice or maybe... Yes, Loki decided. That would definitely be worth investigating. He raised a hand and pressed it close to but not quite touching the walls, letting it glaze over the rock as he walked.

The door snorted at his efforts.

“I guess searching for hidden magic runes beats my idea,” Stark said. “I was just going to see what shooting it does.”

Loki continued his search. “I suspect not a great deal apart from agitating it further. Whoever created it must have been a master of spellwork; I doubt they would have allowed brute force to be a viable solution.”
The door sneered at him as he drew closer to its seams.

“I do hope you are not intending to touch me with those hands of yours,” it objected.

Loki’s lips twitched. “Oh, I won’t need to. Now that you have all but confirmed I will discover something if I continue, I believe I shall continue.” He bowed his head. “And of course, I shall play the gentleman and keep my distance.” By which he meant approximately an inch away. He searched it around mid-height and then made a start higher up when it yielded no result.

“Now I really must protest—”

“Yes, I’m sure you must,” Loki said, “because surely, I must be triggering whatever enchantments you have been implemented with to make this more difficult.” Loki knelt and as he waved his hand, he felt the warmth of a rune embedded inside the stone underneath his fingertips. “Ah.” It was larger than the ones on the pillar had been and there was no interference from other runes this time. As he traced his hand over it, he recognised it as a variation on a rune he was quite familiar with. “Raidho,” Loki murmured, half to himself.

The door’s face fell.

“Raidho,” Loki said again, louder this time. Nothing happened. It should have been obvious; of course him saying it wouldn’t activate it – why would whoever was capable of creating such complex enchantments bother giving the door a mouth unless... “Can you say ‘Raidho’?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the door snapped, “of course I could say Raidho if I wanted to.” The door realised its mistake and clamped its mouth shut.

“My humble thanks,” Loki said. Now he had confirmed the door saying the name of the rune was not enough. If saying the name was not enough then perhaps the door was supposed to translate the rune rather than identify the rune itself... But which interpretation? Journey, transport, and movement were the more direct translations, but more abstract interpretations were also valid. Loki tried his luck again. “What about ‘journey’?”

The door glared at him. “I’m hardly going to fall for the same simple trick twice.”

“That’s a pity,” Loki said, pausing to choose his next words carefully. “It would have been so convenient,” he sighed, “if my move meant to trip you up in precisely the same way had worked again each time.”

“If you orchestrated a move meant to grant you sharper wits, then perhaps you would stand a chance,” the door snapped. There was an unmistakable rumbling and the door’s mouth fell open in horror as it began swinging open without its permission.

Loki allowed himself a small smile and stepped through the gap.

“But how did you—” the door blurted.

“As it happens, semantics were not integral to the enchantments in the way that I would have previously thought,” Loki said, stepping aside to allow Stark space to follow him through the door. “You – admittedly, inadvertently – revealed that a translation of the rune must leave your mouth in order for us to pass and as you were picking up on my more overt attempts, I thought I might try my hand at toying with wordplay. After all, there is little difference you can hear between movement and move meant, isn’t there?”

Whatever the door’s response was made inaudible by it slamming shut.
Stark let out a chuckle. “Word games. Nice. See, if you only came to Earth to play harmless words games, we might’ve not been so prone to flinging each other from high places. Well played by the way – the door never stood a chance, did it? Can't say I'm having a hard time feeling sorry for it. Speaking of which– Oh god, there’s another one on this side as well, isn’t there?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, as runes were a feature within this chapter, I should probably say outright I'm no expert on them. From what little (mostly Google-based) knowledge I have of them, there are a few different interpretations for each one. So yeah, certain liberties were taken to simplify them a little to make the meaning clearer. If anyone more informed than I am has better suggestions or corrections to make, feel free to suggest them.
Fortunately for them, the enchantment on their side of the door was drowsier than that of the other side and they managed to slink away before it was roused from sleep.

For the first time, Loki found himself grateful for the cold. If it hadn't been for the freezing climate, they would have found themselves surrounded by several wraiths rather than several immobile wraiths. Their fractal forms hovered in mid-air, completely suspended in animation and radiating brilliant rays of white and blue and green and orange.

"Hey," Stark said, rubbing his hands together, "at least task two is pretty."

"Or the third task, if they are tasks at all. If they are, it's possible that the pillar was the first task; given that it resulted in us falling and only narrowly avoiding colliding with the bottom, I assume we failed."

"Not a bad theory," Stark allowed. He pointed a finger at the path in front of them. "Um, are we supposed to just walk through there? Because I gotta say, I'm getting bad vibes from the giant glowing orb things up there."

They were stood at the entrance to a long wide passage, the wraiths neatly lined up on either side and there was an opening carved at the opposite side. The wraiths were completely still, as if paralyzed in mid-air, but the question was whether they would remain so. They were neither beasts nor hard matter, and Loki knew little about whether such powerful raw forms of magic were immune to freezing.

"I don’t suppose there is another way around?" Loki asked. He doubted it. Convenience rarely blessed him.

"Confirmed," Friday replied. "There are no alternative routes I am able to detect."

Then there was no option but to walk through the middle. The suspicion that it was all a trap that would be set off the instant he laid a foot on the path made Loki somewhat apprehensive.

"No way out but through then," Stark said.

"It would appear so."

It was with the utmost reluctance that Loki moved forward by placing one foot slowly after the other, pausing far too often to glance around him to check that nothing had moved. Loki didn't dare believe the wraiths would remain frozen but he couldn’t understand why they had yet to attack until it occurred to him that the most opportune moment for an attack would be when they reached the middle of the passage where they would be at their most surrounded.

"How about we don’t snail-pace our way along," Stark suggested. “If something’s going to happen anyway, there's no point lengthening it out.” Loki opened his mouth to retaliate but Stark got there first. “And no, I’m not going to risk the whole underground opening underneath us by flying again. I learned after the first time. I just think we should walk faster.”

“And risk missing noticing some sort of ambush?”
“Not necessarily. How about we do a Lee and Carter? You know, we double up? Back-to-backing it’ll save us the neck ache. I’ll take the left, you can do the right.”

“Oh I can, can I?” Loki bristled. In any other situation, Loki might have taken more offence at the presumption of a mortal giving him instructions like that, however, as far as plans went it wasn’t a terrible one. Loki didn't have a better one.

Stark was inches behind his back and Loki grew painfully aware of the fact that if Stark missed anything, he would be entirely vulnerable – they would both be entirely vulnerable. Despite scrutinising what was in front of him, Loki was paying more attention to what was not, whether voluntarily or otherwise, extending his senses and trying to brace himself for an attack from ahead, from behind, from any given direction. The picking up of their pace did little to soothe his nerves in that regard and his back prickled with the unwanted exposure. He so was lost to remaining vigilant, to carefully examining every single one of the wraiths in his line of sight that when Stark let out an 'oh', Loki whipped around in fighting position, daggers prepared.

Then he realised they had reached the opposite side unharmed.

“Oh,” Loki agreed, lowering his knives.

"That was anti-climatic."

Loki smiled grimly. He still hadn’t eliminated the possibility of the wraiths following behind them. "We haven't finished just yet."

He had no wish to admit out loud that if it took them much longer, he would have no choice but to teleport them off the realm for fear of freezing. He still couldn’t feel his fingertips or his toes and his thighs stung whenever he lifted them. Some moisture had frozen in his hair and the exterior his clothing had cracked from the cold. Loki willed away the urge to check his skin for fear of it freezing over. If he was able to will himself to do so, his body must have been capable of coping.

They descended further and further, taking enough turns that it seemed like they were heading in a circle until they realised their need for Stark's light to illuminate their way had been gradually rescinding. The walls of the passages were glowing, softly glowing, with a faint warm amber light.

Had it gotten colder? Loki couldn't tell.

"Another present the mage has left behind for us?” Stark asked, giving Loki reason to pause.

"I'm not certain. It neither fits into the category of runic based magic nor elemental magic."

"Isn't light an element for you wizardry types?"

“Whether light itself is an element on its own or whether light can be classified within the school of illusion is a debatable subject area."

"Huh. Sounds like it all comes down to whether it’s particles of light you manipulate or whether you actually generate them."

Loki blinked at him. "Well, yes it does, actually." It was rare that even those who had been raised on realms with knowledge of magic were able to truly understand, let alone offer an insight.

“Well?” Stark asked, climbing over a pile of stone rubble. “Which one is it?”

“I have reason to believe it may be both.”
“Huh. You don’t sound too sure about that one.”

“I have been a little too preoccupied to peruse academic lines of enquiry.”

“Fair enough. There’s got to be better times to start a thesis than the apocalypse.”

Truth be told, Loki’s princely duties had never left him with as much time as he would have liked for his academic interests, but that was hardly a topic he wanted to share or reflect on, so instead he emitted an agreeable humming noise rather than commenting on it.

They must have gotten closer to the gem, much closer. Irrespective of the compass, it was close enough to feel its energy humming faintly in the air. Even from within the confines of his pocket universe, he could feel the Tesseract responding to it, like it detected a fellow one of its kind.

The closer they got to the centre of the labyrinth, the more unstable the architecture became. In multiple places sections of walls had crumbled, in others sections of the ceiling and the floor had collapsed, and twice they had to pick their way around frozen skeletons of rats nearly the same size as them. The rats raised Loki’s alarm – not out of fear for their kind, but for the implications that they brought. No creatures like that would have survived for long, so the question was why they had been placed within the labyrinth. The mage or mages were obviously intelligent and it wouldn’t stand to reason that they’d place beasts to ward off unwanted parties only for their plans to be thwarted by the climate. If nothing alive could survive for long, perhaps they thought that the dead might. That thought was more chilling than Niflheim itself.

The glowing of the walls had become more and more vivid as they walked, and when Stark inspected a crack in the wall he found bright bolts of yellow and orange light running through the centre of the rock like fine strands of hair.

It wasn’t until Loki’s muscles felt almost completely stiff that they finally reached something that appeared to be promising. They were at a section where the passageways had a growth of small crystals of ice spreading out like ivy, growing in size and length the further away they got. Then there was a large gap in the wall with an archway over the top, similar to the one they had encountered at the beginning of the labyrinth. The light that shone through the gap was as bright as daylight, powerful enough that Loki had to wait for his eyes to adjust before he could read the rune at the centre of the arch: it was an inverted version of the same rune that had been embedded in the enchanted talking door, only this one differed in that it was clearly visible and glowed like it was inked with firelight.

Inside, shards of crystal jutted out of the walls, covering every inch of them, all reflecting the orange and yellows hues. Glistening icicles hung from the ceiling and huge great columns of crystal and ice stretched from ceiling to floor and there, on the opposite side of the chamber through a twin arch, was something placed on a pedestal. The pedestal was mounted on a set of steps that completely dwarfed the object that was the source of the light and there were four large flat rocks that lead up to it like stepping stones, only with yards and yards between them.

It was impossible to tell whether it was the compass or the Tesseract that yearned for the object, or both.

“Well…” Stark said, temporally stuck for words. “This looks like… something.”

“Technically not incorrect, but hardly an apt description.” In spite of his jabs, Loki felt the need to keep his voice gentle as his eyes took in the beauty of the chamber.

“What do you want me to do? Wax poetic? Don’t get me wrong, this is probably the closest I’ll
ever get to having a spiritual experience because of something being unbelievably gorgeous, not counting—” Stark cut himself off.

Loki hoped Stark hadn’t been about to make a painfully crude comment and hastily changed the subject. “I suppose there must be another task ahead of us. I doubt it’d be so simple as to walk to the pedestal and take the Time Gem for ourselves.” Just as the words had left Loki’s mouth, he spotted the barest glimmer of movement in the air, an invisible barrier ahead of one of the stones that stretched across like a mirage from one side of the room to the other. No – not just one barrier – one for each stone. “Be careful,” Loki warned. “I doubt anything good would come out of touching the barriers.”

"Barriers?"

"Yes," Loki said pointedly, "look: barriers." He waved his hand at the first one, the wall of slowly shimmering air.

"Uh – you're gonna have to clue me in here."

Loki walked as close as he dared and pointed. "Look – right here," he said. When Stark still acted equally as bewildered, Loki spoke again: "Ah. You may not be so foolish after all; perhaps the barriers are only perceptible to magic users."

Stark shrugged. "Yeah, I guess that'd make sense. You're still gonna have to clue me in though; I don't want this to turn into a game of the floor is lava. Not when I can’t risk flying, anyway."

"Then I advise you do not pass ahead of where I am standing until I can figure out how to deactivate the barriers."

Based on the logic of there being one stepping stone for each barrier, the closest stone seemed like a sensible place to start, and with hopes that it would follow the same pattern the previous clues had, Loki held a hand over it and waited to decipher the traces of heat coming off it.

"Fire," Loki murmured after a moment.

“Fire?”

“That’s…” It wasn’t exactly a singular rune that denoted fire but rather a combination of runes that seemed to suggest it. “That’s what I am reading.”

“So what’s it want us to do then – blast it with fire or is it more like an ancient magic version of rock paper scissors?"

"Sorry?"

"I mean, are we supposed to blast the rock with fire or are we supposed to pick its opposite? You know, the thing that’d put it out."

Loki took a moment to consider his answer. "I suppose it’d make more sense if we are supposed to neutralise the element. I did purchase some water flasks which may be of more use than I first thought..."

Loki summoned one to his hands and splashed a small amount on the rock. He hoped, *sincerely* hoped, that he was not wrong and that nothing terrible would come out of it as a consequence.

"Is it working?" Stark asked, barely a second after that water had met the rock.
Loki glanced up and saw that the barrier had fallen through in the middle, like curtains being drawn apart.

"It is."

Thinking it wiser to save the rest of the water, Loki only poured enough to create a gap wide enough for them to walk through and instructed Stark to follow directly behind him, not wishing to discover what touching the barriers would actually do. Although, admittedly, he was morbidly curious.

The rune on the next stone was of light and that was solved quickly enough by Stark standing behind Loki and producing enough light to cast Loki’s shadow over the rock.

By the time they got to the third stone, the routine was becoming familiar. This time, the rune was of water.

Clearly, the designer or designers of the labyrinth had created a series of puzzles requiring a combination of rune reading, trickery, and elemental magic they most likely assumed only they possessed. Loki didn't have elemental magic but he did have something else... What was it the Jotuns had called it? Cryomancy? He wasn't in his Jotun form but maybe he could...

"I need you to turn around," Loki instructed Stark.

"Why? What do you need to do – piss on it?"

"Just–"

"Alright, alright. I'll let you keep your modesty."

Loki waited until Stark cooperated by facing the opposite direction before he began.

He'd had moments of wondering whether he could transform at will before, but never had the reason or desire to act upon it. There was little more horrifying than watching his own skin turn into something he could not stand and the churning fear it brought when he considered the possibility that if he changed to his Jotun form he might not be able to revert back, was enough to deter him from trying. Loki supposed, particularly after the evidence of possible necromancy, that there were worse fates.

As he placed his hands on the stone, he forced himself with vivid intensity to recollect the feeling of pushing something inside him through his fingertips and felt the coldness become less and less painful. Still painful, but a fraction more tolerable. Then he closed his eyes and pushed harder, forcing ice to surge from his fingertips and grow outwards, encapsulating the stone.

When he opened his eyes, the barrier was no more and as he let out a breath of air, the blueness of his skin started fading back to its usual colour.

Loki waited until he was certain there were no traces of blue before addressing Stark.

"This way."

"Oh. You're done. Does that mean I can turn around now? If I turn around I'm not going to be confronted by something I never want to see again, am I?"

Loki had almost forgotten to mask the evidence of his cryomancy and after internally cursing himself, he conjured an illusion of a non-frozen version of the rock to lie over the original.
"It's perfectly safe for you to turn around," Loki said, "but hurry. I suspect I am far colder than you are." That, and Loki did not want Stark to ask too many questions. But Stark, being Stark, did nothing conveniently.

“What was it this time?” Stark asked, and much to Loki’s horror, gave the stone a poke. To Stark’s surprise, his touch brought about a change to the stone as Loki’s illusion dissipated.

"Oh," Stark said. "You did your thing."

"My thing?"

"Yeah, your not-so-super-mysterious Jotun thing."

Loki stared, dumbfounded. "You... You knew?"

"Well, yeah. It was kind of obvious when someone managed to freeze over the guards’ mouths. And then there was that time your illusion crashed and you were a bit Smurf-looking for a second."

"But–"

"So now you know I know, you don't have to bother getting me to turn around."

Loki was wordless.

Another person knew.

Before it had just been Odin and Frigga and Heimdall, not even he himself had known. And he would have much preferred it if it had been kept that way. But then he'd stumbled across the truth on that cursed misadventure to Jotunheim and nothing he could do could take it back. And ever since then, more and more people had been finding out. Thor had known. Then Byleistr. The Jotun guards must have figured it out. And now there was Stark to add to that list.

Something in Loki's expression must have caused Stark alarm because the man raised his hands and said, "Whoa there, I'm not going to gossip about this. It's your business. Personally, I think shooting ice from your fingertips is kind of a cool power but apparently you disagree."

That was one way of putting it.

"Anyway," Stark continued, gesturing ahead, "after you."

Loki walked on, too stunned to offer a protest and too reluctant to allow the same thread of conversation to continue by arguing.

The sight in front of them was a familiar one, only this time there was only one veil between them and the pedestal. The Tesseract was vibrating with excitement, urging him to reach it, to reach it and claim it.

They were so close.

Loki could taste the energy in the air, similar to the Tesseract’s yet different, like a brother to it.

Loki held his hand over the stone for the final time and his rising hopes stuttered.

"It's...” Loki began. “It’s life."

"Life?” Stark blinked. "You don't mean–"
"Exactly. The only thing that counteracts life is death."

Stark took a few steps back. "No way. I'm not volunteering as a sacrifice. Actually, even if I wanted to, it'd be pointless. Apparently, I'm supposed to control the gem. And don't worry – I'm not so keen on the idea of killing you either. That's not... There must be another way. We're not killing anybody. We could just... find a spider or something."

"You forget where we are."

"To be honest, I thought you were exaggerating when you said nothing at all can survive here. So, er..."

"I doubt that mages from this era would have been aware that teleportation is a thing that exists and would have designed this place accordingly. A worm from Nidavellir would be fitting, don't you think?"

"Is there such thing as overkill killing?"

"If not, we shall invent it," Loki said, hoping Stark's expression when Loki would find a worm no bigger than the length of his hand would be a humorous enough to be worth the effort.

"Bag full of cats," Stark muttered, shaking his head.

Loki drew out the Tesseract and Stark automatically reached for it. Loki commanded Nidavellir to the Tesseract but nothing happened.

"Still struggling with performance issues?"

Loki tried again. No result. Of course. The sign over the archway, the inverted Raidho rune.

"There must be some sort of ward between the arches preventing us leaving through magical means," Loki realised.

"Well, shit. Who designed this place anyway? Lord Voldemort? Who puts a thing in place specifically so you have to kill something just to get past? That's some serious supervillain shit right there. Even you wouldn't have gone that far."

Something about Stark's words stuck in Loki's mind, the phrase so you have to kill something just to get past, churning over and over. Because, technically, that wasn’t true. Technically, all the rune needed was some form of contact with death rather than having someone or something die on it. The runes only needed to be touched by the thing that neutralised the element; as the fire only needed water poured over its surface, the light only needed a shadow cast over it, the water rune needed ice, and so following that line of thought... Following that line of thought, all Loki needed to do was touch it. He had died, after all, and only hadn't stayed dead because of being reanimated by the essence of death herself – he would be a walking body tainted by death. He hoped as such, anyway. It was an odd thing to hope for.

Loki reached out and touched the stone, softly at first, then laid both his palms completely flat on it rather than hovering above it.

"What--" Stark began. And then, "Oh."

"It's working," Loki said, his eyes flicking up to the barrier.

"Clever," Stark remarked. "You're the thing that died. It's awesome – not you dying – no one's got
to sacrifice a virgin or anything. Those guys really end up with the short end of the stick.”

Loki attempted to communicate his feelings about Stark’s tendency to ramble nonsensically with a single disparaging look when his concentration was broken by the barrier being completely dispelled.

“It’s safe,” Loki announced.

“Hope you’re right, Reindeer Games. Actually, I can’t really call you that anymore without your super majestic horn attire, can I?”

Loki let out a sigh. “I am sure there are far more pressing matters at hand than what bizarre Midgardian name you elect to call me.”

Stark nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time later.”

With a roll of the eyes, Loki led the way forward, passing underneath the twin archway.

The cold was now long past a problem – it was agony. Each breath felt like as if it impaled his lungs and his vision blurred with what he hoped was not ice forming over his eyes.

Instinct told Loki to pause at the bottom of the small set of steps, but he was tall enough to be able to make out the object that was carefully placed on top of the pedestal: an ornately decorated pocket watch sitting inside of an indentation in the table that fit its form perfectly. The watch was open and the Time Gem’s churning light radiated like a sun from where a face would normally have been.

Instinct might have told Loki to not get too close but it failed to do the same for Stark. Stark climbed his way up as if the thought of it being dangerous not only hadn’t occurred to him, but the possibility also had never existed in the first place.

“Stark!” Loki hissed. “Have some caution!”

Stark paused. “Uh – so what now? Do I just...” Stark reached a hand to grab the pocket watch but Loki moved, quicker than he thought himself capable of, to grab at his arm.

“Carefully,” Loki stressed.

“Right. Yeah. Careful is my middle name.”

Loki had been fully prepared to let go until he heard those words.

“It probably hasn’t been disturbed for hundreds of thousands of years, think on that before you clumsily swipe at it.”

“Oh, I dunno, if I’d been left alone for that long I think I’d be pretty desperate for company.”

Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. “Just spare some consideration—”

“Be polite, you mean?” Stark asked. “How do I be polite to a stone? Hey, excuse me little pocket watch, would you do me a massive favour and hop into my pocket for me?”

“Stark—” Loki fought to keep himself from shouting. “It is imperative that this goes well. An Infinity Stone is more than capable of killing, even when encased.”

Stark’s posture shifted and Loki saw fit to let go.
“Alright,” Stark agreed, “careful it is then. If you can explain how I can avoid it killing me, I’d appreciate that.”

“Think of it like approaching a wild beast. You must be slow and cautious but not seen as weak or prey. And as I believe we have passed the threshold of the ward, I should be able to teleport us away if there are signs of this going terribly wrong.”

“Right.” Stark fidgeted with his arm. “Let's hope we don’t have to do that.”

As Stark tentatively extended a hand towards the pocket watch, Loki hardly dared breathe. He summoned the Tesseract to one hand and kept the other just behind Stark in case he had to act quickly and make a fast getaway. Stark’s armoured fingers were closer now, closer and closer and almost touching and then–

Stark let out a whoop.

“You’ve got it?” Loki asked, despite seeing the evidence plain in front of his eyes.

Stark’s fingers cupped around the base of the pocket watch and then he lifted it towards him, eyes filled with wonder.

“I’ve got this,” Stark said, snapping the lid shut.

It was at precisely that moment when all the light in the chamber disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

You’ve probably noticed that the Infinity Stones aren’t the same colours as they appear in the MCU (apart from the Tesseract). This is due to me starting writing this before most of the colours for the gems were revealed in the MCU. So yeah, the Time Gem is amber instead of green in this fic.
Chapter 18

The late afternoon sun and gentle temperament of Alfheim was a jarring contrast to Niflheim after they had teleported, although it was not an unwelcome one. They were back at the cove they had visited the last time, obscured from sight by large encompassing cliffs behind them and nothing in front of them but a calm sea.

The sensation of temperature returning to Loki’s blood was slow and painful and he envied Stark’s ability to simply step out of his armour and absorb the heat without it being unpleasant.

“What even was that?” Stark blurted out, the pocket watch still snapped shut between his fingers. “I didn’t realise this thing’s basically an off switch.”

“I don’t know.” Loki had found himself growing weary of having to admit it so often. “Its power seemed to be harnessed in the walls of the labyrinth somehow.” He doubted it was merely a coincidence that the Time Gem and the glowing strands that had run through the walls and the rune above the archway had been the same colour.

“But what for? Was it harnessing the raw energy to amplify the magic or something? Or if it’s the Time Gem, does that mean it altered the stream of time in that place? Like it could have preserved the labyrinth as what it was way back in the past – or the future, I guess – either one would explain why there were things there that aren’t supposed to be there. You’re the one with the knowledge of the Infinity Stones – help me out here. How plausible is that theory?”

“I suppose it isn’t that implausible,” Loki admitted. The thought that Niflheim might once have been able to sustain life had not occurred to him; he had held the mage or mages responsible for the oddities of the labyrinth without giving enough thought to what effects the Time Gem might have generated on top of the magic. But if the Time Gem had provided some sort of window through time... Well, Loki thought, that would explain the runes. "It does still beg the question of for what purpose the labyrinth was designed for, other than to make the gem difficult to access. Why would it be necessary to leave the gem behind?"

“Maybe it got out of their control. Maybe it attracted too much attention. Maybe the gem has nasty side effects. What do I know? Maybe pocket watches got out of fashion.”

“Or,” Loki added, “it’s possible that they could not master it.”

Stark shrugged. “That too. Guess we’ll have no way of knowing without knowing the architects.” Stark glanced around him, as if seeing the realm for the first time now that they were no longer speculating. “Oh. We’re back to sunny old Not-California-Land. What is this, our touch base? Stark seated himself on a log of nearby driftwood. “I’m taking it you didn't bring us here to get a tan.”

Loki placed himself somewhat more delicately on another piece opposite him. The warmth had melted all the ice off him and had left him covered in a layer of slowly evaporating chill.

“Until we know Midgard is safe again, we remain here where you will become better acquainted with your gem without attracting unwanted attention.”

“‘Until we know Midgard is safe again’ – what’s that even mean? It’s not like there’s a news channel we can tune into. And you said Thanos is gonna head for other planets next, right? So what if this planet’s the one he decides is next on his kill list?”
"Thanos has a large fleet and travels slowly. We would at least have some warning and time to make an escape."

"So in the meantime, we’re supposed to do what? Roast marshmallows over a campfire?"

"No – in the meantime, you will begin the slow process of learning to control the Time Gem."

"Oooh – so this is more like a mystic retreat in the middle of nowhere kind of vacation. Now I get it."

Loki scowled at him. "I hope you’re taking this seriously."

Something in Stark’s expression changed. "Of course I am." Stark picked at a bit of flaking wood.

"It doesn’t sound as if you are."

"Hey, someone’s got to lighten the tone around here. If I think too much about how many people’s lives are going to depend on me getting to grips with the gem, my chances of ever doing that are going to plummet." He twiddled the wood in his fingers and then threw it in the direction of the shore. "So, yeah," Stark said, his voice forcefully more playful as he punctuated the throw, "you’re stuck with my dumb jokes. They’re for sanity’s sake."

"For sanity’s sake..." Loki echoed. Something about the underlying sincerity in which Stark had said it deterred Loki from making some sort of scathing remark.

"How do I learn to control it then? How do I learn to control the gem?"

"I’d advise establishing a relationship with it before attempting any form of control."

"What – is there an Infinity Gem social etiquette I’m supposed to follow? Am I supposed to formally introduce myself?"

"The gems do not communicate in the same way that you or I might do. But sometimes you might feel something from it, sometimes it might feel as if it is the reverse, and other times it might feel... Well, it might feel as if it does not want to cooperate in the slightest. In any case, do not force its actions. If you try to force its power without being able to harness it or direct it properly, the consequences may be disastrous."

"Are we talking blowing up a SHIELD base level of disastrous?"

"That would be one example." The Tesseract had not appreciated Selvig coercing it to teleport Loki from across the universe. "But I can only speculate about what harm the gems could inflict on a larger scale if they truly wished to."

"Ultron wished to," Stark said darkly. "And Ultron was a hybrid that didn’t even end up using an Infinity Stone in the end."

Stark held the pocket watch between his thumb and forefinger. It was far less conspicuous than any other of the containers that housed the Infinity Stones Loki had come across. It was innocuous enough and small in size, with elaborate carvings on the lid. A long gold neck chain was attached to it and even when shut, some of the Time Gem’s light leaked out of the seams.

"You know what?" Stark said. "Remind me to never piss this thing off."

"I shall hope you won't have to solely rely on me doing so."
They fell into silence but with Stark around, the silences tended to never last long. “Are you gonna try to tutor me?”

“Guide might be more appropriate.”

Stark nodded. “Probably more realistic. Anyone that tries to tutor me is either rapidly A: frustrated; B: embarrassed; or C: both.”

“Well, Stark, if it soothes your sense of self-admiration, I would never willingly place myself in such a position of responsibility for you.”

“Er, good? I don’t think it was a compliment but I’m taking it as one anyway.” Stark positioned his suit of armour so that it sat next to his feet on the sand. “I’ve got a question for you before lessons start: where the hell are we going to sleep? I don’t see any hotels around here. I don’t see any houses. And to be honest, you don’t really strike me as an outdoorsy Bear Grylls type.”

“Water flasks were not the only thing I bought from the Nidavellir market. I also bought a tent while you were purchasing your own supplies.”

“Uh – did I hear that right? Just one tent?”

Loki folded his arms. “I’m hardly fond of the idea either. But after buying food, other supplies, and paying for our stay at the inn, we only had a small amount of gold left. And the markets were too crowded and too well guarded for it to be worth risking stealing anything. Besides, I wasn’t certain at that point whether we would even have need of portable shelter.”

“Great. You know, if anyone told me a few months ago that I’d be having an island sleepover retreat with you of all people without, you know, having to worry you’d kill me in my sleep...”

Loki had no reply and occupied himself by summoning some of the food and water rations he had bought. The pastry and meat were cold but he found that neither he or Stark had any complaints. By the time they’d finished, the sun was beginning to set and more and more winged insects had taken to the air, tiny nuisances that hummed and bit and itched.

Just as Loki had been able to suggest they set up the tent, Stark said, "That's our cue."

From various misadventures with Thor, Sif, and the Warriors Three, Loki was quite familiar with tents from his travels as a child and young adult. What he was not so familiar with was setting them up; he'd always had someone else to do that for him. He'd hoped Stark might have more to offer but Stark diminished those hopes with an announcement that he had never slept in a tent in his life.

They'd retreated away from the shoreline and passed the point where the grass and sand were intermingled, a sign that the tide did not bring the sea out this far. They settled on a spot just at the edge of the woodland; Stark had theorised they'd be more sheltered and the pegs would have something to dig into that'd be much sturdier than just sand.

"What kind of weather should we expect anyway? It can't be sunny and cloudless all the time, right?" Stark asked.

"Alfheim is more prone to bad winds and hurricanes than other realms."

"Uh-huh." Stark had emptied the contents of the bag containing the tent on the ground and rummaged through various bits of poles and pegs and fabrics. "Right," he said eventually. "Since both of us were clearly way too rich and privileged to have camping trips as kids..."
Loki did not bother correcting him; on Asgard, it was only the rich and privileged who could class those sorts of trips as adventures. "That's the groundsheet," he said, pointing to the folded square piece of material. "The tent goes over the top of it." That much, at least, he was certain of.

Stark looked at him sharply. "Wait – you, the Asgardian royalty – have been camping?"

"Hunting trips are common on Asgard," Loki said by way of explanation. "And sojourns to other realms are expected of warriors." He'd never particularly enjoyed the trips but he found the reminder left a bittersweet ache. They'd all been so young.

"Huh. Maybe you are the Bear Grylls type after all." Stark caught Loki's expression and rushed into an explanation. "He's a guy, this really famous guy, he has all these survival skills: drinking his own piss, living off acorns and insects, that kind of thing."

Loki wrinkled his nose. "You Midgardians choose strange idols."

Stark laughed. "Yeah, speaking as one of those idols..."

Loki huffed a breath of amusement.

Stark resumed analysing the tent parts, rearranging the fabric to figure out how it was supposed to be structured when assembled. "Alright, I've got this figured out."

Loki nodded. "Good. I believe it's common practice for one person to push the poles through the slots and another to assist feeding them through."

After that, it did not take long. All they had left to do was peg the tent and the guy-ropes and when they had finished they had, unsurprisingly, a shelter that was a little on the short side. It was a neutral green, the choice by chance being a minor blessing in how little it stood out from the forest, and it had been advertised as a tent designed to fit four – four dwarves that was.

The fly-net was the largest blessing and both of them were eager to relieve themselves of the insects.

Stark unceremoniously placed his suit of armour so that it sat between the two of them like a barrier. Loki kept his relief private. Stark was never still, the same probably applied even when asleep and he would rather not be woken up by being rolled into or elbowed or worse.

"You'll be on first watch scanning outside, Friday."

"Isn't that the only watch, boss?"

"Well, yeah, technically. But it's still the first one." Stark directed his gaze at Loki. "Please tell me that between us, you know, two of who must be in the top percent of richest people in the galaxy, that we could afford something to sleep on."

"I was forced to choose from the cheapest." Loki's tone left no doubt about his disgust.

Stark took Loki's offering and unrolled his fabric. They were both the same: brown and thin and far too short, with equally small blankets to match.

"Dwarves," Loki muttered. "I would have bought twice the number if we had the coin for it."

Stark tested his, lying flat. His calves hung over the edge of the roll mat.

"You know what? For some reason, I'm beginning to think these were designed for people smaller
"How you arrived at that conclusion, I cannot possibly imagine."

The tent roof was so low that Loki had to crawl to position his roll mat and blankets, sitting upon them gingerly when he’d finished, as if expecting to feel hard ground underneath. His expectations were not unfounded and half his legs were too long for the mat.

Stark began chuckling to himself and Loki suspected it was at his expense. “Is my discomfort truly that amusing?”

“I’m not even laughing at how ridiculously tall you are. I’m laughing at how if we both make it, you’re never going to live this one down because – technically – we’re sleeping together.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Lewd, Stark, even by your standards.”

“You know, if you ever decide you want to invade the planet again, I wouldn’t even have to fight you. I’d just start telling everyone about how we slept together and you’d so embarrassed you’d zap yourself somewhere else.”

“I would ask whether you would have a care for your own reputation but the question would be futile.”

“You mean my reputation as a playboy? Because that really wouldn’t help your case.”

“My reputation of having certain standards to maintain wouldn’t help make your claim believable.”

Stark let out a laugh. “Your reputation of having standards? Not on my planet, you don’t. I’m pretty sure we have stories about you fucking a horse.”

“That’s preposterous. Why in the name of the Norns—”

“Although, I guess you could still be a horse-fucker and have standards. I mean, if the horse is well-bred, has a handsome mane, is fast in the field…”

“Do you wish for there to be a Stark shaped hole in the wall of this tent?”

“I guess you gave horse-riding a whole new meaning. Whatever floats your boat, buddy. I won’t tell a soul, cross my heart and hope to die.” Stark made a crossing motion across his chest.

“You are utterly vulgar.”

Stark laughed again. “Aw – come on. I thought we were having fun exchanging sleepover secrets.”

“As I recall, you mentioned being surprised about your assurance that I wouldn’t stab you whilst you slept,” Loki said, forcing a malicious smile. “You should have been more concerned about me stabbing you while you are awake.”

“Yeah, whatever. Maybe when we’re done saving the universe.” Stark began to crawl over to the entrance and his suit of armour started to follow suit.

"Stark? Where are you going?"

Stark began to undo the fastenings on the fly-net. "Gotta go for a piss." He patted the armour as if it was a loyal pet. "This is my flashlight." And with that, he exited the tent.
At least he remembered to reseal the net before leaving.

When it was once again quiet, Loki was left with the trepidation of having to sleep next to someone so close by. Stark had no reason to harm him, not while Thanos still breathed, but it wasn't his safety he feared for. The matter was pure and simple and so feeble that he hated to admit it to himself: it was discomfort. Loki had despised sleeping where others could see him for almost as long as he could remember. It was ridiculous and irrational and petty but he hated it anyway. Sleep left sleepers useless and vulnerable and in some cases, downright humiliated – not that Thor had ever had the grace to be embarrassed by his snoring whenever they had shared a tent, Loki remembered then wished he hadn't. And then there was the matter of Loki's dreams. As of late, he had grown too tired to risk avoiding them. No one had ever mentioned Loki talking or calling out in his sleep or moving in his sleep, but the fear that he did still lingered. Besides, there were very few people who could have known even if he did use to.

The risk of Stark finding out his secrets was enough to make him contemplate not sleeping at all, but his limbs were weary and his eyelids were growing heavier.

When Loki heard the tell-tale footfalls of Stark returning, he had made up his mind. He lay on his side, face obscured from view and his back to where Stark's bed was, eyes tightly closed and breathing in and out in even rhythms. Stark didn't say a word. He moved with more delicacy and quietness than Loki had thought him capable of, making himself comfortable before whispering, "Lights out, Friday."

Then there was perfect darkness.

Loki forced himself to stay awake for hours and hours until he heard Stark's breathing get deeper and deeper before letting himself slip under.

***

The dreams came, as they always did. He dreamt of the yellow taint of the Soul Gem and the taste of his own blood in his lips and The Other standing guard as the overseer of his initiation to Thanos’s service. There was a new addition to his dreams: Thanos's fist squeezing and squeezing. He knew it was Thor's life being crushed even though he could not see him, he knew it in his gut, and yet he could do nothing but watch.

Something steered him back to the land of the awake, noises that were misplaced. Rustling and erratic breathing and thrashing. And it wasn't Loki.

Only when Loki had broken through the haze did he realise it was Stark, limbs twitching as if he was fighting off an imaginary monster.

Loki considered waking him but thought that both himself and Stark would prefer it if he did not acknowledge what he had witnessed. Awake, Stark was able to mask his fears passably well but asleep... Well, Loki was more than content to pretend he was not aware of the mask at all. Seeing Stark so vulnerable was unsettling and it was only after seeing just how afraid he was that Loki found himself preferring Stark's usual nonchalance. No, Loki decided, he would allow Stark to keep up his pretences. So long as Stark didn't know that Loki knew, things would be normal... Whatever their normal had become. And besides, by the sounds of it, Stark would wake himself up before long.

Loki waited. Then waited some more. One of Stark's legs kicked out and his fists were clenched tight, knuckles white.
How was he *still* asleep?

Surely it couldn't go on for much longer.

Loki considered throwing something at Stark to wake him but if he did Stark would know that he knew which wouldn't do. Therefore, it seemed the most reasonable course of action for Loki was to turn his back on Stark and try to ignore it. Which is precisely what he did, making a point of doing it as noisily as possible. He'd had hopes that the noise would stir Stark from sleep but there was no such luck. He closed his eyes again. There was another noise behind him, probably Stark lashing out with an arm this time.

The more Loki tried to ignore what was going on, the more acutely aware he became of it, until sleep was the furthest thing on his mind and he'd finally had enough. He turned, making sure to keep his voice as quiet as possible.

"Friday – wake him up," Loki whispered and at last he was able to resume his pretence of sleep.
Chapter 19

The chirping of birds roused Loki from sleep and daylight seeped in through the tent walls, warmth trickling in along with it. Loki propped himself up on his elbows and cast a glance over to Stark, curled up in a tangle of blankets. His face was peaceful now, rid of the terror and anxieties that it had been during the night and Loki found himself taking care to exit the tent as silently as it allowed him.

When he returned from the lake after washing and filling the waterskins and collecting food, Stark was already out the tent and sitting in the grass, squinting up at the sun and dressed in cheap dwarven robes that only came down to his middle. It was an odd sight.

"Not my usual designer brand," Stark said, gesturing to himself. "But my Zeppelin shirt has officially got to the point of unwearable."

Loki tossed him his waterskin and Stark caught it. Then Stark took note of what else Loki was carrying in his hands and let out an exclamation that was a mixture of shock and disgust.

"What?" Loki asked, placing the carcass on the ground.

"What the fuck is that?"

"It's duck," Loki said but Stark seemed no less alarmed. "I thought Midgard had them too."

"We do..."

"We can't live off the rations we have indefinitely. It's far more sustainable to live off the land and save the rations as emergency reserves."

Stark moved closer, craning his neck over the carcass. "Fucking hell. Ugh, look at its beady little eyes."

"Stark," Loki said, "you act as if you have never eaten meat before."

"Normally, I get my duck off the menu and it's crispy fried and comes with rice, not feathers."

"I fail to see what difference it makes."

Stark turned away from the carcass. "I don't like my food staring back at me. And yeah, before you point it out to me, I know it's irrational and hypocritical that I'm perfectly fine eating meat that's already been prepared but not like this. It's not like I'm directly responsible for it being dead when I order or buy it, just, you know, indirectly."

Loki began to use his already blooded dagger to strip away the skin in the way he had seen it done and Stark began to make more exaggerated sound effects.

"Nope. No way. I can't... Ugh, I feel like I'm gonna puke."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Before breaking your fast?"

"I'm hungry but not hungry enough to so much as touch any of that." Stark couldn't tear his eyes away from the meat, transfixed in morbid fascination.

Loki shrugged. "Then all the more there will be for myself," he said with vague irritation. He
would have found himself something smaller if he'd known Stark was going to raise such a fuss.

"Major culture clash," he heard Stark mutter. And then, "Fucking Space Vikings."

Loki sighed. "If you wish to make yourself useful, we will need a campfire."

"Uh – isn't the smoke going to attract attention?"

"Not unless it becomes out of control. The elves often use small fires for their own purposes. Ours shouldn’t stand out any more than the rest."

"Right." Stark visibly gulped. "I'll go– I'll go and do that then."

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As it happened, Stark wasn't that opposed to eating meat once it no longer resembled an animal. Loki only had a vague idea of how the duck was supposed to be cooked, never having done it himself. Without any flavouring, the meat was dry and tasteless and chewy but Loki would rather force himself to eat it rather than waste rations. Admittedly, he probably had overcooked it a little. The outer layer was slightly past the point of being charred.

With a single look, Loki dared Stark to complain.

Stark chewed – no, crunched – his meat with a face that said everything he didn't need to. Loki assumed he was too busy chewing to have the capacity to complain.

The reason for Loki finishing his portion was out of stubbornness more than anything else.

It was as if the two of them were waiting for the other to ask the question of what next, but neither did. Getting the Time Gem had been their first goal and with their focus on acquiring it so intense, they had unknowingly overlooked all that which would have to come after it. The gem would only be the beginning of it.

Stark fiddled with the pocket watch continuously, as if it was a particularly pretty piece of jewellery that hung around his neck, and Loki found himself frequently drawn to staring at the shifting orange and yellow lights emitted from it as if it would give them answers. It wasn't an impossibility; the Tesseract had been known to communicate with those within a close proximity. In the early days when Loki held it, it hadn't shown him any visions or suchlike but it allowed him to feel its power for fleeting moments. He was indestructible in those moments and the world would have to succumb to his will instead of the other way around and none of the past was relevant anymore because he had the gem and the gem had him and nothing could stop them. But then it would withdraw back into itself and would only leave him craving more. It hadn't retracted itself like that for some time but neither had it let him feel the full force of it.

"It's not as big as I thought it'd be," Stark commented, eyes on the gem. His fingers toyed with the golden loops of the pocket watch chain, winding it around and around.

"I'd expect all the gems are a similar size, it's the size of their containers that vary."

"Who made the containers then?"

That, as it turned out, was a very good question.

"Would that I could give you an answer." Loki had tried to search for the answer when he had been pretending to be the Allfather in case it gave him new leads but hadn't managed to find anything of
importance.

“The casings for them must be made of interesting stuff. For a start, they’ve got to be at least as strong as my arc reactors...”

Loki frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“Remember your little performance issue? You know, when you tried to tap me with the glow stick of destiny?”

“Ah.”

“You chose the wrong place to tap,” Stark said. “So – gem stuff. That’s what we’re here for, right?”

“Yes. I can attempt to teach you what I know, although what may apply to the Tesseract may not necessarily apply to the Time Gem. The gems are unique; I doubt there is a uniform way to wield every single one of them. They have wills of their own and you must remember that if you are able to harness their powers it is because they allow you to.”

“The wand chooses the wizard.”

“What?” Then Loki thought better of it and dismissed it as one of Stark’s many offtrack Midgardian remarks. “Expect it to take time for you to gain control and precision. Do not be foolish enough to presume anything of the gem. It owes you nothing.”

Stark nodded. "Gem Etiquette 101." He scratched behind an ear. "You know, it's kind of ironic how I'm sitting here literally holding the objectification of time itself in my hand and time is the one thing we don't have enough of.”

“True,” Loki agreed, “but we are able to outrun Thanos for a while.” His eyes slid back to the chain and the gem inside the watch. “Can you feel it?”

"Of course I can, I'm holding it." 

"No – can you feel it?"

"Oh. Er… Not like that.”

“Even your species should be able to detect such strong signatures at such close proximities.”

Stark nodded, but his attention was wrapped up in the gem. He tilted it and when that achieved no result he gave it a gentle shake. Redder and yellower tendrils emerged and then dispersed like drops of ink in water.

“I–” Loki started. “I wouldn't recommend doing that. The last thing we need is for it to take a dislike to you or see your actions as an insult.”

The colours settled and the light was back to its original warm amber.

"Oh yeah, I'm supposed to be avoiding pissing it off. That uh– That might not come so naturally to me."

"Believe me, Stark," Loki said, "I am very aware of that."

Loki summoned the Tesseract to hand. It was slightly brighter than it usually was, energy coming
"Watch," Loki instructed. The Tesseract remained normal. Then Loki focused on that connection, the bridge between his mind and the gem, and the blues began moving as if they had charge and were reaching out for him.

"That's you?" Stark asked.

"Yes and no. That's the gem responding to me."

"Huh."

"Now, carefully - and I cannot emphasise that enough - open the lid."

Stark complied. The tendrils of orange were chaotic and patternless.

"See how the interior of the Tesseract has changed?" Loki asked. The blues were stretching towards the Time Gem but they were so weak they were barely wisps.

"What's that – some sort of embedded code that allows it to recognise the other stones?"

"Not code – sentience."

"I scanned that sceptre of yours. And code and sentience aren't mutually exclusive; sentience is just an advanced form of coding thought patterns."

Interesting, Loki thought. He had already heard about the debacle that had happened with the creation of Vision but had not heard it through Stark. "Surely in that case sentience requires some form of vessel."

"Well, yeah, the code needs something to run on. A brain, a machine, a hard drive, anything goes really."

"It requires physical matter to root itself in then."

Stark shot him an odd look. "I guess?"

"Then explain to me how it came to be that I was still very much sentient after I died."

Stark faltered for a brief moment. "Wait – are you about to argue that sentience is rooted in a person's soul?" He let out a burst of surprised laughter. "Sorry – I just didn't see that argument coming from the same guy who made the free will is an illusion speech in Stuttgart."

"They're not mutually exclusive," Loki said.

Stark's lip twitched. "Yeah, we might be getting a bit off track here. This is Gem Theory, not Philosophy Class. And what happened with you and the whole dying thing is something we're going to have to discuss some other time because – hello? – life after death actually being a thing would be one hell of a revelation. Other planes of existence, whether we have souls, and fucking immortality – they aren't things I'm just going to dismiss if there's actual evidence for them. But I'm kind of busy at the moment. So, yeah – going back to the plan."

"Would that I had anything beyond a vague outline."

"Wait a second - you don't? You've been the guy with the plan from the get-go."
“Yes, well, there were a great many variables,” Loki admitted.

“Me being one of them.”

“And the whereabouts of the Time Gem was another.”

“And the priority is me somehow figuring out this thing,” Stark said, swinging the gem around his fingers. Loki cringed.

“I would not recommend treating it like that. It's hardly respectful.”

“I don't think it minds.” Stark held out the watch in his palm for Loki to inspect. “See? It doesn't look angry, it just looks kind of... like a kid at a fairground.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. It wouldn't be the description he would have chosen. “I hope you're right about it not being opposed to it. For both of our sakes.”

Stark flashed a grin. “Maybe it got all attention deprived down there for who knows how many years.”

“Yes,” Loki huffed, “that might expect its peculiar tolerance for your behaviour.”

“But I was thinking, in order to master it–”

“Mastering it is hardly necessary – it would take far too long and beings with far more power than you would have failed – wielding it on the other hand... I would hope that an adequate level of control would be sufficient enough for our purposes.”

“So mastering it is more like the premium non-restricted version of using the Time Stone and wielding it is the cheap freebie version.”

“I suppose that would be one way of putting it,” Loki replied.

“And you think we'll be able to time travel using the freebie version?” Stark asked, taking Loki’s nod as confirmation. Stark let out a whistle of appreciation. “Sign me up.”

The majority of the day was spent continuing trying to forge the beginnings of a connection between Stark's mind and the Time Stone. Stark was able to grasp concepts and theories quickly, even adding his own speculation and insight, but he struggled to put into practice what he far too quickly dubbed as 'magical bullshit'. The Time Gem hadn't responded negatively in any way but it hadn't exactly responded positively either; it remained as erratic and inconsistent as it always had been. Loki hoped the lack of hostility in itself was a positive response. It had been kinder to Stark than the Tesseract had been to Loki in the beginning, although that might have had more to do with Stark's lack of ability to create a link between them, thus making himself a lesser known target. Stark called himself a man of science but for all that it helped him with his inventions, it severely hindered him making progress with the gem.

"Open your mind, Stark."

"I've been trying for the past four hours. All I'm getting is a headache."

"Try to feel the force of its power but do not grasp it for yourself, not yet."

"So you're telling me not to use The Force?"

"Just be able to sense it. Be receptive to it."
"You say it like it's that easy. How the hell is anyone supposed to just open their minds? Please
don't tell me meditation. I'm gonna be very disappointed if your answer is mediation."

"I..." Loki struggled to explain how to sense power. It was like trying to explain how to see with a
pair of eyes and hear with a pair of ears. "It's instinctual."

Stark snorted. "For you maybe."

"Your cynicism is only likely to make this more difficult for you."

"My cynicism doesn't have an off button, okay? I can't just press a button and all of a sudden start
feeling weird mystic energies in the air or whatever."

Loki grew quiet for a moment. "Then I suppose a different approach may be in order."

"You mean one that doesn't rely on me having to completely suspend disbelief?"

"You have created your own form of artificial consciousness. Surely, forming a relationship with a
sentient object is not incomprehensible to you."

"When I coded AI, I understood it because I made it."

"It is not necessary to have to make something to understand it."

"No, but it makes it a hell of a lot easier." Stark tried connecting with the gem again, visibly
straining.

"If connecting with it requires effort, you are doing it wrong."

"Your fortune cookie tips aren’t helping."

Loki bristled. "Neither is speaking in that manner to the only person who can help you accomplish
this."

Stark forced himself to take a breath, closing his eyes. When he was done he held his hands up in a
peaceful gesture. "Alright, what I’m trying to say is your understanding of things just doesn’t fit
with mine. This" – he held up the pocket watch in one hand – “makes sense to you because you
come from a place where magic is a thing and you all speak in metaphors and live for thousands of
years. No wonder your way isn’t working for me. If understanding the gem is a factor in
connecting with it, I’ve got to understand it my way. I want to scan it with everything I've got
and see what makes it tick and what makes it go boom and what the hell it actually is."

"And I take it your equipment to do that would be on Midgard?"

"Got it in one."

"You know why we can't return yet," Loki said, his voice quiet.

"I know. I'm planning ahead."

"And even if it was safe to return, it may still be highly dangerous for you to investigate the gem
like that."

"I'm gonna be careful. There's no way I'm letting Ultron happen again; I'm not going to touch the
code, just look at it. I'm thinking I start with gentle non-invasive scans, not launch straight in with
probing. I wasn't being literal when I said I wanted to see what makes it go boom. That'd actually
be the opposite of what I'd want to happen."

"Then I hope you are correct in your assumption that it likes attention."

Stark let out a burst of laughter that didn't hold any true amusement. "Me too, buddy. It's a gut feeling."

"But until we are able to safely return, the only course of productive action is—"

"Yeah, yeah, spiritual psychic gem connection time."

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With evening starting to draw in, Loki decided there was little point continuing with the day’s work and elected that they gather more food instead. They walked around the cliffs, and it wasn't until then that their perspective allowed them to see what was behind them apart from trees. Out to the left were stretches and stretches of carefully cultivated gardens populated by brightly coloured exotic plants, next to those were colonies of fruit bushes and trees, and further behind them the woodland continued to grow, its trees older than Loki was.

It was hot enough that the back of Loki’s neck was damp with sweat and Stark had commanded his armour to walk with them instead of wearing it. The empty suit was still slightly unnerving and its presence had lingered next to them like some sort of ghostly spirit all day.

"What are those raspberry look-alike plants?"

"Those would be raspberry plants, Stark."

"That seems way too down to earth for a place like this. But hey – if we're passing through that direction we might as well take what we can, right? Unless there's a farmer Legolas who'll be pissed at us for stealing his fruit."

"The elves of Alfheim claim no land as their own. So long as we take no more than our fair share and cause no damage, I doubt we would encounter trouble should we be seen."

"Speaking of being seen..." Stark said. "How likely is that?"

"We have much more of a real chance of being seen here than where we set up camp or on the sand."

"Does this mean I'm going to have to put up with one of your disguises again?"

"I doubt the elves would be able to discern the difference from a distance."

"I'm not leaving the suit behind."

"I wasn't about to suggest that it would be a good idea to," Loki replied. "Here." He rendered Stark’s armour invisible but saw no need to alter Stark's appearance, save for making his ears slightly more pointed and his frame taller.

"How bad is my face?"

"No different than usual."

"Have I got a nice set of ears? Please tell me I've got a nice set of Spock ears."
"They're lovely," Loki said, and if there was any condescending undertone he made no effort to disguise it.

Stark didn't seem to mind. "Awesome."

***

"I never thought I'd actually enjoy a piece of fruit this much," Stark commented when they returned to their path.

Loki made a non-committal humming noise in reply.

"Seriously," Stark said, "that stuff is good. I don't think I've eaten anything that tastes that good – especially not something that's fruit. Something must be wrong with me."

As they ventured deeper into the wood, the trees began to grow larger and larger until some of their roots were so big they could walk underneath them. Owls blinked at them from their perches and from time to time there'd be rustling and darts of movement from rabbits and foxes and deer. On their way, they walked past a huge badger den and Loki had to abruptly change direction when they crossed paths with the unmistakable prints of a bear.

They'd been trying to find landmarks so that they'd be able to remember where the locations of the hunting traps Stark had managed to piece together where. Two were by a small pond, another by the tree vaguely resembling a woman (as Stark had crudely pointed out), and the last they placed opposite the trees the elves had coaxed into growing like a bridge over the river. Loki thought it best not to advance any further after that, taking the bridge as a sign of the beginnings of an elven settlement.

During their journey back to the tent, they passed a number of tree hollows with spaces large enough for a person to curl up inside of, filled with so many flowers that the petals looked as if they were bursting out.

Stark had wanted a closer look and Loki had to explain why that was a bad idea.

"It's how they deal with their dead," Loki said.

"They're graves?"

"The ones filled with flowers are, yes."

"Prettier than a coffin, I guess. Don't they get animals disturbing it? Because that doesn't sound so pretty."

"The Crimson Flower is something of a natural deterrent."

Stark looked intrigued. "Smells bad or something?"

"No. They are able to digest flesh. The elves see a certain poetry in being returned back to nature in such a fashion, although I do not pretend to be able to relate to it."

Stark moved closer towards one of the grave-burrows with fascination in his eyes. "Man-eating plants... We don't have many like that back home. What enzymes do they use to digest? How long does it take? Do they have any paralytic toxins they can inject? What about digesting other materials? Metal? Plastic? Plastic eating flowers would be one hell of an elegant solution to sorting out trash piles." Before Loki could answer any of his questions, Stark turned to him again. "I know
I should respect the dead but I want one."

"Must I list all the reasons why that would not be a good idea? They can digest through layers of skin in seconds. I should not have to continue after listing that reason."

Stark raised his eyebrows. "Seconds? That's fast. Do they eat metal?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then I'm pocketing one," Stark announced. "Plant biology isn't my thing but I want one anyway. If I take one of the stray flowers, that makes it less bad – that's how it works, right?"

"Stark – no. Don't touch the petals or leaves!"

Stark gripped one of the nearest Crimson Flower by its stalk and pulled. "These would make terrible apology flowers. Remind me not to let anyone sniff them."

"By the Norns, Stark, why would you bother with such a thing?"

Stark shrugged. "Curiosity combined with an attraction to things that could kill me has kind of become my go-to answer."

"And that's worth the risk, is it?"

"I've made it this far."

Loki made a scoffing noise. "You and everyone else alive has made it this far – only because of not having died yet."

"Except you."

"Yes, Stark, except me. My thanks for that reminder."

"Look—" Stark made a show of delicately holding out the plant for his suit of armour to take and store away. "There. Safe now."

“Congratulations,” Loki said, rolling his eyes, “you now have a needlessly dangerous object within your inventory. And with that delightful new way you have found to accidentally maim yourself, I believe it’s time to be heading back.”

***

They'd learned after the first night to retreat early to avoid the nuisance of the insects. It was too bright to hope for sleep but too late to get anything of use accomplished.

Loki lay flat on his back with an arm over his eyes to attempt to block out the light and tried to clear his mind of thoughts. It was never so easy. Just when he'd begin to relax he'd be distracted by Stark scratching something or shifting his weight around and then he'd have to start the whole process over again.

Somewhere above the tent, a bird cawed softly, a creature at such peace that it seemed utterly alien.

"How long do you think it'll be before I can go home?" Stark asked and Loki had never heard his voice sound so small before. He wanted to shut his ears to it, to the audible pain and longing and desperation. His traitor mind thrust the memory of him visiting Thor on Midgard and Thor asking a similar question with that same vulnerability. Loki was glad his face was already covered by his
"Are you certain you want to go back?"

The rustle of blankets signified Stark shifting positions again.

"I have to," Stark said. "Whether I want to doesn't come into it."

Loki shifted his arm to give Stark a curious look. "Why? Why would you want to return there? Why would you want to see the ruins of what was your home?"

Stark visibly swallowed. "I can't stop wondering... I can't stop thinking about who could still be alive. If Thanos only kills those that fight against him..."

"There may well be enough of your people left for your planet to continue on," Loki finished.

"If we're lucky."

"And if you aren't so lucky?"

Stark's mouth was set in a hard grim line. "Then this time-travelling thing better work."

"Wouldn't not knowing be better than knowing an awful truth?"

Stark eyed him out of the corner of his eye, a look far too astute for Loki to be comfortable with. "I guess it depends," Stark said.

"What if the truth is so devastating that it destroys you and any chances you had of success with the gem?" Loki asked. Stark's mouth opened and then closed again. "What if your need to know the truth dooms the fates of all your friends?"

"Look, the not knowing part is already a massive distraction. At least if I know, I'll be able to refocus after..."

"Will you?" Loki asked quietly.

"I wouldn't have another choice," Stark said but he didn't sound certain.

"Midgard sounds like an unnecessary gamble to my ears," Loki said, his words harsh but his tone the opposite.

"I can't... I can't go on now knowing indefinitely, okay? I'm just-- I'm exhausted. All the guessing and the not knowing if I should be mourning or working and if I don't mourn then it means that there's no one to mourn them, or if I do mourn them it means I'm not working hard enough and--" Stark forced himself to take a breath. "I'm reaching the end of my rope here. There's only so long I can put it off. There's only so long I can convince myself to function without knowing. There's only so much distracting myself I can do before none of it works anymore."

Stark still clung on to hope, Loki realised. Regardless of how rationally-minded he could be and how much he knew the odds were against his planet, he still dared to hope. It was a dangerous thing.

"Are you certain?" Loki said, propping himself up on his elbows. "Absolutely certain?"

"This isn't-- I've been thinking about this a lot. It's kind of hard not to. But the fact is that if I carry on like this, I don't know how long we'll keep making progress for, except it's not gonna be long.
At least if I know, there's a chance I'll...

_A chance you'll be so deep in grief that you will guarantee their deaths_, Loki thought but did not utter aloud.

Stark's face was taut. "You know, if the worst comes to the worst, I'd fight harder. I might end up thrown back a bit but..." Stark trailed off. "And even if I do end up losing focus, you wouldn't let that shit stick for long."

Loki found himself unable to respond to that. It was a strange sentiment, that of trusting his former enemy turned ally to not allow him to truly grieve. Did that make him ruthlessly cold-hearted or committed and dependable in Stark's eyes?

"I like to think that intervention on my part will not be necessary," Loki said stiffly.

Stark sat up straight. "Will not be?" Stark echoed. "Does that mean we're – I'm, I mean – going home?"

"If what you are saying is true then there are not many useful alternatives. Plus," Loki added, "I am beginning to believe that what you were saying about analysing the Time Gem using your own science and technology may have some merit."

"Oh." Stark blinked.

"Once enough time has passed to minimise the risk of the Chitauri or Thanos we will return to Midgard if you still wish it. I believe another fortnight or so should guarantee our safety as much as we could hope for."

Stark blinked at him again.

"What?" Loki asked.

"No– I just– I just wasn't expecting you to actually agree."

"Contrary to popular belief, I am capable of compromise, Stark."

Stark snorted, an abrupt contrast to his prior seriousness. "We're not stuck in Pride and Prejudice, you know. I think we've passed that level of formality. I've had my hand in your mouth and you've seen me with my goatee in this state – if that doesn't merit being on a first-term name basis, I don't know what does. I mean, I call you by your first name so it's kind of common courtesy to return the favour."

"Anthony?" Loki said. It sounded wrong. Judging from Stark's expression of distaste, it sounded wrong to his ears too.

"What are you, my school teacher? It's Tony. Just call me Tony."
With plans of spending another day continuing strengthening or at least putting in place the connection between Stark and the gem, they'd headed out to check the hunting traps they'd lain before starting. Two were still empty, another was missing, and another had captured a hare with a badly broken leg.

"Ugh," Stark said, holding a hand in front of his eyes. "I feel like I’m personally responsible for everything that happened in Watership Down."

Loki picked up the limp animal, its fur soft underneath his fingers. He made a motion with his hands and it disappeared. "It's gone, Stark."

"Thumper's gone?" Stark lowered his hand. "And I told you – it's Tony."

"I had forgotten," Loki lied. Stark’s first name felt as it bordered breaching the terms of their alliance and he thought the man suited his surname better. Besides, he'd been calling him Stark for so long it would be difficult to break the habit.

The rest of their journey exiting the woodland had been uneventful, save for them spotting what might have been an elf peering at them ahead through the trees. Loki had given Stark an impatient tug after that, Stark being slightly preoccupied with examining a bush of fruit he had not encountered before. For whatever reason they had drawn the elf's attention, it did not seem interested enough to follow as they returned to cook the meat.

The instant they'd finished eating, Stark brought out the pocket watch, apparently not deterred by the previous day’s lack of success.

"About approaching this from a different angle, as we discussed..." Loki said. "I have an idea that may be of use."

"I’m listening."

"I believe part of the problem with you attempting to detect the Time Gem's magical energy is that you have no concept of what magical energy is supposed to feel like in the first place."

"With you so far."

"So if I was to direct a low level of my own magical energy towards you instead of you having to rely on detecting a passive signature..."

"Then I’ve got better chances of learning to detect it. Worth a try, I guess. So long as all the radiation isn't going to make me hulk out. Actually, screw that – especially if it makes me hulk out."

"It will not harm you," Loki said. He had always been too invested in perfecting his illusions to stray too far down other branches of magic. He had gotten so far as to learn to coat an object with his magic as a prerequisite to transmuting objects, only without ever having much success with the actual transmuting part.

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

"Hold out both of your hands, palms facing up," Loki instructed. "I will direct energy at one of
them. You will learn to tell which one."

Stark complied. "Alright. Hit me up."

Loki’s face remained perfectly still, his gaze giving no indication of which hand he chose as he folded his magic around it like a bandage. "Which hand?" Loki asked.

"Uh... Left?"

"Do not guess. Feel."

"Right?"

"You're still guessing, Stark."

Stark frowned. "It's Tony." His frown grew deeper. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling here."

"Try not to overthink; use your instinct."

"Left. That was my first answer so I'm sticking with it."

"Is that your final answer?"

"Fuck it. Why not? Left."

"Wrong. Try again."

The first time Stark guessed correctly, Loki brought out a bag of some of the fruits they had gathered. “An extra incentive,” he said by way of explanation. “But only when you are correct, of course.”

“Great. You’re gonna condition me like a lab rat. You should stay away from reading Skinner.”

It turned into a game of sorts that lasted for hours. Variations upon variations were added and retracted as they experimented. Loki tried getting Stark to state the first hand to enter his mind, tried getting Stark to make a carefully deliberated decision, and he even tried getting Stark to cut off his other senses. Whatever variations were made, there were no discernible differences. Occasionally Stark would have a streak of guessing the correct hand several times in a row and Loki would begin to believe the exercise might have been beginning to work only to wonder whether it had all been a fluke.

"What if I just end up learning to read you?" Stark had voiced. Loki had still not managed to substitute the surname for the former in his thoughts. It was getting tiresome to hear Stark insisting upon it whenever the surname slipped past Loki’s lips and so Loki had learned to omit calling Stark any name at all when addressing him.

"I doubt that will happen. There are some who name me the God of Lies." He’d only begun to understand the cruel irony in that title when he'd learned the truth of his origins. "But if it's a large concern, you may turn your back to me."

And so another variation began.

By the time evening began to fall, Stark's success rate had improved to the point where Loki had him guess which finger on a hand he was wrapping his magic around.
Stark fell into step next to him on their walk back from the cliffs to the tent.

"This thing still doesn't make any sense to me," Stark said, fiddling with the casing of the pocket watch. "It has the capacity to modify the whole of time and somehow its abilities are trapped within a pretty glowing stone that's somehow sentient. Seriously – and I’ve seen some weird shit in my time – none of this makes any logical sense. How did the gems just start existing? Did someone make them or where they always just kind of floating out there? And there's supposed to be six of them, right? Six of them that supposedly can control everything in the universe. We've got two. Thanos has three now. The only one still awol is the Reality Gem."

_Damn Odin for keeping that secret with him_, Loki thought. Although perhaps Odin was in the best possible place: one where Thanos would never think to look for him and one where no one but Loki would be able to find him – except for possibly Heimdall if he thought to cast his gaze to the statues of Niflheim.

"And the Reality Gem is the one that makes the least sense," Stark continued. "If I was Thanos, that'd be the first I'd go for. If you can alter reality to make it anything you want then why would you need anything else? You could just click your fingers and bam – all the gems are yours."

"You are assuming the gems are able to wield their control over other gems."

"Aren't they?"

"To some extent they must be. I was able to teleport you and the Time Gem with the Tesseract. But if I wished to directly meddle with the gem or have it attack another gem I am not certain what the consequences would be."

"Huh. Anyone actually tried it?"

"Not that I know of. But wars must have been fought over the gems, given how powerful they are and the length of their histories. I assume someone would have tried at some point."

"It's kind of weird that given the huge size of the universe, four of them ended up on Earth at the same time. Those odds must be batshit crazy."

"The Norns have a habit of manipulating to suit their own ends,” Loki said, traces of sourness tinging his tone. He had been – and still was – one of the things they manipulated. As much he resented the Norns for forcing the responsibility of the fate of the universe on him, knowing that there might be some semblance of chance was the closest thing to reassurance he could accept.

“Boy, you really have it in for them.”

Loki shot Stark a look. “I cannot possibly contemplate why.”

“If this whole thing actually works I don’t know if I should thank them or punch them. They’re supposed to see everything that could possibly happen, right?” Stark said. “Wanna know what I think? They’re messing us around. They could’ve given you step by step instructions but they didn’t. They could’ve bothered to pay me a visit but they didn’t. For all we know, they could’ve told every person with a with a special costume to fight in they’d be the likeliest to defeat Thanos. At least that way someone might actually manage because self-fulfilling prophecies and all. But we’ve no way of testing that without risking everything so...” Stark left the rest of the sentence unsaid.

The air was cooler than it previously had been and the difference in temperature meant that there were hardly any insects flying about. Once they had rekindled the fire, they sat on logs by it,
cooking the rest of the meat they had and watching as darkness took over the sky.

"Huh. Look at that. Different sky. Different solar system. I wouldn’t even be able to difference just by looking."

"I hadn't thought you one to admire the view," Loki commented dryly.

"The sky's not that impressive, it's just a bunch of tiny dots of light floating in the sky. But the concept of them – planet-sized nuclear reactors so far away that by looking at them we’re looking light years into the past – even I can appreciate that," Stark said, ruining any profoundness the statement might have had by giving a graceless wave upwards with his stick skewer. Stark – Loki sighed internally; he’d done it again, it was Tony, he insisted on being called Tony – took another bite of the meat on his skewer.

"Asgard is the only realm that nebulas can be clearly seen from," Loki said. ‘I suppose most skies fail to measure in comparison once that is a thing you become accustomed to."

Something that might have been a drop of rain landed on Loki’s leg.

“That’s not how I pictured Asgard.”

“Dare I ask?”

Loki received a grin.

“I was thinking more along the lines of giant mead halls and every other building that doesn’t sell boar or something selling weapons. There’s got to be some sort of huge stone castle in the middle of it. There’s probably loads of fields with sheep and bulls and pigs around,” Stark said, pulling a face at the thought. “I’d pick city life over that any day even though I’ve heard Asgard’s got a pretty nifty bridge.”

“In terms of cultural ideology, that is not so inaccurate. In terms of technological advancement, I believe you have woefully underestimated Asgard.”

“You guys never had records or movies or TV. Most of you must be bored out of your minds.”

“Drinking, feasting, and tournaments are the most common forms of entertainment. Theatre is somewhat less popular.” Which wasn’t surprising, given the appallingly acted and scripted needless number of plays that did nothing but retell battles long in the past.

“So you’re way ahead with transport but way behind on entertainment and communication,” Stark said. “How long’s it take if you want to send a message? Days? Weeks? Could be months depending on how far away they are. Speaking of – how big is Asgard anyway?”

“Approximately the size of one of your larger Midgardian continents,” Loki said.

“Wait – you’re telling me that the legendary planet that rules over the Nine Realms is the same size as the moon? Are you kidding me? The moon. You’re basically a ping pong ball surrounded by beach balls and your planet somehow made itself king of them all.”

“With one minor difference,” Loki said, feeling a raindrop landing on his hand, “Asgard is not spherical. It is flat.”

“What?” Stark gaped.
Another raindrop landed on Loki but he ignored it in favour of being entertained by Stark’s astonishment. “I believe you heard correctly,” Loki said as mildly as possible.

“I sure don’t.” Stark blinked. “Flat? Are you shitting me?”

“I’m not entirely certain what you intend to mean by that expression.”

“Was that supposed to be a joke?”

“Oh, no,” Loki said, “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. Do you guys have a thing about breaking physics?”

“Surely, you of all people would know that physics is not a thing that can be broken, only revised in concept.”

“But it’s flat – how the hell does that even work?” Multiple drops of rain filtered down from the sky, heavier than the preceding ones. “Shit. Is this gonna have to wait?”

Loki nodded grimly. The hairs on his arms were beginning to stand on end and already the stars were becoming obscured by thick clouds. “I believe a storm is coming.”

***

They got damp – well, Loki got damp as he did not possess sealed armour – adding extra reinforcements to the tent pegs and creating a small ditch to direct the water away but they still managed to get inside before the rain started lashing down in sheets. The sound of the water beating on the fabric of the tent was oddly soothing, although the sight of a steady flow of drops falling through a pucker in the fabric becoming heavier and heavier was not. Already, a small puddle had formed underneath it.

"Can't you just open your pocket dimension under it or something?" Stark asked.

"No." It only worked with objects Loki was holding. "And even if I could, I would hardly want to soak everything that's stored there~" Loki’s voice died when he heard the distant roll of thunder. It seemed as if Alfheim was determined to plague him with reminders of Thor, first the camping and the hunting, and then there was this. There was nothing more Thor than this, nothing so impossible to ignore, nothing so loud and raw in power–

Lightning flashed from outside the walls of the tent.

Stark eyed Loki uneasily and held out a hand. “Might as well carry on with the magic game, right? It’s not as if there’s anything better we could be doing right now.”

It took Loki a moment to find his voice, he had been so lost in thought. “Very well,” he said. The wind had started picking up, he could feel it pushing at the walls of the tent. Loki wrapped his magic around Stark’s index finger. “Which finger?”

Stark lifted the correct finger. Loki offered him a berry as a reward. That was how the game worked. It was too mechanical and mindless to be a true distraction and by the time the wind was no longer gently pushing but shaking the tent walls and a small stream had started flowing somewhere underneath the floor, the game had trailed to a halt. There was another flash of lightning, brighter this time. The storm must have been getting closer.

“Gonna be in for a long night,” Stark sighed.
There was another roll of thunder and Loki failed not to think about his brother. Something in Loki's expression must have given him away because Stark said, voice soft and quiet, "I miss him too."

Loki's thoughts came to an abrupt halt. He recoiled at the thought of the thing that sounded far too close to pity for him to stand.

"You barely knew him." Loki's voice was cold, eerily detached even to his own ears.

"He was my teammate – when he came down to visit us, that is. And yeah, I only knew him a handful of years but—"

“A blink of an eye.”

“...To you guys, probably. I’m not gonna pretend we were besties or knew each other super super well or anything. Thor was one of those guys who’d class someone he’d just met as a new friend like a giant overexcited puppy—"

"Just stop!"

Stark closed his mouth.

Loki fought to keep his breathing even.

"Sorry," Stark said quietly.

Loki did not reply. He could not afford to. His voice might have cracked. He had been fine until Stark had started talking about Thor as if he wasn’t ever going to come back. When Loki started having to blink rapidly, he could no longer stand to be there. He muttered something about seeing to the ditches before climbing out, feeling the weight of Stark's gaze on his back.

It was a battle of the elements, the wind attacking his face and the rain making it impossible to tell whether any tears had escaped. Mud surrounded the tent and the ditches they had dug had overflown. Loki closed his eyes and felt the full force of the storm: the pounding rain, the static in the air, the thunder that echoed through his skull. He did not know how long he stood like that but he did know that he stopped it was because of hearing the unmistakable sound of something snapping.

Loki whipped around but there was no one there, only a broken pole sticking out of one side of the tent, the fabric collapsed around it.

Stark emerged a moment later and started fussing over the pole.

The fabric of Loki's clothing soaked him to the bone.

Another gust of wind blew and something in the fabric of the tent ripped. Stark stopped fussing shortly after that.

"Uh – don’t suppose you happen to have spare material in that handy pocket dimension of yours?" Stark asked, the sound of the rain plinking off his armour making the words almost inaudible. It was only with a sense of mild indifference that Loki realised Stark meant to avoid the weather.

“Everyone knows you’re not supposed to stand near trees during a storm. So uh… that doesn’t leave us many options apart from our dollar store tent over here.”

"There are rocks near the cliffs," Loki said. "We might be able to find shelter within them."
“Sure – there’s only the downside of risking turning ourselves into sitting conducting rods.”

Loki eyed Stark – the man in the metal suit – sceptically.

Stark caught his look. “Hey – I designed the suit and that means it’s actually designed well. It’d be pretty stupid to design a suit for flight without putting in measures against lightning. So I’m fine. I’m dry and if I get zapped it’ll just give the suit a nice boost. You on the other hand…”

“It would hardly be likely to put my life at risk.”

“Your call. So long as the lightning doesn’t hit the rock and decide you’re the best route to the ground, you’ll be fine. And if it does, you’ll still be fine. Fine with a side of singed.”

“It’s a risk I’ll take.”

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The shelter they found consisted of an opening in some crags perched over the top of the cliffside. It was a natural crevice, vaguely triangular and too dark to see the inside of.

They had scrambled their way to the entrance, the rock treacherous and slippery underneath their feet.

Loki entered it first, his eyes adjusting to the dark. The gap was barely wider than he was and he could not tell how far back it went. As Stark followed from behind, there was a loud crunch of something underneath his foot but it was too dark for either of them to tell what it was.

"Hey – we got company," Stark announced and there was the sound of something stirring further ahead.

Knives appeared in Loki’s hands and he crouched, ready to attack. Stark snorted.

"Loki, sir," Friday said, "you appear to be attacking a group of nesting birds."

Stark – Tony – unleashed a loud guffaw.

Loki relaxed his posture and threw a scowl at the man behind him. "You might have mentioned this earlier."

"I wasn't even trying to prank you. You're just on edge constantly. Ever heard the phrase 'knives at the ready?' Because that's you 24/7." It was said in more of an observational manner rather than an accusatory one, but Loki wasn't certain he liked the words all the same.

There was another rustle from the blackness and as one of Stark's hands moved it illuminated the floor they were stood on. Skeletons of fish were scattered over the rocky floor. Loki frowned at them. They were far too high up for them to have come in with the tide which meant that something must have brought them in for feeding on. But the only thing inside the crevice were birds, so what sort of–

Loki reached out to slowly grab Stark's arm and ease him backwards. They had been far too loud and far too conspicuous already. Any sudden loud noise or movement could–

Something rustled again – no, not just something – somethings – and there was a dreadful ear-piercing screech followed by the flapping of wings, multiple wings, and suddenly the birds were on them. They came out too fast to count them. Huge ones, young ones, all flying out all at once,
making it impossible to tell one direction from another. Loki slashed and one fell to the ground, dead. More slashes and more kept falling, but there were too many of them in such a small space. Stark's blasts only seemed to agitate the flock and they charged more frantically, in erratic directions like a swarm like bats cloaking their heads.

"Stark!" Loki managed to shout. "We must get out before–"

"Before what? This turns into a Hitchcock movie? Because – newsflash – that's already happened."

Loki fought his way closer towards the exit, bringing down another two of the birds with a single slash. "No – before they attack."

"You mean this isn't them attacking?"

Then Loki heard it, too far away for it to be over his own head: a dry hacking noise. He blindly threw a dagger in its direction as he stumbled another step. The noise hadn't stopped, instead it had progressed into more of a wet heaving and there was an unmistakable hiss and the smell, what was the smell? The putrid stench made him gag but there was something else mixed in along with too, something Loki was struggling to identify. What could possibly–

Stark's armour, Loki realised. He batted the creatures with his arms, barely bothering to waste time slashing anymore. There were too many of them. Loki just needed to be able to see.

There.

Loki darted to the side and pulled Stark with him to the opening, running, running, dragging the stumbling weight behind him.

"You have to get out of your armour," Loki said, speaking so rapidly that his words almost blended into one. "Before the acid burns through to–"

"Wha– Ow. Ow. Fuck. Fuck!"

"Get out of your armour!" Loki shouted and Stark finally acted. Loki spared a glance behind him as he continued steering them away. Some of the birds were hovering by the opening like wasps outside of a nest, but they were not perusing.

The metal was still hissing and steaming from a section where the acid had eaten through the shoulder.

"Ack!" Stark clutched a hand to his wound. The skin underneath was a bright red but his hand was covering the worst of it. "Fuck," Stark cursed when his skin made contact with the burn.

"Stark–"

Stark was past words. His eyes were squeezed shut and his breath came out in hisses. Healing was not Loki's area, otherwise he could have... What was he thinking? He didn't need to resort to magical means for healing. He just needed water.

***

They appeared in the lake in the woodland. In retrospect, with the water reaching his knees, Loki realised he should have been more specific about appearing to the spot by the lake rather than in the lake itself. Evidently, he had been acting on impulse and the Tesseract had interpreted his thoughts in more of a literal manner.
Stark plunged his shoulder underneath the water without any hesitation and his strings of curses interrupted only by hisses of pain began to quieten.

"Ow..."

"Let me see," Loki said, ignoring the unpleasant swell of the water around his legs.

Stark took his time straightening up, but he allowed Loki access, gently peeling the fabric out of the way. It was not as bad as Loki had feared. It had not gone through to the bone, as it would have done if not for the suit. A few layers of skin had been eaten away, more than a few in some areas, and some blotches were more purple than a shiny red. Was that exposed muscle? Loki didn’t know. Whatever it was, it would sting to be cleansed.

"It is not anything that won't heal," Loki said.

Stark gave the wound another dunking before asking, "What the fuck was that?"

Loki assumed Stark was not referring to his assessment. "That species of bird has a particularly nasty defence mechanism."

"What – like corrosive as fuck acid? See, to me that doesn't sound like a defence: that sounds like a weapon. I don't care if we stumbled into their nest. Those birds are feathered assholes. If you get a burglar sure, confront them, call the cops, whatever, but you just don’t throw up on them. I mean – look what they did to me."

"I just did. You should probably treat the wound with salt water when the currents are calm enough."

"Great. Another thing to thank those beaky little shits for," Stark muttered as he started wading his way to the land. Loki began to follow suit but then Stark stopped short.

"Uh – hi?"

The elf had been so still and so silent that Loki had not noticed it standing only several yards away. It had a willowy frame with hair so dark it blended into the night, and it regarded them with its head slightly tilted to one side. Loki acted quickly, adjusting the appearance of his and Stark's ears and hoping it was subtle enough that the elf would not notice. It pointed a finger at the hand Loki had held the Tesseract in.

"What was that?" Its voice gave it away as female.

Loki deliberated the advantages and disadvantages of answering her questions. If they disappeared, more elves may be alerted to their presence and they would have to relocate, but if they gave her a satisfactory answer, she may prove her usefulness with her knowledge of healing magics and herbs.

"An object of mine," Loki answered.

The elf narrowed her eyes. "It's more than that."

"A magical object of mine," Loki amended. He couldn't give away how powerful the Tesseract truly was, but there were certain things he could not feasibly hide – the fact that himself and Stark had suddenly appeared in the lake was one of them. "It hides us from sight when I command it."

"How unusual." Her face was hard to read. The lines in her skin might have made her face look kind if she had been smiling. "The water seems an odd choice of place to hide on a night like this."

"Let me see," Loki said, ignoring the unpleasant swell of the water around his legs.
"It was not by choice, I assure you," Loki said. "May we?" He gestured to the patch of land ahead. The change was subtle but Loki spotted it: the desire to know was behind her eyes. They may not have had her favour but they certainly had her curiosity.

"I will not prevent you," she answered and then frowned at Stark. "What happened to your shoulder?"

Loki intercepted. "My... companion and I ran into some trouble – or it would be more accurate to say that we were pushed into trouble. He received burns from some of the creatures nesting in the cliffs."

"It hurt," Stark added. Loki had to stop himself from giving him a nudge to remind him to be quiet.

"Then it seems you both have quite a story to tell. Come. It is safer deeper inside the forest where the trees have sworn to allow us no harm."

As she turned to lead the way, Stark's mouth fell open and then Loki did not stop himself elbowing him. He knew that look. It was the look he got whenever he found something ridiculous or implausible.

She smiled wryly at Stark. Damn, Loki had thought she missed it.

"You are not from these parts, are you child?"

"Been a while since anyone's called me young," Stark said. "I'm flattered."

She cast him an odd look. "What an unusual thing to be flattered by. I assume you have applied dovine leaf to the wound already?"

"Er..."

She turned to Loki. "Then you must not be from these parts either, to make such a basic error."

"We have travelled far," was all Loki said on the matter.

"Under normal circumstances," she said, "I would point you in the correct direction and let you go on your way. But given the level of incompetence I have witnessed so far and the risks the weather poses at the moment..." She let out a shrill ear-piercing whistle. At first nothing happened but then there was the sound of something coming and closer towards them until it emerged from between the trees: a stag, tall and magnificent – that was until it hobbled towards her, one leg having adopted a limp. "Given that you have travelled far and your companion is injured..." The elf unleashed another two whistles and another pair of the creatures emerged from the forest. A stag for each of them, Loki realised, but instead of standing next to them, the creatures were reluctant to leave the side of the elf, using her as some sort of shield.

"You'll have to forgive us," Loki said by way of explanation, "we are not used to such creatures in our homeland. I think they sense our... lack of familiarity."

The elf frowned. "I have never witnessed such a thing amongst our own kind before."

Loki forced a light laugh. "I have no wish to cause such distress to the creatures. We will elect to follow on foot instead."

"You’ll have no other option," she said, mounting one of the stags. It nuzzled at her as she did so
and allowed her to stroke its ears before she set a slow pace, keeping between Loki and Stark as she rode.

They travelled in silence at first, the only sound the sound of their steps falling on the woodland floor.

"Where are you from?" the elf asked abruptly. "I have not seen your faces before."

Loki had to think quickly. "The marshlands." That should suffice. It was a small region of Alfheim that would explain their lack of familiarity with woodland creatures and plant life.

"My," she said, "that is far."

Loki nodded. "It has been a long journey." He hoped his rather redundant reply would discourage her from asking further questions.

"Which route did you take?"

**Damn.**

It had been such a long time since he'd last travelled Alfheim, let alone studied it. But his memory was able to serve him well.


"Goodness." She hopped off the stag. Her movements were graceful even by elven standards for her age, neither elderly nor middle-aged but falling somewhere in between. "Come," she commanded, "I will show you where to find the leaves to treat your wounded friend." She didn't glance back to check whether they were following, making her way through a section of the forest too narrow for the stag to pass through and into a cranny formed by overhanging roots. She pointed to a deep blue flower growing above them. "These will be easiest for you to find. The sapphires that grow, they are known as. The flower itself is useless but the leaves are excellent for neutralising burns." She took a step backwards and gestured for them to inspect it closer.

"Do I just take off a leaf?" Stark asked.

"That is correct," she answered. Just as Stark's fingers touched the stem she spoke, her voice cracking like a whip. "Seize them."

Loki only had enough time to react to conjure his daggers against the unknown threat. They did him little good. Roots coiled around his arms and legs, yanking him close, the grip not allowing him to so much as move. Loki struggled, but each limb was held firm and the roots were too strong to break apart. Each one was thick, too sturdy to be cut or snapped, and the tree had ensnared one of his and Stark's legs together.

**Wonderful,** Loki thought dryly.

"Aw – come on!" Stark moaned. "What've we done this time?"

"You tell me," she said.

Loki thought it prudent to have his say. "I do hope you are not normally in the habit of trapping those who have done nothing to cause you offence."

Her eyes narrowed.
"You lied," she accused. Loki opened his mouth to deny it, to fashion another lie, to persuade her to change her mind, but she did not let him speak. "More than once. The Gogarn River has been too dry to travel on for decades," she said. Loki blinked at her. "And that cube you held does more than hide you. I can feel the magic on you, even now."


She scoffed. "Honest, you say? Why, even the skin you wear is a lie. That's what the cube does, doesn't it? It does more than merely hide you – it disguises you as whatever form you wish it to." Wrong. So wrong. But if she believed the Tesseract to be some sort of artefact of illusionary magic then Loki was not going to correct her. "You are not of Alfheim," she said. "Neither of you are. The stags would not have responded as they did if you were both fully elven. I don't know what your purpose here is or what you intend to--"

"Our intention," Loki said, "has been what it has been for a long time: to prepare."

"Prepare?" She put on a show of listening with rapt attention, and for a brief moment Loki saw a reflection of his mocking self in her features. "Pray do tell."

"There is a foe who approaches. He will slaughter the whole of the Nine Realms if he sees it as worthy enough of the effort."

"From what I have witnessed, the only foe on Alfheim has been the pair of you."

"But we haven't actually done anything." Loki hated how the sentence made him sound, like a petulant child.

"So you are not responsible for injuring my companion, is that what you are claiming?" The stag. Loki realised with a sinking feeling. "You are not responsible for putting in danger all the animals of the forest who may have fallen prey to your traps? Do you know how many years it has been since the creatures we share our lands with have been hunted? Did you truly believe anyone could disrupt the peace like that without us noticing?"

Loki closed his eyes shut in exasperation but before he could attempt to remedy the situation, Stark broke in.

"We might have fucked up a bit there," Stark said. Loki would have pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration if he had been able to. "But that doesn't mean we don't have good intentions. If you class us an enemy because of hunting in your nature reserve, then we've got nothing on what’s coming."

"Is that a threat?" she asked, her voice dropping in pitches. She directed her gaze behind them. "If you don’t mind," she said to something behind them, her voice suddenly warm and polite. The roots tightened.

"Whoa – easy there Zelda, we haven't even established a safe word yet."

Loki and the elf both ignored the comment. Loki forced himself to sound if not cordial, then at least civil. "As I am sure you are able to understand, the truth in this instance is far less easy to accept than a lie."

She smiled but it was barely a smile; it was more of a flashing of the teeth. "Is that a subtle attempt at flattery? Much to your inconvenience, I am sure that I do not believe a single word that passes through those tainted lips of yours."
"Then I believe we are both wasting our time," Loki said. His limbs were bound but there was nothing to stop him summoning the Tesseract to hand.

She eyed it scornfully. "There's little point in hiding when I am already aware of exactly where you are."

"How about it, Stark?" Loki asked.

"How many times? It's Tony."

"Tony then. I grow weary of this place."

"Yeah, I'm not feeling in the mood to be tied up anymore. It's kind of lost its edge."

Loki lowered his voice. "If we returned to Midgard, would you—"

"Yes. Let's do it. Need a quick stop to pick up my suit again on the way though."

"Very well."

The elf was a combination of bewildered and panicked and she rushed forward, lunging for the Tesseract.

"Farewell," Loki called.

"Don't give us a call."

And then because Loki couldn't help himself, he added, "I do hope you enjoy this next trick."
It was the first time that teleporting did not cause either of them the slightest bit of discomfort.

The top of Stark Tower allowed a view of the majority of the city. No Chitauri. No signs of Thanos.

A number of the buildings were in a state of being rebuilt and the inhabitants of the city were still bustling around as if their species hadn't faced a threat that could have reduced them to extinction only recently. Loki possessed a grudging respect for that resilience. If the people of Midgard had, for the most part, managed to survive Thanos then maybe it would not be impossible for the people of Asgard too. Except that would require a surrender, a concept Asgard was not familiar with unless it involved others surrendering to them.

Stark remained stood, stiff and tense, his eyes unfocused and a slight tremor in his hands.

“Welcome home, Boss,” Friday’s voice emitted from somewhere within the walls. Stark did not appear to register it. “You appear to have an alien fugitive with you.”

“He’s… He’s not a problem. Take it you’re still syncing up with the suit then.”

“Synchronisation is 44% complete. And consider my lips to be sealed on the matter of the fugitive,” Friday said. Loki wondered how a programmed mind could have such a strong grasp of irony. “There are 104 messages waiting for you. Would you like me to contact Miss Potts to tell her you have returned?”

“Pepper?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Pepper’s still alive...” Tony breathed.

“Yes – she has been leaving increasingly concerned and frustrated messages for you.”

Stark – Tony – smiled softly. “Put her out of her misery then.”

“Is there anything else I can do?”

“Not yet.” With a grimace, Tony made his way towards the window to gaze out at the city. “It's here.” His voice was stunned. He rested his forehead against the window and gave a delighted laugh. “It's all still here!”

Loki wished he could share his joy. The relief of not facing an imminent attack upon the moment they arrived should have been enough for him, but his thoughts were for the realm he'd called home.

"Look at them all!" Stark exclaimed, positively giddy and pointing at the people of Midgard scurrying around in the streets below them.

Loki tried not to think about what this would mean for Asgard, about how Thanos must have been eager to be done with Midgard as quickly as possible.

"I kinda thought there might be a huge crater where New York used to be. Or that we'd come back and it'd be a giant ghost town," Stark said. "But it just looks so… normal. Look – look at that guy,
right there. Just delivering some donuts. And that lost tourist on the sidewalk. And the cab parked exactly where it shouldn’t be. I never thought I’d miss all that.” He turned to Loki. “So anyway – welcome back to New York. Here’s to hoping your stay will be better than the last one.” His smile fell a fraction. "Hey – what’s with the long face?"

Loki shifted his expression back to one of neutrality with as much haste as he could.

“Seriously,” Tony said, “we got away. We've got no Chitauri on our backs and—” he broke off. “Actually – about that. What happened to the rest of your little team of buggy aliens anyway?”

“I… My position of their battle commander is no longer in place.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You got mutinied? You got a demotion?”

Loki was spared having to answer by a door opening and a red-headed woman approaching them with alarming speed.

“Pep!”

"Tony! Where the hell have you been? I thought you were gone!"

Stark wrapped his arms around her, eyes squeezing shut. "So did I."

"I came as soon as Friday said you were back. What’s been going on? Why couldn’t Friday locate you? Are you safe? Why haven’t you been answering my calls? Why didn’t you let anyone know where you were? I didn’t know whether to be angry or worried.” It was only as they released each other that the woman noticed Loki's presence. "I didn't realise you had company, Tony." She turned to Loki. "Tm..." Her voice trailed off as she assessed Loki. "I'm sorry, have we met? You look familiar. Are you a new member of the team?"

"He made the headlines a few years back," Tony said, which Loki supposed was technically true, "and he’s not exactly a new team member. We’ve uh... We’ve got a sort of partnership thing going on."

She masked her shock with surprising professionalism, holding out her hand as an offering. "Pepper Potts."

"Loki," Loki said, allowing her to shake his hand. He still felt the silence in the air that should have been filled with the rest of his title.

She dropped his hand. "Wait. That Loki? The one that—"

"Yeah, he's that Loki," Stark butted in before Loki could answer for himself. "But we're on the same side now so it's all good."

She was quicker than most to compose her features. "If you'll excuse me," she said, addressing Loki, "I need to borrow Tony. Now." She pulled at Stark’s elbow and steered him into an adjacent room.

And that was how Loki found himself awkwardly perched on the edge of a settee with little else to do with himself but wait. He had nowhere else to go. Nothing to occupy himself with except for speculating on what might have been being said. Occasionally, her voice would rise and he heard something about trust and fear come through the walls, no doubt that the topic of conversation had turned to himself and their alliance. Their alliance had seemed far more intact before outsiders had started questioning it. Half of him wished Stark's answer had been loud enough to hear, the other
half was glad it was inaudible.

Loki fidgeted with his hands as he waited. Their voices had grown quieter, calmer.

There was a click of a door opening.

“Please don’t put me through that ever again,” Loki heard her say.

“Not if I can help it.”

There was the sound of their footsteps getting louder behind him. Loki rearranged his features to look as nonchalant as possible.

"Don't get me wrong, Tony," she said, "I'm happy you're okay. I just worry about you, that's all."

"Not your job anymore," Stark teased.

"Don't be stupid. Whether I worry about you doesn't depend on what my job is or our relationship status."

Stark sounded sheepish when he spoke next. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"You are a ridiculous ridiculous man," she said, heading towards the door that led to the exit. "As for you," she said with a sharper edge, pointing at Loki, "if you ever decide to drag Tony off-planet again, you call me first." Loki blinked at her. "And if Tony gets so much as a single scratch because of you--"

"That would hardly be in my best interests now, would it?" Loki replied with a forced roll of the eyes. He did not possess the energy to discuss the futility of her threat or point out that Stark had already received a wound because Loki had not been quick enough to stop it happening.

"Come on, Pep. I'm a big boy who’s managed to survive so far, remember?"

"I know. It's the future of your survival that worries me," she said. “Talk to me. Or somebody else – anybody. I know you’re not fully ready yet but when you are…” She gave Stark a final embrace before she departed.

It was quiet when she left.

"I didn't know if I'd ever see her again," Tony said quietly.

"How fortunate it is for you that fate acts in your favour." Loki did not do a good job of disguising the bitterness in his voice. Thanos had come and Stark still had his home, he still had a friend who cared deeply for him, he still had most of his people alive. Loki didn’t have the heart to wish to deny him any of it but the roots of envy had already taken hold. Pathetic, he thought. Envious of a mortal.

“Fate?” Stark snorted. "Even if such a thing exists – which I'm pretty sure it doesn't – then yeah, this time fate was in my favour. Makes a nice change."

Darkness coloured Loki's voice. "You think yourself a victim of fate?"

"No – I just told you I don't think fate even exists. But shitty things happen to everyone, myself particularly included." Stark took one look at Loki's expression and said, "I'm not getting into a trauma competition with you. By the sounds of it, you didn't always used to be so... supervillainy. I have it good authority you used to be a nice-ish guy. I used to think you were just Thor's" – Loki
flinched at the name – "blind-spot, but you seem to have dropped the whole supervillain act."

"Act?" Loki repeated.

"The guy I met five years ago and the guy sat in front of me aren't the same person. No one changes that much in such a short period of time which means you must’ve been performing, either now or back then. I’m betting it was back then when you put on one hell of a show trying to crown yourself king of the planet. Don't get your feathers in a ruffle, I'm not accusing you of being a good guy, I'm just observing out loud that while you're not exactly evil, you're still kind of... morally dubious."

"Well thank goodness for that. I could hardly continue with this partnership if I lived in fear of you misinterpreting my cooperation for good-will."

Stark laughed and in that moment he looked much more like a Tony. His face quickly sobered. "On a serious note, Pepper said something weird."

“Oh?"

“Yeah. Hang on – I’ll tell you on the way. You haven’t had a tour of this place yet, have you? We’ll have to figure out which rooms you’ll be staying in – luxury mattresses, you’ll love them – and you’ll need to know where the kitchens and bathrooms and all the facilities are. I had a massive clear out a couple months back because I was planning on selling the tower but I uh... I got preoccupied.”

Loki rose from his seat to follow. “And what did your fellow Avengers have to say about that?”

Stark’s face flickered. “They don’t know.” He scratched behind an ear. “We kind of– We kind of broke up.”

“Ah,” Loki said.

Stark straightened himself. “Yeah, but enough about that. Come on, I’ll show you around. And then the first thing I’m gonna do after that is have a decent shave, take a shower, order a takeout and...” He trailed off. “I guess I can’t put off finding out who’s still standing any longer after that.”

“Stark,” Loki began. Stark shot him a look. “Tony,” Loki corrected himself. “I have been thinking about this dilemma of yours and I have an offer to make you.” Tony looked sceptical. “What you need is somebody to access whether you are capable of still functioning with this knowledge, yes?”

Loki asked. Stark remained stoic. “I believe I could find out on your behalf. You could consider it a favour. For your hospitality.”

"And how'd that help?" Stark’s voice lacked its usual friendliness.

“Boss?” Friday’s voice sounded from the walls.

"Not now, Friday. Mute.” Stark turned to face him, waiting for an answer. “Well?”

"If I deem you capable of handling the truth, I shall inform you of it. And if not..."

“And if not – then what? You make up something? That’d just mean that either way, I’d still be wondering if you were lying or not. That doesn’t solve the problem. If I’d wanted that, I could just ask Friday to do it for me.” Stark shook his head. “No. I‘m not gonna do that. I owe it to these people. They were my teammates. They had my back.” Tony touched his elbow, a subconscious movement. “Some more than others.” He dropped his gaze. “Some might have chosen to stab me
in the back instead of watching it but I still just can’t… not know.”

_Sentiment_, Loki thought. It could get in the way of everything.

Loki gave a quiet nod. “On with the tour then?”

“Yes!” Stark reached for the door handle but before he could grasp it, it opened from the other side, revealing a man standing behind the other side of the door.

"Rhodey!” Tony exclaimed. He rushed forward to wrap his arms around the man an instant later. The man – Rhodey, Stark had named him – looked baffled. "How are the legs doing you?” Stark released him to take a look.

It was at that moment Loki noticed what the man appeared to be wearing. The resemblance to Stark’s armour was indisputable, but where Stark’s armour covered his whole body, this armour only covered the lower half. More peculiarly, it appeared to lack the features for the armour to be weaponised which begged the question of why–

It was only when Rhodey began to walk further into the room with a stiff unnatural gait that Loki realised that the armour’s purpose was not to be armour at all.

"They were doing great up until they needed a minor upgrade and couldn't find my favourite mechanic. Um, Tony – not that I’m not touched that apparently you’ve missed me – but where the hell have you been? I thought we were over you going awol–" The man noticed Loki's presence and broke off. Loki and Rhodey stared at each other. "Uh – Tony? You don’t seem to be anywhere near as alarmed as you should be to have this guy in the same room as you. You didn’t tell me this was a code red. I’d have suited up properly if this was a code red.”

Stark placed his hands on the man’s shoulders. "Relax. Long story short, he kidnapped me but it was kind of essential and for the greater good etcetera. We're uh... working on a project."

"A project,” Rhodey said flatly, eyes narrowed and not leaving Loki.

“Trust me,” Tony said, “I wouldn’t have brought him back here if he was still a threat.”

“No,” the man said, “you wouldn’t have brought him back here if you _thought_ he was still a threat.”

Stark shrugged. “Same thing. Can we lighten up a second? One: I’ve just got back, and two: you and Pepper are still alive.”

Rhodey frowned. "Of course we’re still alive.” He eyed Loki again. “You sure he's not a threat?”

"I assure you, I bear no ill-intent towards your realm or its people,” Loki said. He lowered his head and grinned, revealing his teeth. "Currently speaking, that is.”

Rhodey stepped between him and Stark, presumably with the intention of forming some sort of human barrier that failed to encourage Stark to move further away from Loki. "Yeah, that's not reassuring. Tony? Can you fill me in a bit? Why’s the guy who led an alien invasion in New York in here like you just invited him over for movie night? And why the hell did you think me and Pepper might be in danger? Can you explain that one while you're at it?"

"I didn't hear anything from you or see anything during..." Tony trailed off and waited for his friend to fill in the rest of his sentence but his friend only remained utterly perplexed. "You know, during the battle."
"The battle? What battle?"

"The battle."

"Tony, I still don't--"

"All of us versus the big purple guy. Thanos. I blacked out early on and this guy" – he jerked a thumb at Loki – "intervened but we still lost. That's why I didn't know what happened to you."

Rhodey shook his head. "Tony, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"The Chitauri invasion point two. Come on – the guy who made even Thor nervous. The guy Thor warned us about and then every powered personnel in the whole fucking state and then some had to club together to fight in the space of a few hours. The guy who made me agree to be on the same side as Rogers for fuck's sake!"

"Tony..." Rhodey spoke slowly and quietly. "That never happened. This guy... Thanos? He never invaded, there was no war, you didn't lose anything. I don't know what you think happened but nobody's dead, we're all still alive. No one lost anyone."

Tony froze and Loki froze too.

"But--" Tony uttered.

"You've been compromised," Rhodey informed Stark. "Friday – Tony's in danger. Send Veronica over here now."

Loki found his voice. "What did you say?"

"Tony – you have to trust me." The man shook Stark by the shoulders when he didn’t respond. "We have to get out of here."

"What did you say?" There were leaks of a terrible desperateness in the cracks of Loki’s words. "Tell me what you just said."

"Look," the man pulled Stark further back, Stark stumbling over his feet, "I don't know what you've done to Tony but you can drop the act. You've been found out. Come one step closer and I will unleash the force of a hundred missiles right at you. Probably won't be enough to kill you, but it'll hurt for sure."

"He said it never happened..." Stark murmured, eyes distant and uncomprehending.

"Tony– Tony–" Rhodey spoke. "You have to listen to me. He's– I don't know, he's tricked you somehow, he got you real good. You have to believe me when I tell you everyone's still alive. You never lost to Thanos... This guy right here? He's the guy you lost to. I've got to get you out of here, we've got to--"

"They're alive?" Stark's voice was small. "All of them?"

"All of them – Vision, Bruce, your Spider Kid, Tasha, even Wanda and Clint and--"

"What of Thor?" The words escaped Loki’s mouth before he could process them.

"I told you to drop the act! Come any closer and I swear I'll--"

Knives appeared in Loki’s fists.
“I said,” Loki repeated, low and dangerous, “what of Thor?”

“Whoa there!” Stark was suddenly in between them, holding them apart with his hands. “Loki – don’t pull those on Rhodes, just–”

There was an almighty crash from the window and before Loki could fully comprehend what had caused it, he was surrounded by a metal casing that assembled itself around him and encased him in a small prison of its own making.

“You think a wall’s gonna stop him?” Loki heard Stark ask.

“No. But it’ll give us so time to get out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Loki appeared in a flash outside the walls again.

“Oh – hey, Lokes,” Stark called. His ploy for attention did not succeed.

“Thor,” Loki rasped, advancing on the man who would not give him the answer he needed.

Stark moved to stand in his way.

“Don’t touch my Rhodey,” Stark said, then turned his head. “And Rhodey – it’s not worth it trying to contain Loki. That attempt was actually kind of embarrassing.”

“That’s it,” Rhodey said, “I’m officially out of my depth. I’m calling for backup.”

“No you’re not,” Stark said. “Just hear me out. Come on – it’s like you don’t even trust me a little bit.”

Rhodey’s eyes were on Loki. “It’s not you I don’t trust, Tony.”

Loki made his move, shifting Stark out of the way with a single hand and stalking forward.

Rhodey took a step backwards. “Uhh – Tony? I’m kind of unarmed here…”

Something touched Loki’s back.

“Hold it, Reindeer Games. We’re gonna figure this out, okay? And we can’t do that if you try turning Rhodey here into a voodoo doll. Also, I’d have to stop you turning Rhodey into a voodoo doll. I happen to like having him around.”

Loki came to a still. “Thor,” was all he said.

“Well?” Tony asked. “How about Thor, Rhodes?”

“I… Alright, I’ll tell you what I know,” the man said. “If we know for sure you’re not being duped.”

Loki raised his knives again. Something – no, someone – grabbed his wrists.

“Loki – look at me.” It was Stark. “This isn’t something you can solve with knives.”

Loki shook Stark off him.

“Hell,” Stark said. “I never thought I’d say this but can we actually sit down and talk about this
Rhodey’s eyes flickered between the two of them. “This is the only leverage I have against him, Tony. I have information he wants to know.” He spoke as if Loki was no longer in the room with them. “If you can prove Loki’s not going to do something like Obadiah did or worse then fine, I’ll tell him what he wants to know.”

“Loki isn’t lying,” Tony said.

“He’s the God of Lies, Tony.”

“You didn’t see his face when…” Tony broke off. “I don’t think he could’ve faked that. My gut says there’s no way in hell he’s faking this, you weren’t there when–”

"Your gut instinct? That's the reason he's still here and not locked away some place secure? Have you forgotten who he is? What he's done?"

"Of course I haven't! Don't you think I had the same suspicions as you? That I asked myself the same questions you're asking?" Tony took a deep breath. “I'm not saying it's impossible that he lied, okay?” Tony admitted and Loki was surprised when the words stung. It was stupid, idiotic. He should have been used to this by now. "I just think we should find the answers ourselves."

"I'm all ears."

"Good,” Tony said, “because I've got an idea."

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Loki didn't speak. Stark's doubt was more troubling than it should have been and yet a small voice in his mind whispered that he'd earned it after all. It shouldn't have felt like a betrayal. They were allies, not friends, temporarily cooperating to achieve a mutually beneficial goal. Trust had nothing to do with it – necessity did. It sickened him that somewhere along the way he must have started seeing Stark as some sort of companion, like some sort of rogue pet he’d started craving approval from. The prospect of facing Thanos must have made him so utterly desperate for some semblance of company that he must have latched on to the idea that anything was better than having to do it alone and–

"Loki? I’ve got something I want to run past you.”

Loki's lip curled.

"What?" After everything that Loki had done, what could Stark possibly want from him? Loki had been expecting a fight; no doubt that it would be the two of them against him if it came to blows – but he couldn’t risk damaging Stark and the other man was too aware that Loki needed him alive because of the information he possessed – and so they were left in an odd stalemate.

"BARF.” Stark held up some sort of device in his hands. "Or an early prototype version of it anyway, before all the memory mod stuff started getting involved. Stands for Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing. If you agree, we'll be able to verify you're not lying about your memory of what happened."

“Tony – do you think there’s any chance he’d be able to fake the memories somehow with his magic or something? I mean, BARF isn’t infallible, right?”
"Actually," Tony said, "he can't. Not deliberately anyway. The interface connects to the neurons inside the hippocampus. What he remembers is what we’d see. And he can't actually modify the physical properties of what we see with his magic, that’s not how it works. He can disguise it or add layers over the top of it but if he did I’d be able to feel it so..."

For a moment, Loki struggled to breathe. "You--" he managed to say out loud. "You want to see my memories. You're-- You're asking my permission to access my mind."

"Wouldn't do it if I didn't have to."

Loki swallowed back against the wave of horror.

"Look," Tony pacified, "you don't have to fully relive the memory if you don't want. All that happens is you wear these," he said, holding up a pair of glasses, "and it'll scan your brain. It's non-invasive, non-permanent, totally safe. You’d be asked a few prompt questions about the memory and it'll be able to bring the scene out for us to watch."

To watch?

Loki shook his head. "I can't let you do that. I can't do that. I won't do that."

Tony's eyes were pleading. "We can only see the memories you think of in detail. We can't force any information out of you with it, I specifically designed it so it could never be used like that if it fell into the wrong hands."

Loki's lips were a bitter twist. "All I have is your word. That's... not enough."

"And all I have is your word that you didn't fake the entire thing. Stalemate. This is how we get out of it."

"By having me blindly trust you not to intrude upon the rest of my mind?"

"Hey – I've been blindly trusting you not to kill me for how long? I tagged along with you on your fucked-up planet-hopping adventures through space and went along with your plans even though the entire time I didn't know whether everyone I ever cared about was alive or not. And not a single fucking time did I ask you to do me a favour. Let's face it – if you were in my position, you wouldn't be nicely asking me to wear this, would you?"

Loki did not reply. Could not reply.

"If I proved to you that BARF is 100% safe, would you think about it at least?"

Loki’s mouth was dry, his thoughts racing. The concept of his memories being brought to life like some sort of play for all to watch made his skin crawl. But he had to know. If what Stark’s mortal friend had said was true, if all of Stark’s allies and former teammates alike were still somehow alive then maybe...  

It didn’t make any sense. None of it made any sense. He'd watched it happen, he was there when it happened, he couldn't unsee what he had witnessed.

But if there may have been hope for Thor without even having to intervene with the gems...

Loki found himself having reached a conclusion.

“Fine,” he said. “I shall consider it.”
Chapter 22

The device was deceptively mundane, appearing as nothing more than a Midgardian accessory worn over the eyes. The only signs it was more than that was a strange soft-edged prong that sat behind one of the ear hooks and the electronic light on one of the arms. The light responded to touch, Loki noticed, but he failed to find anything nefarious about the things in themselves; their primary function appeared to be indicating whether the device was on or off.

“The override off switch is back there too, by the way. Or it stops if, you know, you just take the glasses off,” Stark explained, holding out a hand for the glasses once Loki had finished examining them.

Tony had presented the demonstration as a game; he would wear the device and it would be Loki’s objective to try everything within his power to pry out any memories or information that he would otherwise would not be willing to give.

“Alright, it’s on. Do your worst, Loki.”

Loki opted for a verbal attack, beginning by testing the waters with more basic prompts and seeing what memories, if any, they conjured.

“Alfheim,” Loki said. And then more specifically, “The birds attacking.” The room remained unchanged, no memories appearing to light. It appeared that the cues of a location and an event had done nothing. Loki tried again, probing deeper into something he knew Stark would be far more reluctant for him to see. "The moment your fellow Avengers turned on you," Loki said. Stark gave him a certain dubious look that caused Loki to shrug. "I must admit, I am curious how that came about."

"Yeah, you don’t get to see that one. None of your business. What else you got?"

"Very well," Loki responded. Then he tried a more abstract suggestion. “Think of the thing you absolutely do not want me to know, the secret that you hold most dear...” Tony smirked when nothing happened. "Something you haven't told a single other living soul, the thing you mustn't think of under absolutely any circumstances, the thing it is imperative that no one else discovers."

This time, Rhodey spoke up. "Are you done yet?"

Loki shook his head irately.

"Do you recall how we met the second time?” Loki asked Stark. “You resurfaced consciousness upon Jotunheim and wasted no time demanding that I send you back to meet your death just so that you could die in the name of defending your realm and with your team. You repaid me saving your life by throwing me off a mountaintop. But before I made impact with the ground you reached for me and prevented it even though you must have suspected I would have survived without aid."

"I'm nice like that on occasion," Tony said, "although maybe I'm beginning to regret catching you."

But words alone still hadn't been enough to trigger the memory being brought to life. Loki held out his hands and the scene played out over his palms like a pantomime act of Tony pushing Loki and him falling and being caught, his theory being that perhaps a visual cue might be able to trigger a memory.

"And what was the first thing you said to me afterwards?"
"Probably something about being even," Stark replied.

Loki tried spreading the illusion to the scale of the room, telling the story of the memory increasingly more and more vivid forms, even trying to see if there was a difference depending on how distracted Tony was, but there were no changes. Loki had been thorough, very thorough, until eventually he was as satisfied as was capable of that words alone would not be able to wrench memories from his mind and bring them out into the open. The only thing Loki hadn’t checked was that the device would not delve into his mind as it pleased once he had given his permission for it to read one memory.

“I wish to see what happens once the device has projected one of your memories,” Loki announced.

"Alright then," Tony said amiably, "since you like being the star of the show so much..." He pressed another button on the rim of the glasses and Loki waited.

Loki had expected the entirety of room to change to fit the memory but instead it was the exterior view of the city that did, the sky filling with flying Chitaurian ships and the streets below in chaos. The scene was familiar and yet unfamiliar at the same time. Loki knew it well – he had, after all, been standing on the other side of the penthouse at the time – but this memory was from Tony’s perspective. The room looked slightly larger through Tony’s eyes, the details less crisp, and his eyes had a tendency to wander until they finally settled on something behind Loki. That something was Loki – a different Loki. Had he really looked like that? His face was gaunt and hollow, all sharp lines and pale skin stretched tightly over bone, his eyes ladened by shadows. The smile was predatory, mocking, and when he walked it was more like he was stalking forwards rather than stepping. He carried the sceptre in one hand and moved his body with a distinct almost feline quality.

“Please tell me you’re going to appeal to my humanity,” the Loki of Tony’s memory said.

“Uh – actually I’m planning to threaten you.”

“Bold move, past me,” Tony said, his voice unexpectedly close, making Loki jump.

"A strategically questionable move," Loki corrected.

"My suit was shot," Tony admitted with a shrug. "Thought I might as well put up an air of bravado."

"As I recall, it came close to costing you your life."

"Shh. I like this part." Tony grinned, watching himself offer the alien version of Loki a drink.

The sight of himself had been so jarring that Loki had almost forgotten the purpose of visiting the memory.

“Tony,” Rhodey spoke from behind them, “why I am horrified yet not surprised?”

“Probably because you know me,” Tony replied.

Loki decided he had wasted enough time. Watching himself had become something alarmingly akin to morbid fascination. Loki tried testing the device again – he refused to call it BARF – using both verbal and visual cues in the context of a living memory this time. He prompted Stark to recall memories he did not wish to share, tested creating his own illusions within the illusion of Tony’s memory, and even tried implanting slight alterations to the memory by subtle suggestion, but the technology granted him nothing more than what Stark permitted.
"Here we go," Tony said, "the exact moment your plan went to shit."

"I would argue that my confrontation with the one you call the Hulk was."

“Well, if we’re trying to pinpoint an exact moment, I’d say it was when you decided to invade Earth in the first place. Your plan was shitty. Who starts with the capital?"

Loki licked his lips, his mouth having gone slightly dry. “Someone who wishes for a fast result.”

“You got that alright.”

Loki watched himself seize Stark by the throat. He had come so close to ending his life. If he had decided to break his neck instead of throwing the man through the glass to fall to his doom then things would be… Things would be very different.

The smashing of the glass was loud, even in Tony’s memory, and the ground was rushing up to meet him, colours flying past and the speed of the air causing his vision to blur.

“Jesus, Tony,” Rhodey said when Stark narrowly avoided colliding with the pavement, “what percentage of the reasons you’re alive just come down to flukes?”

“Anyone ever told you that life happening has just been a long series of flukes?”

“Pretty sure you did that one time you turned into a philosophical drunk.”

“Doesn’t sound like me. I don’t remember that.”

“You wouldn’t,” Rhodey replied with a certain dryness.

“Anyway – I’m gonna have to cut this memory short before it starts getting into unpleasant nuke territory.” Tony pressed the button at the side of the glasses and the illusion of the memory vanished.

It had been odd to witness a form of illusion that wasn’t caused by his own hand, Loki realised, although it did not touch the level of surrealness that seeing his previous self from another person’s eyes had.

“So,” Tony said, “what do you think?”

Loki blinked at him. “What do I think?”

“Yeah. Of that nice little BARF demonstration I just gave you.”

“I would say that it makes me question why you would design such a thing.”

“Oh. It’s supposed to be a therapy-healing thing, not a dystopian government thing. At least it might be a therapy thing when I can 100% guarantee there’s no way the tech could be misused if it got into the wrong hands. That’s why there are so many fail-safes, with the thought consent and the manual off switch and it measures anxiety levels to make sure no one’s being forced into it and–”

“Therapy-healing?” Loki repeated.

“Yeah. This is just the version that reads memories.” Tony grinned. “In the later versions you get to mod them. And I don’t mean you rewrite them, I mean you get to decide what happens and remember both versions.”
Loki was stunned. “And that helps?”

“A bit.” Tony scratched that hair around his jaw. “So what do you think? BARF or no BARF?”

Loki had been unable to provide substantial evidence that the technology could be used nefariously but he still far from willing. He had other options. He could have fought them. He could have torn past Tony and held a blade to the other human’s throat and demand to know the whereabouts of his brother but something held him back. Maybe it was because he wouldn’t have liked the answer if he knew, maybe it was something to do with being reluctant to be on the receiving end of Tony’s repulsors, or maybe it was that Loki needed to see the memory in case his mind had been tampered with any further than he was already aware of.

That would be the price of knowing whether or not his brother was still alive. It was a heavy price to pay and it came to Loki as a shock to realise that in some respects, he might have been better off believing Thor to be dead. At least when he believed Thor to be dead, he wouldn’t have bothered taking the risk.

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Loki fought the urge to tear the device from his head, the feel of the arm of the glasses behind his ears prickling his hair like some sort of spider. He concentrated on the sound of his breathing, trying but failing to maintain a controlled even rhythm despite the rising dread in the pit of his stomach.

Loki forced another reminder that no memory could be accessed without his permission. Tony’s only interest was seeing whether Thanos’s attack upon Midgard was a lie; he had no reason to delve any deeper, and besides, if he was that interested, he had enough of a lack of tact to be forward in asking about it. No. The only thing that could possibly cause this to fail was Loki’s own mind. What if he accidentally let another memory slip? What if Stark and his friend got a glimpse of the void and what happened after? What if the technology failed to turn itself off? What if it worked differently because Loki was a god and Tony was only a mortal?

*Mental discipline,* Loki reminded himself. He had taken pride in his ability to discipline his mind at one time.

He’d done everything in his power to check that nothing besides permission could conjure the memories. Stalling wouldn’t help him.

“Alright, turn it on when you’re ready,” Tony said.

Loki hesitated. Then his fingers reached upwards and he tapped the appropriate button. He’d expected to feel something in his mind, some sort of obtrusive force, but he felt nothing. No threads of magic, no invasion, no physical sensation. The device was designed alarmingly well if even he could not feel its invisible claws reaching into his mind.

Loki waited, hiding his fingers in his fists.

“Uh – you’ll need to give it proper permission before anything will happen,” Tony said.

Loki nodded, his jaw tense, ignoring Rhodey’s stare. If it had been up to Loki, the stranger would have been too far away to witness this.

*The day of Thanos’s attack on Midgard,* Loki thought. His stomach churned with nervousness. Why wasn’t anything happening? Loki had to know, he needed to know, if someone had addled with his mind or if Thor–
Ah, he realised, *I give my permission to access*–

There was a bright blue flash, the flash of the Tesseract in his memory, and suddenly instead of being inside Stark’s tower, they were looking at a view of the city. The flash faded into the confusion of the battle, the Chitauri and the humans fighting so compactly it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. The viewpoint was jarring; Loki’s eyes had been darting across the scene both to avoid conflict and to seek out Stark before Thanos would be the end of him.

Debris and bodies were barely granted notice as he had picked his way over them and woven around the Chitauri soldiers. In his memory, the Chitauri were creatures barely worthy of attention – their advantage in battle was in numbers rather than skill and engaging with them would have only slowed him down. He was moving faster now, anything red or gold catching his attention in the race against time to find Stark. Loki grew closer to the centre of the battle and only then did he locate Stark, lying broken on the ground. And along with Stark was Thanos.

Loki – the real Loki, not just the memory Loki – blanched.

"Alright," somebody said in the background, "definitive proof."

Loki waited for the memory to fade but he was trapped in horror as he watched Thanos, the gems glinting off his golden gauntlet. Any minute now, Thor would be making his appearance.

"Loki," someone said, their voice sounding far away, from another world. "It's okay – we believe you. You can stop it now, you don't have to watch this again."

But Loki did, his stomach twisting further and further into knots as he anticipated his brother’s arrival until–

The memory was gone.

“The fail-safe,” someone murmured. A hand settled around Loki’s shoulders to steer him forward. The touch had not been obtrusive. It wasn’t until Loki was sitting on the settee again that he realised whose hand it had been.

Loki ignored Tony next to him, his stare directed at Rhodey.

"Thor?" Loki rasped.

Rhodey’s eyes were far too sympathetic for Loki’s liking.

"Sorry," Rhodey said. "You know why we had to check, right?"

"We had a bargain." Loki reminded him, the beginnings of anger seeping into his voice. "Tell me."

Rhodey lowered his eyes. "Alright. As far as I know, Thor’s still alive. Last I heard, he’d just headed back to Asgard after staying with Jane."

And just like that, Loki’s stomach dropped.

Asgard. Thor was home. Wasn’t he?

But what about Thanos? Where had he gone? Was Asgard his next destination. Why–

"Hey," Tony said, nudging his shoulder, "hey, look at me. We’re gonna figure this out."

The Norns would have to be cruel, even by their own standards, to put such hope in Loki’s path,
like tempting a dog with the smell of meat only to snatch it away.

"Rhod?" Tony was still speaking. "Can you..."

"Uh... Sure."

Loki barely registered the sound of the door shutting as the man left.

"Why?" Loki’s voice cracked. "Why do you get your loved ones back?" The omitted but not me was implicit.

“If everyone’s still alive there’s no way Thor isn’t too. We’ve just– We’ve just to figure out what the hell is going on since apparently the invasion we both remember never actually happened.” Tony looked thoughtful, light suddenly appearing in his eyes. “Or hasn’t happened yet. I mean, this whole thing screams gem fuckery to me, doesn’t it to you?. You know what? I’m a moron. I can’t believe I didn’t think of this earlier.” Tony rose to his feet. “Friday – consider yourself unmuted. Done syncing with the suit yet?”

“100% synchronised, boss.”

“Good,” Tony said. “Anything you think you should be telling me?”

“Well, boss, I had been about to correct your misconception about a battle you appeared to be under the impression had taken place before you muted me.”

Tony sighed. “Now’s really not the time to sulk, Friday. Anything else?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, boss.”

“The date, Friday, give me the date.”

The answer Friday gave meant little to Loki, as unaccustomed to the Midgardian calendar as he was, but Tony’s reaction told him more than Friday could.

“Huh,” Tony said, sitting back down. “So that’s that theory out the window.”

“What?”

“The date is... exactly what it should be. Which is weird. I thought we might have...”

“I doubt it would have escaped our attention if you had enough of a grasp of the Time Gem to send us backwards in time.”

“I’m still not ruling out magic gem fuckery.”

“As you probably shouldn’t,” Loki said. His voice sounded distant, even to him, his mind occupied by the ramifications a brief visit to Asgard might introduce.

“So – theory number two: future us actually succeed. Future us manage to travel back in time and stop Thanos attacking Earth and that’s why in the present, Thanos never happened. Maybe this is the reality where Thanos is already dead. Maybe it’s because we – future us in the past, I mean – won. Or will win, anyway. Am I supposed to call the versions of us who already stopped it ‘past us’ because we’re in the past or ‘future us’ because it's still ahead in our timeline? Someone really needs to establish proper time travel jargon or else this’ll get confusing as hell.”

Loki was uncertain. “You’re saying we might already be seeing the results of us using the Time
“That’s exactly what I’m saying. And you know what? That’d actually make sense. Ever heard the multiverse theory? Or about parallel universes? Daughter universes?”

“It’s also possible that our minds may have been tampered with,” Loki said.

“But what for though? Alright, for the sake of thinking out every possibility, let’s say someone’s fucked with our heads. Let’s say this entire thing right now isn’t real. Whoever they are, they want us to believe Thanos is no longer a threat. But what for? Probably so we don’t bother going ahead and doing what we would’ve done anyway. So obviously the best course of action is to go ahead do what we were gonna try to do anyway.”

“Unless,” Loki added, “the memory of Thanos was a false memory. In which case, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that this theoretical person would want to manipulate us into having to resort to learning to travel through time.”

“So assuming someone’s messed with our heads, the only thing we can conclude is that they might or might not want us to travel back in time. Great. Don’t you love it when you can make a solid conclusion?”

“I don’t suppose your technology–”

“BARF can’t distinguish between false memories and real ones. Hell, even human brains can’t do that by themselves.”

“I may,” Loki admitted resignedly, “need more information about the theories of the universe you just mentioned.”

“Then count me as your dealer,” Tony said. “But first I’ve got a date with the shower. And I’m ordering cheeseburgers since there doesn’t seem to be any imminent threats lurking around right now. Stick a movie or something on for him, would you Friday? Guest rights and all that.”

Whatever story began playing on a screen once Tony had left did little to capture Loki’s attention. He was too busy trying to make sense of it all, trying to invent a solution that made the pieces fit.

When clouds began to roll together unnaturally quickly, Loki passed it off as wishful thinking. When a figure with a red cape flying towards the window emerged, Loki passed it off as an outright delusion. It was only once Thor had crashed his way through the window and hit him square in the chest, knocking him to the floor, that Loki believed in his solidarity.

Loki accepted the collision with open arms. Pain had never been sweeter.

His brother crouched above him, one hand clutching Mjolnir and the other grasping Loki by the neck.

"Loki!" Thor roared, thunder crackling outside. "Loki, how could you?"

"Actually," Loki said breathlessly, "I didn't."

Thor was not gentle placing Mjolnir on his chest, pinning him to the floor.

"I grieved for you, I shed tears for you, I..." Thor's face tightened. "I did not think to find you here. I did not think that the Norns would force me to face this a second time," Thor said. Oh, you think the Norns are cruel in their irony towards you, Loki thought. "I thought you were dead, Loki. I
held you as you died! Only to find you here using this realm as a base for your schemes with the Tesseract again." Thor shook him and Loki's head hit the floor. "I thought you were done with this farce! I thought it was put to an end when you lost your way here the first time."

And then, because Loki's own mouth had the unfortunate habit of often betraying him, he found himself replying, "Different time, different scheme, brother."

Loki expected a physical blow but it did not come. Instead, the static in the air grew weaker and–

Where Thor's eyes wet? Loki stared at the liquid with fascination.

"Loki," Thor uttered, his voice uncharacteristically quiet, "must you always conflict me like this? You are undoubtedly up to no good and yet I would much rather have this than the alternative of not having you at all." Loki blinked as if dazed. "Why? Why must you put me through this again? I suffered enough the first time I thought you were dead and now…"

"I..." Loki's mouth had gone dry and he suddenly lacked the ability to transform his thoughts into words. "It is not what you assume."

"Not what I assume? And what else am I to assume, brother? I return home to find the throne room empty, Father missing, and then I discover that you are here with your precious Tesseract. Have you learned nothing?"

"I do not mean to rule them this time."

"I wish I could believe you."

"You can."

"You can," a voice said. Loki startled at the voice, twisting his head to seek out the source: Tony. "And you owe me a new window. If taking the door is too hard for you, what's wrong with taking the window that already got smashed today? Is breaking windows a family trait or something?"

When Thor advanced towards Tony, Tony pointed at his own eyes. "Thor, look at the evidence – my eyes aren't all glow-stick-of-destiny-blue. I'm still me. I'm fine."

Thor stilled. "Loki is in your tower," Thor spoke slowly, as if explaining something to a child.

Tony gave a bright grin. "Yeah, I know. I invited him."

Thor's frown deepened. "Why? Why would you–"

"He's not over for a movie night. We're..." Tony met Loki's gaze. "We're working on a project."

Thor appeared horrified. Beyond horrified.

"Stark, my brother is a skilled liesmith and has fooled the best of us time and time again. Whatever this project is that he claims to be assisting you with, I assure you, it is not what it seems."

"You're right on one part," Tony agreed. "It's really not what it seems."

"Stark, heed my words. Do not let Loki toy with you. Nothing good can come out of encouraging him regarding the Tesseract."

It was at that point that Loki felt the need to let his voice be heard once more. "As it happens, Tony is under no deceptions on my part."
The over-familiarity of Loki using his first name granted him an odd look before Thor continued speaking. "Stark – please. Let me help you before something terrible comes out of this. I have sworn to protect this realm to the best of my ability and I intend to honour–"

"The protection's already being taken care of," Tony dismissed.

Thor clenched his fists so tightly his knuckles were white.

"Is that so? I have not forgotten the 'protection' you enlisted the last time we assembled."

Tony’s cheek twitched. "Yeah, funnily enough, neither have I."

"Thor," Loki pacified, voice weakened from the weight of Mjolnir on his chest, "you must listen." Listening had never been his brother's strong suit. It was as if his blood beat so hard and rang in his skull so loudly it made it impossible for him to stop and think. Thor was quick to temper and his default response was to revert to using his muscle whenever he encountered problems and so it was for that reason that Loki was surprised when Thor turned to face him and spoke with such coldness it made the hair on the back of Loki's neck stand on end.

"I told you if you betrayed me I would kill you."


"You had me think you were dead!" Thor roared. I did die, Loki thought. I died for you. "And as if that isn't damning enough, you pretended to be Father for only the Norns know how long and had me believe you were him. I even discussed finding your body with you, thinking you were him."

Loki could not deny the accusation. "I know," he murmured.

"No clever lies for me, brother?"

*Only a truth.*

"I do not deny that I did these things but I deny that I betrayed you."

Thunder sounded again, louder this time.

"I will give you one chance, brother. You already have the Tesseract. Transport us home and willingly submit yourself to Asgardian justice and I will--"

"Asgardian justice?"


"Make no mistake, Stark. I will fight through you if I must."

"Thor," Loki sighed, marvelling at how quickly the relief from seeing his brother had turned to exasperation, "there is no need. I have done this realm no more wrong. Have you not spoken to Heimdall?"

Thor paused. "Of course I spoke to Heimdall when I was finally able to release him after his reimprisonment. I came as soon as he informed me you were still alive and of which realm you stood upon."

Of course his brother had not stopped to ask any further questions and of course Heimdall did not bare Loki enough loyalty to have testified for his innocence.
"Had you not been so hasty, Heimdall might have informed you of the conversations we had in the dungeons."

Thor hesitated. "What conversations?"

"The ones in which I was single-handedly preparing Asgard for the war against the fiercest foe it will ever meet."

"Do you truly expect me to believe that you usurped the throne purely for the good of Asgard?"

Loki held a fist to his chest in a mockery of the royal salute. "I was doing my duty to my kingdom." He dropped the facade and flashed a grin. "But you are correct, I did not seize the throne for purely altruistic purposes."

"Tell me what you did to Father. Heimdall cannot find him."

"Well..." Loki pretended to think. "He's not dead."

Loki considered teleporting away at that moment but he knew little of the complications Mjolnir would introduce if he attempted to.

Thor reached for Loki's throat and sparks of lightning ran across his fingers.

"Are you intending to be true to your word?" Loki did not need to specify that he was referring to Thor's threat to kill him.

Thor's hand fell. "Oh, I might intend to be." Thor sounded so miserable that it seemed out of place coming from his mouth. "But I doubt I could have it in me to kill you, Loki." Thor's eyes were very blue when they met Loki's. "You are my little brother. You are my family."

Loki was frozen in place.

"Right!" Tony clapped his hands. "I'm glad that's settled. No one's killing anyone, not here, not today. Three cheers for family reunions."

"Settled?" Thor echoed. "This matter is hardly settled. He may be my brother but he is still a great threat to your realm."

"Not right now he isn't," Tony replied. "You" – Tony pointed at Thor – "sit." He pointed at the sofa. "And you" – it was Loki at the receiving end of his finger this time – "don't antagonise him. This is hard enough without you making it worse."

Tony took his seat next to Thor. "Drinks anyone?" He was met by silence. "Another time, then. Are you gonna release him anytime soon, Thor? It's kinda hard to have a nice chat while one of us is stuck to the floor with a giant hammer. No? Alright, here's the thing: Loki isn't up to anything. He isn't trying to take over the planet or get himself another crown or raise another army."

"Loki is the greatest liar I have ever met."

"Quit interrupting. I'm not done. I'm also not a fucking moron. I have definitive proof he's been telling me the truth."

Thor furrowed his eyebrows. "You do?" His voice was weak but his eyes were alight with something Loki was hesitant to identify as hope. "How?"

Tony clapped Thor on the shoulder. "Science."
Thor was examining Loki in such a manner that made him feel like squirming. That thing in Thor's eyes – definitely hope, Loki concluded – had grown and it gave Thor a child-like vulnerability that Loki couldn't stand. Why after all of this time and everything he had done would Thor still have so much as a grain of hope for him? Was there anything Thor's stubbornness allowed him to give up on?

"I made a piece of tech that scans the Amygdala." After Thor's blank stare Tony adapted his explanation. "It's tech that lets you replay bits of your memory."

"And Loki allowed you to do that?"

"Reluctantly," Tony confirmed.

"I was not particularly fond of the other options I found myself presented with."

Thor turned to Tony. "Are you absolutely certain?"

"All evidence points to your brother cooperating with me in order to" – Tony glanced at Loki to read his expression – "finish our project." Tony shrugged. "After we're done I can't vouch for his intentions."

"This project..." Thor began. "What does it involve?"

"A mutual enemy," Tony said before Loki could think of a plausible enough lie or half-truth. "Enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that."

"It must be a powerful enemy."

Loki cursed Stark silently. Of course, there was a risk that Thor would want to join them now that he had gotten the idea into his head that there would be some sort of upcoming battle or fight. But the Norns had said it was only Stark that Loki should have allied himself with, not Thor. And besides, how could Thor possibly stand with them against Thanos with no gem of his own? The risks were too high – Loki had no desire to watch Thor die again.

"He's not the type of enemy you are imagining, brother," Loki said. "This fight will be fought with ingenuity and intelligence rather than fists and swords."

"Even so, I could help. Both your minds are sharper than my own, but I could still defend you if need be. And any being capable of thinking is capable of being hurt, I could–"

Thor, you stubborn oaf. Why are you so determined to get yourself killed?

"Brother," Loki reprimanded him from his undignified position on the floor. "you are adopting your much-preferred brawn tactic again. I assure you it will not work. Not against him."

"Where is the Captain? Black Widow? The Hawk?" Thor directed the question at Tony. "Surely, they would be of much use."

Tony ran a hand through his hair. "I... I don't know where they are right now. Long story. You weren't there."

"Are they alright?"

"Yeah. Must be. I'd know if they got themselves in trouble."

"Then tell me how I can help."
"You can help letting us continue making our plans without further interruption," Loki suggested.

"It is my sworn duty to protect the realms that need it."

Loki unleashed a loud sigh – a mistake with Mjolnir still on him. "This realm is not at currently at threat." Technically it was true, supposing that they had already somehow managed to prevent Thanos from wreaking havoc upon it. "And besides," Loki added, "you must learn not to prioritise a single realm above the others. I am sure that as the king of the Nine Realms, you must have other more pressing duties for you to attend to than one escaped prisoner such as myself. Especially after the most unfortunate absence of the royal family will have thrown Asgardian politics into chaos."

"I do not like this one bit."

"You don't have to."

"Stark." Thor turned away from Loki. "If this somehow gets out of hand or out of control, know that I will help in whatever way I can."

Loki lifted his head up. "Is this a concession to leave us to get on with it?"

"No. I need to know more. I… It appears I may have acted rather hastily. I will speak with Heimdall and I shall have him watching. If he has the slightest reason to suspect something is amiss with you…"

"Why brother, it's almost as if you don't trust me."

Thor's sternness melted. "It's myself I don't trust. I want to believe this so badly I fear it blinds me."

"If I blinded you how could I fool you with my illusions in the future?"

Thor smiled then, a fond smile that caused Loki to realise it had been far too long since he had last seen that expression.

"May I at least know the identity of the enemy that managed to unite you?"

"A feeble attempt to wheedle your way into our fight, Thor, even by your standards," Loki said and Thor’s smile turned sheepish. "But rally the rest of our armies and have all the defences in place that you can. Have Heimdall watch for signs of an impending attack and a fleet of Chitauri. And Thor... If the enemy comes do not face him. It is a fight you cannot hope to win." Loki had spoken similar words to Thor before but Thor believing the command came from the Allfather had changed nothing. "If Thanos comes, you find me."

Thor gave a nod. "Your words trouble me."

"Finally, you have gained some sense."

"If this threat is real, that is more troubling than you having managed to escape your cell," Thor admitted. "The justice you will have to face may have to wait. But Loki – if this threat is real, don’t you see that Asgard is all the weaker without Father? He–"

"He is the only thing that guarantees my freedom. If you or any other Asgardian attempts to imprison me, I will never reveal where he is."

Thor closed his eyes in resignation. "I believe you," Thor finally said. "I will return after speaking with Heimdall. I trust that Tony will not allow you to do any harm here. I would stay if not for
Asgard needing a ruler. The very fact that this enemy is serious enough to merit both the Tesseract and you allying yourself with a mortal—"

"–hey–" Tony objected.

"–concerns me. But I am familiar with that look on your face, Loki, and I know your stubbornness will not allow you to let me help you even when you desperately need it." Thor rose to his feet. “I am sorry, Tony, for the damage I have done. I will make reparations when I can.”

One of Thor’s hands opened to summon Mjolnir and the weight flew off Loki’s chest before he brought himself to his feet.

"And one more thing," Thor added, "regarding your 'death'." His voice was colder now and filled with a darkness Loki was not accustomed to hearing. Thor laid a land on the back of Loki’s neck in a gesture Loki was not certain was intended as threatening or familial. "Never do that to me again."

*What – die? Only if you promise not to do the same.*
Once Thor had left, Loki took a seat rather unsteadily.

“Cheeseburger?” Tony asked. Loki did not respond. “Well, I’m having one.” Tony picked up something from a greasy looking paper bag and bit into it. “Mmm… Look at that – meat you don’t have to hunt down yourself. The luxuries of Earth. Sure you don’t want one?” Tony rattled one of the bags. Loki shook his head; he was not feeling particularly hungry. “Suit yourself.” Tony took another hearty bite. “Any other surprise guests we should be worried about?”

“No–” Loki broke off. “Not that I am aware of.”

“Awesome. It might actually be worth fixing the windows then.”

Loki stared at him incredulously. “That’s what’s on your mind? Your windows?”

“Hey – I’m capable of having more than one thought at once. And they’re letting in a draft, it’s pretty distracting. So I’ve got that, still trying to figure out what’s actually going on, and trying to figure out why I get the feeling Thor was doing bunny ears around the word ‘death’ on my mind.”

“Bunny ears?”

“You know, quote marks.”

“Ah,” Loki said in his best offhand voice, “my brother is under the impression that I faked my death.”

“Shit like this really shouldn’t surprise me anymore. So did you?”

“Must you have to ask?”

“It’s funny, the fact that you never denied faking it kind of makes me think you’d prefer Thor to believe you did.”

That was… astute. Unsettlingly so.

“I believe that is a tale for another time, perhaps.”

Tony’s lips twitched. “You never did get that drink I offered you.”

“As tempting as the offer of alcohol may be after an encounter with my brother–”

“–Oh please, Thor barging into you like that was practically your equivalent of hugging–”

“–I believe we have more pressing matters to attend to.”

“Yeah, you might have a point there.” Tony wiped his greasy hands on a napkin. “Something has obviously happened. It’s just a case of figuring out what. Or why. We can’t eliminate some form of memory altering or mind control for good. And I don’t even know how I’d go about proving we’re in an alternate universe…” Tony had been mid-way through screwing up the bag into a crumbled ball when he came to a sudden pause. “Unless we’re not in some alternate universe.” He looked to Loki for his reaction. “The Reality Stone still hasn’t shown up – do you think that could explain anything?”
“It isn’t impossible, though I doubt that we have an unknown ally who conveniently vanquished Thanos so we wouldn’t have to.”

In fact, some part of Loki hoped that wasn’t the case. If somebody else had defeated Thanos then it would mean his deal with Hela would have been broken and he’d never see Frigga again. Loki did not wish to dwell on the possibility of gaining his brother back only to lose any chances of walking the halls of Valhalla with his mother again. “It would not explain why we still remember the invasion even though nobody else does or why the Norns did not mention another potential ally.”

“But how much stock can you put in what the Norns tell you anyway?” Tony asked, then caught the look Loki gave him. “Alright, I heard your explanation the last time you answered that – what I mean is how much information do you think they’re keeping from you?”

“I do not doubt that they are and have been keeping much information from me.”

“That’s not reassuring.” Tony threw the paper ball in the direction of a bin. It missed.

“No,” Loki agreed. “It isn’t.”

“But they’re basically the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, except they can see every possibility on top of that, right?”

Loki was able to infer the general meaning, if not the reference.

“That is correct,” Loki replied, uncertain of what point Tony was trying to make.

“So if we’re in an alternate universe, wouldn’t the Norns would be the likeliest to know? Or they’d know if we were mind controlled or if someone used the Reality Stone hit the delete key on Thanos or something.”

Loki hesitated. “I am uncertain of the answer to your first question. The rest, however, they would know.”

In the periphery of Loki’s vision, a small machine entered his field of view, rolling in on four wheels and fumbling with its long protruding arm at the bag lying by the side of the bin. It managed to seize it within its vice-like extended hand, but then instead of placing the bag in its intended destination, it placed it by the other side of the bin and wheeled itself back out of sight. Loki idly supposed that sort of thing was normal in Tony’s place of residence.

“Yeah, good job DUM-E,” Tony called after it. “But going back to the point I was going to make – I guess it’d depend on whether each universe has a different set of Norns or whether it’s just one set and they exist in all the universes and that’s how they know what every possibility is. Even if it’s a set of Norns for each universe – if we’ve actually switched universes – they must’ve become aware of each other’s existence if they weren’t before because they’d have seen it in our timelines, wouldn’t they?”

Loki gave it a moment’s thought. “I suppose so. But the issue with the Norns is that–”

“We just need to find them. They’re the ones with all the answers, they can afford to be a bit more generous.”

“As I was trying to say – the issue with the Norns is locating them. Finding the Time Gem was one thing but finding the Norns themselves is an entirely different matter. They do not want to be found.”
“But it is possible to find them?”

Loki folded his arms. “Supposing that they do not wish to be found and can see every possible outcome, it goes without saying that they can avoid anyone wishing to find them without much difficulty.”

“So it’s not possible then.”

Loki pulled a face. “Improbable would be more accurate. Although if they also wish for a Thanos-free universe, they may be aware that it would be within their best interests if we were to have a conversation.”

“Huh. We should probably add finding them to our to-do list then.”

“Ah,” Loki said wryly, “you mean the ever-expanding list of things that we may or may not be forced into doing to rid ourselves of Thanos.”

Tony snapped his fingers. “That’s the one.”

“Wonderful,” Loki said. “No one has succeeded in finding the Norns in countless millennia – how difficult could it possibly be for us?” His tone made his lack of conviction implicit.

“Well actually… I was thinking because all this Norn stuff is way more your area than mine and unless you looking for them is gonna be dangerous, we might be better off splitting the party.”

For a moment, Loki did nothing but stare.

“Two hardly constitutes a party,” Loki found himself saying.

“Figure of speech.” Tony waved a hand dismissively. “But there are two things that need doing. The first is figuring out what’s actually going on, which you can do by speaking to our elusive mystic all-seeing entity buddies. And the second is that I’m expecting to still have to figure out how to use this thing at some point.” He tapped the Time Gem hanging around his neck. “And I’m going to need my lab for that so I can’t really go with you and do that at the same time…”

“Yes.” The word had slipped past Loki’s lips without his consent. “That makes sense.”

“Awesome. Got any leads yet?”

Loki took a moment to think. “It’s possible that Heimdall may have seen where the Norns went after they visited me on Asgard… And speaking of Heimdall, a conversation about precisely what Heimdall might have seen during the battle would be useful, although I suppose I would have to get past Thor first in order to do that. I would prefer not to have the entirety of Asgard attempt to reimprison me.”

“Fair enough. Let’s hope Thor has the manners to knock next time he visits. Whenever that might be. Seriously – that guy has no measure of time. I mean, his lifespan’s a hell of a lot longer than the rest of ours so I guess I get why, but still.”

“In this instance, I suspect Thor will return sooner rather than later.”

“Thor’s not really the type to understand the concept of socially acceptable visiting hours and how people generally just don’t turn up on each other’s doorsteps – or through windows – anymore. And speaking of courtesies – I never got around to showing you around…”
The tower was more vast than Loki had imagined. There were floors for production, floors for accounting, floors for marketing and advertising – and those were not including the floors that had been intended for living or personal use. Loki could only guess what the other floors labelled by the lift would contain.

He was not shown the areas he did not require access to, but he was shown around a communal living space, kitchen, and his own private quarters, including his own bathroom. There was so much space – not in comparison to the rooms he had to himself as a child, but in comparison to what Loki had become accustomed to as of late, which had been reduced to spaces as meagre as cells and tents.

Loki did not know how long he stood underneath the shower, letting the warm torrent of water wash over his skin and hair. It loosened the tension he had become too accustomed to lurking under the surface of his skin and he relished the feeling of finally feeling clean again.

When he could put off stepping out of the shower no longer, the tiles of the floor were deliciously warm underneath his feet. Loki hadn’t quite anticipated the luxury Stark Tower had to offer – even the towels were pre-heated, and in some ways the tower was more extravagant than the palace of Asgard, though on Asgard they had Asgardians serving them rather than computers and machinery.

The quarters he had been allocated were spacious, if a little sparse, but Loki found himself without complaints. Apparently, it had been one of the few rooms on the communal floor that was still at least partially furnished and there were indents in the carpet where other pieces of furniture had once been. A thought that he’d probably be sleeping in a room that had once belonged to one of the Avengers who had stood against him passed through his mind but Loki did not dwell on it for long.

He had a bed – a proper full-sized bed with a mattress and soft plump pillows. It was a small thing, Loki realised, but one he felt gratitude for nonetheless. It was a major improvement upon the sleeping mat that failed to be long enough to fit his whole length on and was thin enough to feel the ground through.

Loki took what comfort he could but despite his exhaustion, sleep did not come easily. The night was too quiet and it allowed his thoughts to occupy the silence, circular speculations – about Thor, about Thanos, about the battle, about everything – but none that could lead to a discernible conclusion.

Loki was perched on a bar stool by the counter and had just been handed an item of food by the machine with the singular arm the following morning when Friday announced that somebody was waiting to gain entrance.

Tony downed the contents of whatever foul-smelling drink was in his cup.

“What is it, Friday?”

“It’s Thor, boss.”

“You mean he’s learned to do things the civilised way? Send him in, I want to see this.”

Loki’s shoulders stiffened and his fingers clutched at his plate.

When Thor entered the room, he did so with strangely pensive mannerisms that looked foreign on
his body. Thor said nothing as he laid Mjolnir gently on a hook, his back turned to them.

“My– My friends…” Thor said, turning to face them. “I believe I owe you both an apology.”

Loki could hardly believe the words.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “and a new window.”

Thor bowed his head. “I will make amends however I can but I fear I have wronged you in ways worse than that.” His eyes met Loki’s. “Brother,” Thor said, his eyes shining in earnest. “I have spoken to Heimdall and he confirmed the truth of what you told me and more: that you acted to protect Asgard even though you did not act to protect its king, that you sought the Time Gem but not for yourself, and that you have been preparing to fight an enemy even he cannot see.”

“I see,” Loki said after a long moment had passed.

“I came to offer my support. If there is anything I can do to assist–”

“What you can do, Thor, is everything within your power to prevent Asgard from trying to haul me back into my cell.”

Thor’s eyes widened and joy filled his features. “Does that mean you’re coming back?”

“No,” Loki said. “Not for good.” Loki watched Thor’s face fall. “I need to speak to Heimdall.”

Thor gave a solemn nod. Loki hadn’t been expecting him to agree so easily.

“Very well,” Thor said. “As the acting ruler of the Nine Realms, I shall give you my word none shall detain you while you are on Asgard.”

Ever? Loki thought. Thor should have learned not to be so careless about his choice of words when improvising vows.

“Good,” Loki said.

“How urgently do you need to speak to him? I could arrange–”

“As soon as possible, I should think.”

“Oh.” Thor scratched his arm. “The observatory is clear of all but Heimdall, if your need is as urgent as you say. We could return to Asgard now if you wish.”

“I see no reason to delay it.”

“Then come with me to the roof and–”

“No,” Loki said. “You go to the roof.” He brought out the Tesseract. “I, however, will be finding my own way.”

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“My King,” Heimdall greeted Thor. Heimdall’s gaze fell to Loki. “Prince Loki.” Heimdall had not granted him that title in some time. It felt odd to hear, as if it belonged to somebody else.

“Heimdall,” Loki replied, traces of wariness in his voice.
“My brother seeks to speak to you,” Thor said.

“Your brother,” Loki said, “can speak for himself.”

Thor’s mouth was downtrodden as he gave a nod. “Then I shall take my leave.”

Heimdall and Loki were left staring at each other.

“What is it that you wish me to tell you?” Heimdall asked.

“Thor tells me you have seen no trace of Thanos.”

“Thor tells you the truth.”

“In that case, I wonder what it is you saw when Thanos attacked.”

Heimdall shifted his weight. “Even I, whose gaze stretches as far as the Nine Realms, do not see everything at once.”

“I hope you are not meaning to say that you merely did not happen to be looking in the right direction when Thanos attacked.” Loki considered his meaning. “Or didn’t attack,” he amended.

For the briefest instance of a second, Heimdall hesitated. “My gaze was drawn to something more enigmatic than you,” he said.

“Oh?”

Heimdall gave a singular nod. “The Norns.”

Loki looked up sharply. “You saw where they went?”

“I saw where they disappeared,” Heimdall corrected. “Although it may not be of much importance.”

Loki frowned. “Why might that be?”

“My gaze followed them to the spot where they disappeared but I suspect they may have been able to disappear anywhere and anytime they wished to.”

“I might as well hear it.”

“They followed the river that runs off the edge of the world and then vanished.”

Loki began to pace. "And my mind?"

"Your mind?" Heimdall repeated.

"Have you seen anything? Is it... Is it my own?" Loki had not meant to sound so desperate.

Loki had never seen bafflement on Heimdall's face before.

"As far as I am aware," Heimdall replied.

Loki had reached the exit to the observatory when he turned around to ask one final question. “And the Aether?”

Heimdall grew more stern. “You still wish to know where it is?”
“Yes.”

Heimdall shook his head. “You would have me betray the Allfather while his body lies discarded wherever you saw fit to leave him?”

“I would,” Loki replied. “The king you serve now is Thor and Thor wishes for you to answer the questions I have to guarantee the safety of the Nine Realms.”

Heimdall remained level, staring at Loki unflinchingly. “In that case, I shall take up the matter with Thor and see what he makes of it.”

“But—”

“Thor,” Heimdall interrupted, “is not so quick to treason and the act of sharing information that Odin Allfather expressly sought to keep secret would be breaking his last command.”

Loki scowled. Heimdall could be as unchanging as stone and no amount of pretty sentences or endearing arguments would move him.

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Loki opted to travel to the edge of the world by foot, disguising himself as nothing more than a nameless Asgardian citizen. The multi-coloured glinting light of the bridge whispered to him like a challenge, one he had come so close to teleporting to avoid. Perhaps it was a singular-minded stubbornness that triggered it, perhaps it was the idea that he could never expect to defeat Thanos if he could be so easily defeated by an inanimate object, or perhaps it had more to do with not wanting Heimdall to watch him march out of the observatory in annoyance only to have to make a retreat. Whatever the reason, it made Loki resolve to conquer the Rainbow Bridge. It stretched on and on and he kept his gaze so determinedly fixed straight ahead that he almost didn't notice the cracks from where the Bifrost had been broken and he had been clinging on to Gungnir, legs dangling over the edge of the abyss. Loki's face was set, resolute. He continued as if it wasn't him who had decided to let go, as if it had been something that happened to a stranger, not himself. Then he was at the other side, something in his mouth tasting like victory that quickly soured as he failed to keep thoughts at bay of how pitiful it was to feel triumph in something so small, to best an object that could not fight back.

Loki's route took him around the edge of the golden city. He'd never seen so many workers in the weaponsmiths and he passed the Vanir and dwarven soldiers in the practice grounds.

So Thor has been listening, Loki thought. There were already far more soldiers than those Loki had managed to gather together during his reign as Odin. Loki wondered what it must be like to inspire the sort of loyalty and devotion that Thor did with no conscious effort, and for the first time, Loki did not envy him for it. To command armies was to command them to die for a cause and if Thanos came for Asgard – as Loki believed he would, whatever games had been played – then that cause would be futility. But the words ‘futility’ and ‘defeat’ did not exist in Thor's vocabulary because the Norns had been kinder to Thor; he had never been forced to learn them.

Loki walked through Frigga's gardens and was pleased to note that one of the schools of magic he had commissioned in her honour was almost built. Further ahead, there was the library and what used to be Loki’s choice of mead hall when it was his turn to choose, and then the buildings began to scatter, becoming more and more sparse and replaced by open country.

Loki followed a valley formed by the hills until he found the wide river than ran through its centre. It was deserted enough that Loki saw no point in maintaining his illusion, opting to allow it to fall
He didn't know what he expected to find once he followed the water to the edge of the world, but what he didn't expect to find was nothing. No traces of magic, no runes, nothing that could possibly be some sort of portal or gateway to another location. He watched river gush over the edge, sprays of water forming a mist as it fell. Why had the Norns chosen this place? Surely it had not just been a coincidence. Loki found it unlikely that they just happened to want to catch a glimpse of the view, as terrifying and awe-inspiring the gallons and gallons of water plunging into nothingness were.

The sound of something landing on grass shook Loki from his thoughts and he turned to seek out the source: it was Thor, dropping Mjolnir on the ground.

Loki folded his arms and waited.

“What are you doing here?” Loki asked once Thor had gotten close enough to clearly hear him.

Thor approached him cautiously, like he was some sort of wild animal that may attack at any moment.

“I meant it when I offered my help, Loki.”

“Unless you happen to know where and how to find the Norns or perhaps even where the Reality Stone has gotten to, your help is useless to me.”

Thor’s mouth turned mournful. “I had hoped that when you finally came home you would not push me away so.”

Loki let out a bitter laugh. “Home?”

“You thought it your home until the moment you learned of your true heritage, I fail to see how—”

“There are many things you fail to see, Thor.”

Thor cast his eyes downwards, staring at the grass and allowing silence to fall between them before breaking it. “If you want use of your quarters, they are yours.”

“I don’t want them,” Loki said before he realised how much he meant it.

“Or if you require use of the libraries then you need only ask. Of course, it will be easier if—”

“Yes, I have the presence of mind to know to disguise myself.”

Thor opened his mouth and then shut it again, his expression resembling some sort of downtrodden wet pet as he turned his gaze to the falling water.

“Do you recall when I said that my hope for you no longer exists?” Thor asked after a long moment.

“Goodbye, Thor.”

“I don’t believe that was entirely true. If it was, I would not have stopped to listen to your explanation as I did.”

Loki’s face darkened and he leant forward to observe the weight of each word sinking in. “I don’t need your hope.”
“Well,” Thor said, laying a hand tentatively on Loki’s shoulder, “perhaps I am the idiotic oaf you have always said I am, but all your misdeeds are not enough to extinguish it.”

Loki twisted his body away from the hand. “You are partially correct – you are a sentimental fool, blinded by your own desires for everything to be the same as it was before. And it will never,” Loki snarled between his teeth, “be the same.”

Thor’s smile contained too much sadness to be called a smile. “I know that now.”

“Then why do insist on persisting?” Loki was yelling now, the words flying out of his mouth without his consent.

“Because I know you. You were at my side for over a thousand years and I know you, Loki. You could be cold and calculating when you wanted to be, even malicious if somebody gave you reason to be, but you were never outright cruel. I just… I don’t understand what happened. I came home and you had changed. And then after you let go– Why did you have to let go, Loki? Why did you choose to do that? I would have pulled you up, myself and Father would have pulled you up, we would have made sure you were safe but instead you made us watch you fall. After I mourned you, I discovered your intention to crown yourself king of Midgard regardless of how many you would harm in doing so. I thought you had succumbed to madness and I thought the man who was my brother was no more. And then there was Svartalfheim and just when I thought I might have been wrong you…” Thor fell back into silence, shaking his head. “It feels like every time I begin to understand you in the slightest, I have to mourn you and then you are reborn into someone slightly new for me to figure out only to have to lose all over again. Sometimes I don’t know whether it’s you that has changed or whether I am finally noticing the different sides of you. Sometimes, I just don’t understand you anymore.” Thor paused and his voice grew small. “I don’t understand what happened.”

Loki could have screamed at him then. He could have raged about how of course Thor would never be able to understand, how utterly incomprehensible his own brother was to Thor, how Thor was blinded by all the blessings he had been granted.

Instead, Loki just said, “You don’t have to.”

“Truly, Loki,” Thor said and there was nothing the Nine Realms more pleading than his eyes than in that moment, “you can speak freely to me. I am not the man I was, and I will do my best to listen as well as I can.”

“Have you changed that much, brother? You seem just as eager to throw yourself into battle against an enemy you know nothing of as you did when you led us into Jotunheim.”

Thor hesitated before he gave his answer. “I hope I have changed. I believe that counts for something.”

Loki nodded and reached for the Tesseract.

“Loki, wait–” Thor reached out to place a hand on the back of Loki’s neck. “I meant it. I mean it. And if I can assist you in your quest in any way…”

“A quest?” Loki shook Thor off him. “You think that I have set myself upon some righteous quest to redeem myself? I assure you, I have done no such thing.” Loki watched Thor’s face carefully so he could observe the precise impact of extinguishing Thor’s idiotic notions of his redemption on his face. “I seek my enemy’s death for the sake of my own vengeance, not as a pathetic attempt to gain glory or honour.”
“Well,” Thor said as Loki began reactivating the Tesseract, “at least that’s an improvement.”
Loki returned to Stark Tower with armfuls of books and journals from Asgard's library discussing the topic of the Norns. He had little hope of discovering something as straightforward as a direct clue to where the Norns resided or how to contact them, but he supposed ruling out options and possibilities was more productive than doing nothing.

The shared living space was empty, and the route back to his quarters revealed that so was the kitchen and dining area. The air was silent.

Loki stiffened and his blades appeared in his hands.

“Friday?” Loki asked aloud before he fully realised what he was doing.

“How can I help?”

“Where is Tony?”

“Mr Stark is in his lab.”

Oh.

The full weight of how ridiculous he was being hit him.

Loki had become too accustomed to having to remain constantly vigilant as of the past number of years and it meant that whenever something or someone was out of eyesight he had a tendency to assume the worst.

He should have realised that Tony not being within his immediate line of sight did not indicate they were both in danger. Midgard was Tony’s realm and it contained his home, his friends, his resources. It would be irrational to assume that Stark would remain in the same place indefinitely. Loki had gotten too used to continuously being in Tony’s company – that was what had caused the jolt of panic when he suddenly realised he did not know where Tony was. If that had happened, if they’d gotten separated involuntarily on any other realm, the consequences could have dammed them both.

Adjusting to a realm where Loki was not required to act as the guide, to have to always be pointing out each threat and problem, where there were not perpetually threatened by something – that would take some time.

Tony, contrary to popular belief, was capable, for the most part, of taking care of himself for the few hours in which he had been left alone. Midgardians were indisputably more fragile than other races like the Aesir or dwarves, but that did not mean that Stark needed to be constantly watched over to ensure that nothing – including himself – caused him harm. Tony might have been considerably more fragile and breakable than Loki was, but he wasn’t helpless or as careless as he liked others to believe, and Midgard presented fewer threats than the other realms – not that Loki believed they could be truly safe. Loki didn’t trust that Thanos was gone for good but until they’d have to face him again, they were as safe as they were likely to get. Midgard was safer than Niflheim and Vanaheim and Alfheim and–

Loki did not wish to think of Jotunheim. It was easier that way; the anger had simmered to leave something behind that pulled his conscience in multiple and confusing directions. But Loki did not wish to dwell on why thoughts of that place stirred something alarmingly close to resembling guilt.
Stark was fine and Loki’s somewhat hasty assumption that because it was quiet and there was no sign of him implied otherwise had been an error. Tony was presumably doing exactly what he said he was planning to do: attempting to scan the Time Gem. Loki saw no reason to join him; he had little to offer where Midgardian science was concerned and he had already previously made his attempts to mould Tony into being more receptive to magic, which Tony was not choosing to pursue. Which was fine. So long as it enabled Tony to wield the gem faster then Loki saw no logical reason to object, unless whatever Tony was doing to it caused the gem to behave dangerously – but even Tony was not likely to ignore warning signs from an object so volatile.

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It seemed that even outside of Loki’s confinement in his cell, he was doomed to while away eternity reading; he had done it as the Allfather and it had not helped him and now he was forced into doing it again. Loki would have been far less opposed to the concept if he had some choice in the matter.

He lost count of the number of times he’d finish a paragraph only to forget its contents and he’d have to reread the words to give them meaning. The Midgardian parchment he’d found in one of the desk drawers and had intended to use to note down worthy lines of enquiry remained depressingly blank.

Loki marked the page he was at, selected the next book in the pile, and the process started again.

Evening had fallen when he was interrupted by a low whirring noise following by a sound he could not accurately describe as a knocking at his door. It was closer to scraping, and when he opened the door there was the machine, one long extended arm piercing through the end of a plastic bag.

Something was inside of the bag, the weight of it stretching the plastic.

Loki stared at it uncertainly. He did not receive an explanation.

"What is it?" he asked when the machine waited expectantly.

The machine turned what Loki assumed to be its head and whirred louder.

"That," Friday said, "would be Indian."

"Indian?" Loki repeated.

"Your dinner, courtesy of Mr Stark."

The machine pivoted, the holes it had pierced in the bag stretching larger and threatening to tear. Loki extended a hand for the items, supposing that it would probably be wise to eat something – he had been so preoccupied that it made him forget his hunger. He wrapped his hand around the handles of the bag and the clamp at the end of the machine's arm opened wider to release it but a bit of the plastic was caught on a metal seam. In the end, Loki had to wrench the bag from its grasp.

He found a pair of foil trays enclosed with indecipherable scribbles written on their lids and the strong smell of whatever food was contained inside.

Loki quietly shut the door behind him as he retreated back into his quarters. The message he’d received was clear: for all of Tony’s words about how it was common courtesy to give him a tour of the tower, he would receive no more courtesies than that. Even guests of the lowest standing on
Asgard were not forced to dine in solitude. Loki did not know why he was the slightest bit surprised of his own treatment; he had invaded the very same planet, flung Tony from the top of the very same floor, and had opened a portal for the Chitauri in the sky directly above the tower. Tony had hardly invited him to stay for the pleasure of his company – Loki was there to maximise their chances of defeating Thanos and nothing more. Tony’s brusque manners aside, Loki was well adapted to solitude. He had, for some unidentifiable reason, assumed that Tony would have wanted to converse directly to glean insights rather than interrupting his research with a couple of brief questions from Friday about what he had learned from Asgard as he had done earlier during the day.

Whatever the reason, the demeaning treatment caused Loki to bristle as he ate the meal inside of his room, the unanticipated spice making his throat burn and giving him no choice but to venture out in search of water. He'd forgotten how Midgard had flavours to the extreme, never settling for subtlety. Asgard had no such spice as chillies or peppers but Vanaheim did, and it was not uncommon for warriors to challenge each other to withstand the burn of them when they had the opportunity. Loki was beginning to suspect that the Midgardians would not fair terribly badly in such a contest.

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The next day followed a similar pattern, only this time the food was far too greasy and salty and the day after that it was too sweet.

The same four walls of his room started to feel like a new cell, another space he had been confined to. Loki slept there, ate there, did his research there, and the only respite he got were brief visits to the kitchen. He began eating in the shared living space instead, strictly reminding himself that no, he was not doing it due to hopes of having company that would provide a welcome distraction from his own internal monologue, and when he discovered how much more comfortable it was there instead of his own quarters, he migrated his books and notes there as well.

He’d had thoughts of seeking out Stark when his research appeared to be proving the most futile – not for information but rather for alternative ideas. Tony’s mind worked very differently to his own, Loki had found. It worked with flashes of inspiration rather than in a linear fashion following a clear thread of logic and that meant Tony was able to generate ideas or speculations when Loki’s own mind would have gone in different directions. If they – or rather just Loki – became more conclusively unable to locate the Norns – which was looking likelier and likelier the more Loki read – then an alternative solution to figuring out exactly what might have happened regarding Thanos might be necessary.

Loki had declined the option of discussing the matter with Tony after a little deliberation. Knowledge of the Nine Realms, of the Norns, of the tapestry the Norns wove – that was all Loki’s area of expertise and if he had to resort to asking a Midgardian for what was essentially advice then he might as well consign his soul to Hela straight away.

The thought of it caused Loki to sit up straighter. Of course – Hela. How had he been so blind? Hela was the one with the access to the Norns; she had been the one to arrange for Loki and the Norns to meet. Hela must have had access to them somehow and knowledge of their whereabouts or the means to contact them. Perhaps Loki had been too direct with his lines of enquiry, perhaps he had been looking in the wrong places when what he should have been searching for was the route to Helheim. Not that going there would be wise. Hela would likely not allow him to leave if he entered her domain with nothing to offer but more demands to make of her. It would have to be a desperate last resort – the chances of him returning were probably lower than their chances of success if they continued acting blindly.
"Mr Stark requests that you join him in his workshop," Friday said, her voice startling Loki from his thoughts.

Loki took his time placing his bookmark inside the page and unfolding himself, irritation causing his features to darken. He was not some servant to be summoned or some lackey to be called upon, but he could only assume this had something to do with the Time Gem and even he saw little point in refusing to cooperate for the sake of his pride and to give Tony a lesson in polite etiquette, given what could be at stake.

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The doors opened for Loki, revealing a large brightly lit room littered with chunks of metal and wire and materials and technology Loki did not have names for. Most of the surfaces of the worktops were filled with scrap materials, half-formed inventions, and notes that were both in paper form and in technological form, hovering mid-air like illusions. Tony was stood with his back to him, examining one of the said illusions and using his fingers to rotate it.

The doors of the lift closed behind Loki, the sound gentle but loud enough to alert Tony to his presence.

"Oh – hey."

"What is it?" Loki asked flatly.

"Well hi to you too." Tony made a motion with his hand to beckon him over.

Loki remained where he was stood.

"Our alliance does not mean that I am a creature to be summoned at your beck and call."

Tony directed an odd look at Loki with his red-rimmed eyes. "Never said you were, buddy."

"Your actions have spoken otherwise."

"My actions?" Tony repeated. "What – is this because I asked Friday to send you a message?"

"If you require my presence for something in the future," Loki said, "I suggest you bother to exert the effort of informing me yourself rather than–"

"Rather than what? Choosing the most efficient way of asking you to come on up?"

Loki misliked Tony's tone. "Are you forgetting who you are speaking to?"

"It's kind of hard to forget when there's a Norse deity staying in my tower. And it's not like I went 'ooh I know what'll get his royal Asgardian ass in a twist' and–"

"What is it that you wanted exactly, Stark?" Loki interrupted, crossing his arms.

"Oh – you're back to that name now, are you?" Tony asked. If the change bothered him, he showed no signs of it, continuing on as if nothing had happened. "Anyway, I wanted to run a little experiment. See, I've been working on making sure there's no way Ulton will happen again so I've been disconnecting the internet, Bluetooth, you know, anything that it could use to escape into the outside world if this goes badly. And after a bit of tweaking I finally managed to start getting some readings from the Time Gem."

"Oh?"
"Yeah. Trouble is the results aren't telling me a lot yet. Because it's magic, it's fairly new to Friday. It's not like I have much to compare it to. So I'm thinking I'll need a control. That's where you come in."

"And by that I assume you wish me to grant you some sort of favour."

"Well, yeah. You've got magic I can compare to the Time Gem and who knows, we might even be able to correlate some of the essence of your magic with how your magic effects the world around you and line those results up with the stuff the gem emits. I'm having trouble distinguishing the magical part from the radiation and other energies or whether they're all the same thing or what."

"And you want me to what, exactly? Stand still while you dissect--"

"Actually, all I'll probably need to start with is you to just conjure an illusion or something."

Loki eyed him with scepticism. "That's... all?"

"Yup. That's all for now. Depends on the results, I guess. There's no need to look at me like that, you're not gonna become my next lab rat or anything."

"Why an illusion?" Loki asked. "Why not raw magic?"

"Uh," Tony said, "first off I didn't know that was a thing you could do. And secondly, part of the plan was to start off comparing the readings from you making illusions to the readings the illusions themselves emit. Then I'd be able to distinguish between what magically created objects look like and what magical activation or whatever you'd call it looks like."

"And I suppose that would allow you to get a better glimpse of when the Time Gem is responding to you specifically rather than it reacting in general."

"Got it in one," Tony said, clicking his fingers.

"Then I shall acquiesce," Loki said, "providing that you do not presume to summon me like that in the future."

"Done. I'll get Friday to tell you please and everything."

Loki scowled.

"Fine," Tony sighed, "I'll waste unnecessary time and energy walking instead of utilising the technology I already have."

Loki ignored Tony’s jibe. "Good."

"Ready to give this a shot then?"

"Now?"

"You're here now, might as well."

Loki conjured the first thing to come to mind: the Time Gem, sitting on the worktop bench alongside the genuine.

"Did you--"

"Behind you," Loki directed.
"Oh," Tony said. "Pretty convincing fake by the way. Shame about–"

“I must admit I am curious,” Loki said, coating the screens he assumed contained the readings with blackness. “I wonder whether you require your technology at all to be able to distinguish the real gem from the fake.”

“Is now really the time to go all trickster god on me?”

Loki smiled thinly. “Your technology is still a long way away from being able to sense how much you have connected with the gem. If you are able to pass the test, as it might be, then that would be a far faster indicator and measure of your progress.”

The corner of Tony’s mouth twitched. “Take it touching is cheating.”

“You presume correctly.”

“Challenge accepted.”

Tony approached the two gems sitting side by side and held a hand over each one. Loki had been anticipating having to wait longer but Tony’s answer came quicker than he expected.

"This one feels more you," Tony said, pointing to the one on the left.

Loki suppressed a smile. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. Absolutely." And then to prove it, Tony slammed his hand through the illusion. Unsurprisingly, his hand went straight through and collided with the table below. What had been rather unanticipated was the illusion remaining intact, entirely unimpaired and unaltered. "Huh? I thought–"

Loki made a shushing sound as he strode forwards to pull Tony out of the way so that he could examine the oddity more closely for himself. It was Loki’s illusion – it should have dissipated when touched, that was what every illusion he conjured did. So why had this one been any different?

Loki hovered a finger over the false gem and then slowly pushed downwards through it. No shattering, no holes appearing in the illusion, no dissolving, just… Just as if nothing had touched the illusion at all, as if the illusion was able to withstand physical matter passing through it. So many questions were on Loki’s lips and–

"So it's not just me," Tony said. "That's not normal."

"This…” Loki said. “This isn't how it usually works." Loki withdrew his finger and swiped his hand through the entire illusion. The illusion looked as solid as ever.

"Uh – been reading some new spell books lately or something?"

"Hardly."

“Then–”

“Unfortunately," Loki interrupted, “I have no concrete answer. This– This isn't how illusions work: once the illusion has made contact with something concrete, the illusion becomes impaired.”

"So you make what are essentially holograms now?"
"I don't know what these holograms are that you speak of. I used the same conjuring methods without alterations as I have always done, I do not understand why—"

"If this isn’t you just improving your magic, does that mean this is another weird alteration? Like if time's gone all haywire, maybe you’ve learned how to make holograms without realising it yet? Or if we’ve actually switched universes, maybe in this one your magic works differently?"

Even from Loki's perspective, the theories sounded rather convoluted and unlikely as they went against the very nature of illusions: illusions were made to be breakable, that was what made them illusions instead of conjurations.

"I have a different theory," Loki announced quietly.

"Oh?"

"It has to do with the Tesseract."

"The Tesseract? But the space stone doesn’t control reality, only—" Then realisation dawned on Tony's face. "Except gems are more than just magical containers for each of the elements… They’re powerhouses. So you think you’re doing what exactly? Channelling its power without realising?"

"That is exactly what I think."

"So the Tesseract is what? Some kind of huge external magical battery you're getting extra juice from?"

"I... I believe so."

Tony let out a laugh. "Sweet."

Loki supposed he had noticed the effects of teleportation decreasing with time and had attributed it to the Tesseract being more compliant. There had been no pain the last time he teleported, or the time before that, or... Now that he came to think of it, Loki struggled to recall precisely when the last time he had felt the ill effects of the Tesseract had been. But Loki felt no different; there was no surge of power coursing through his veins and there was no magical signature he had registered mingling with own. Perhaps it was because – assuming his theory was correct – the Tesseract was not lending him any more power over the domain of space, but was lending him its energy instead. Maybe the two were two distinct things that could be channelled separately. Maybe the fact that Loki felt no different was an indicator that his system and the Tesseract were more compatible, rather than it causing his senses to go into overload. Maybe he had somehow finally passed the things that felt like tests the first time he had wielded the Tesseract, maybe the lack of feeling meant that the Tesseract had no objections to lending him some of its power. The fact that it was subtle enough for Loki to not have noticed...

When was the last time he had tried to dispel an illusion like that anyway? When had this change happened? Had it happened gradually or all at once? Was there any other form of power he had unknowingly unlocked? Was it only his illusions it had affected or were there other areas of magic it had affected too? Was it possible that the extra power could be channelled through non-magical means as well?

And more to the point – how could all this have happened without Loki being aware of it? Was it simply a matter of it occurring gradually over time or was there something more to it, like Tony had originally theorised?
Loki’s lack of awareness of the alteration was somewhat disturbing but it did not override the glee that without even putting conscious effort into it, Loki was closer to the Tesseract than he had ever been and the possibilities of that, so many possibilities, made his breath catch in his throat.
Chapter 25

The next line of Loki's enquiries had him diverging into research on Hela. For such a powerful figure, she was an oddly elusive one; little was known about her other than she governed Helheim and thus had earned the title of the Goddess of Death.

Thanos had, Loki recalled, much preferred to name her Lady Death and Loki wondered why that might be. Thanos was no god regardless of how much he desired the power of one and perhaps he misliked the unequal standing in their titles – Thanos the Mad Titan and Lady Death sounded like a much more evenly suited match than Thanos the Mad Titan and the Goddess of Death.

Loki supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that so little was known about Hela – few, if any, could have returned from the realm of the dead to speak of her, although that did raise the question of how the world of the living came to know of her. She was like a shadow in the pantheon of the gods; it was almost entirely universally accepted that she existed and yet none had seen her face or heard her voice – none except Loki. The legends of her contained details of a face half rotten and mutilated, the face of a child, and yet Hela was neither of those things.

Loki found no mention of Hela and her relation to the Norns or how a live soul could enter Helheim or escape it. But he did manage to find one curious detail, a detail that was consistent across all of the sources he used: none of the books contained a single mention of her before she became the Goddess of Death or of her origin and how she came to be. Without exception or giving a singular reason, all the books and scrolls and journals had collectively revised themselves at one time or another, omitting the information they previously contained and only addressing its existence when they dismissed whatever they had stated earlier as inaccurate and unfactual. Stranger yet, the changes in the sources had all happened within a relatively short period of time – it might have occurred a couple of thousand years ago, but Loki doubted Asgard’s priorities with regards to its scholars and recorders of history had dramatically changed since then.

Loki had tried to dig deeper, wondering, or perhaps hoping, if Hela had created or discovered a method of contacting the Norns that could be linked to whatever information had been so thoroughly revised. He found nothing.

Finding nothing was rapidly becoming a regular occurrence.

Weary of being defeated by scrolls and papers and books, Loki decided to pay Heimdall another visit. Thor had instructed Heimdall to answer what questions he could he saw fit to answer and Loki thought he might as well make use of a person who had little motive to lie to him. That and the fact that Heimdall was one of the few people Loki knew who was of age when the revision had taken place became rather significant factors.

Heimdall’s recollection of the time period had only added to Loki’s suspicions. Not being able to recall a very specific revision of information from a significant length of time ago alone would have been understandable, especially given that watching over the maintenance of libraries and scripture was hardly Heimdall’s duty – why would Heimdall have any interest in reading when he could simply cast his gaze into the sky as see as far out as he wished? Why would he immerse himself in literature when he had the sights the whole of the Nine Realms had to offer at his disposal?

The lack of conviction in Heimdall’s voice had further implications, Loki was sure of it. His descriptions were vague and inconsistent and there was something else there too, something that at first Loki struggled to identify. That thing was doubt. If Loki was correct, he had for the first time
witnessed the barest trace of uncertainty in Heimdall.

The conversation had left Loki with two possible conclusions: the first was that for whatever reason, Heimdall was lying; and the second was that Heimdall’s vagueness had not been deliberate. Heimdall, treasonous though he often was, was at least an honest traitor. If Heimdall wished to withhold information it was far more like his character to refuse to answer rather than fabricate a fiction of an unclear picture of that time period. Or maybe there was a third conclusion: Loki was reading far too much into it out of sheer desperation.

Deciding that it might be an idea to ask similar questions to another citizen of a similar age another time, Loki had returned to Stark Tower. Returning there with little to show for his efforts was becoming a habit but Tony, on the other hand, had been making more progress than Loki had been doing. Loki had been asked – by Tony in person on that occasion – to allow Tony to run scans on him while he wielded the Tesseract and he had not seen the man since.

Loki was so used to Tony being anywhere but their communal living areas that it shocked him to see him stood in the kitchen. The shadows underneath Tony's eyes had grown and he shuffled towards the coffee machine, clutching some sort of cuboidal device with two long prongs like antennae sticking out of the top of it in his hands.

“Don’t judge,” Tony said. “It’s an early model.”

"An early model of what exactly?"

"Something to detect the energy signature of the Time Gem's magical energy to precise increments. And yeah, I mean the magical energy, not just the" – Tony rubbed his eyes – "...energy energy."

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I hadn’t realised technology on Midgard was advanced enough for that to be possible.”

“It wasn’t.” Tony took a long sip of coffee.

"In fact," Loki said, "I'm uncertain if any realm has technology advanced enough to do that."

Tony gave a slight smirk over his mug. "Well, one does now."

The realms that were home to magic users relied on their senses rather than technology to detect magic and for that reason, no one had any reason to attempt to create an artificial magic detector to do that job for them. The fact that Tony had, and all within a matter of days – well, that was... not unimpressive.

"Do you think you would be able to attune it to other Infinity Gems?" Loki asked.

Tony pulled a face. "Maybe the Tesseract. There's no way I can use it to track down the rest of the Infinity Stones across the universe. Sure, each gem emits a massively powerful – and I mean a ridiculously massively powerful amount of energy – but other things do too when the whole universe is in play. The amount of interference from across space... There's just no way I could do it even if I did somehow know what each of their energy signatures are. I mean, each star is essentially a giant nuclear reactor – well, it's a bit more complicated than that but you get my point. And," Tony added, holding up a finger, "I've only been able to make this because I already have a gem at close range to attune to. But if the readings suddenly start going crazy with Infinity Stone type energy, at least we'd get some warning before our Thanos shaped problem makes a Thanos-shaped hole in the city."
"That may be useful."

"It's what I'm for, isn't it?" Tony's tone was light but there was a graveness in the lines of his face that were not normally as present.

Loki picked up the mug he had claimed as his own from the counter and gave a small indication with it, a joyless toast. "You and me both, it would seem."

***

The sound of shouting – no, not shouting, more of a loud dispute – roused Loki from sleep. It took him a belated moment to place the voice; it sounded familiar somehow and yet... Ah. It was the woman who had introduced herself as Pepper Potts, one of the people Tony had been the most relieved to learn was still alive.

"Tony," Loki heard Pepper say, "you need to listen to me."

"I'm fine, Pep, I've gone way longer–"

"No." Her voice had become firmer.

Loki doubted there was imminent danger. If there was, something would have brought word such as Friday or Tony himself or maybe even word from Heimdall. No – for whatever reason, the disagreement had an emotional element.

Curiosity got the better of Loki and he made his way into the living space, acting as if he was doing nothing more innocuous than seeking breakfast. Neither of them so much as glanced in his direction; she was too fixated on glaring at Tony and he was too busy trying to pacify her.

"Tony," she said and something about her tone said that she'd done this far too many times before.

"I'm an adult," Tony replied. "For some reason, no one ever believes me when I say I can look after myself."

"Wonder why. Your own inventions are better at looking after you than you are. Friday was the one who called me here after you haven't slept in over fifty hours and–"

"Should've known just muting Friday wouldn't be enough," Tony muttered. "It never is."

Loki opened the fridge to search for the bread.

"Luckily, someone programmed a backup plan in case you were stupid enough not listen to Friday," Pepper said.

"Me? Did my past-self do that? Traitor."

Loki placed the bread in the toasting machine.

"Yes. You did. Because – like every other person on the planet – you're smarter when you actually get sleep. This... This isn't healthy, Tony."

Tony ran a hand through his hair. "Look..."

Suddenly, Loki felt as if he was intruding but there was no possibility of retreating now, not when the toast popping would give him away completely. Neither of them seemed to be paying him any mind, maybe if he was quiet enough...
No, that was obscene. Loki was a guest and they were in the shared area. If they wished their disputes to remain private they should have had them elsewhere and Loki would be damned if he was reduced to skulking around like some sort of timid rodent.

"I need get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible," Tony said.

"You've also got to sleep."

"You weren't there, Pep. You didn't see– I know everyone's fine at the moment, okay? I know everyone's still alive and kicking but I don't know how long it'll last... Or if it even will last. I can't lose focus just because everything looks like it's fine."

"Tony," Pepper sighed, "I don't how many times I have to tell you that you're not personally responsible for the safety of the entire world but even if we ignore that, the fact is that not sleeping will make you lose focus anyway so–"

"Oh no, Pep. This is where you're wrong. In this case, I'm literally responsible for the entire world. Maybe even the universe."

"You're being ridiculous, no one can hold that much weight without breaking."

"Alright, maybe a slight exaggeration. It's not just me who's responsible for the entire world-slash-universe." Tony jerked a thumb in Loki's direction. "There's the other guy responsible." Loki found himself wishing his toast would cook faster. "So if I slack off," Tony continued, "it could be the end for everyone. It won't just be me in danger – it's not like I'll be the only person affected, okay? Everyone will be, everyone on this planet, everyone on all the other planets. Do you know how many billions of lives that is? Because I sure don't. And what's one guy feeling a little sleepy against all that?"

Pepper visibly deflated. "Tony," she said, gently this time. "I don't think anyone can hold that weight."

"I can. I have to."

"Why you, Tony? Why does it always have to be you?"

"Because if I don't," Tony said, "more people will die."

"You can't know that."

"I saw it. I lived it. I faced the reality where everything went to shit and I'm not risking that happening ever again. So yeah, I can know that. Even if I didn't see anything, there are these three old women in the sky who can see literally every single choice and outcome so... And yeah, I know how insane it sounds."

Pepper was at a loss for words. And then, for the briefest of moments, her eyes sought Loki's as if she was pleading his help. Loki was spared having to respond by his toast loudly popping up and allowing him to busily himself.

"If you're going to claim responsibility for everything – which I stand by being ridiculous – how can you do that when you can't even be responsible for yourself? How are you supposed to think clearly when you've barely slept in a week? You say you've got stuff to figure out – then sleep and maybe your brain will function how it should function. Trust that the universe won't collapse just because you're not fighting for it for several hours, okay?"
Loki did an immaculate job of spreading the butter. "It might do. If Thanos is out there and–"

"For an intelligent person you can be incredibly stupid," Pepper said. "Sleep."

Tony looked downwards. "You can't keep running on empty," Pepper reminded him.

Tony didn't reply. "Promise me?" Pepper asked.

Loki picked up his knife and plate and deliberated the merits of eating elsewhere versus his pride.


"Thank you. I'll be over again tomorrow."

"The protocols would call you if–"

"I know," Pepper said over her shoulder on her way out, "but I'm checking on you anyway."

Tony turned to Loki once she had exited. "Can you believe that? I'm so used to being sleep deprived that my brain might actually work better without it. I mean, practically all my eureka moments have been after like forty hours without sleep at least so my brain's practically conditioned to–"

"She does have a point."


"I lived through it too." Loki did not need to specify that he had been referring to Thanos's attack. "I understand just as much as you do that we need to solve this as quickly as possible."

"As quickly as possible doesn't involve spending a third of the time sleeping. If–"

"Not even Asgardians can go indefinitely without sleep and still function effectively."

"I wasn't planning on not sleeping period – I was gonna take catnaps, you know?"

"Based on what little I know of human biology, that would hardly be a sufficient amount."

"Of all the people likely to be concerned about my health, you'd be last on my list."

"You'll be far more efficient if you actually–"

"I don't even need that much sleep anyway. I must be in like the one percent of the population that can still function fine on four hours a night."

Loki rolled his eyes. "I don't know why you insist on arguing against the idea of a reasonable amount of sleep when you have already agreed to–"

"I don't like unnecessary delays, that's all."

"Did your mother never teach you that an arrow can only fly forward after it has been drawn
"No," Tony said. "I don't know, maybe she would've done if she hadn't been murdered."

Loki stilled. When Barton had been Loki’s informant, he had said it was a vehicle accident that had killed Tony’s parents, not murder.

Tony took another long sip of coffee, avoiding meeting his eyes and Loki wondered what had changed.

"Er," Tony hastened, "anyway – I've got stuff to be getting on with. I wanna see if I can make something that's compatible with the energy the Time Gem emits rather than just reading the energy it emits. I need to figure out how to channel it."

Loki frowned. "Channel it? You mean wield it. I doubt that any technological equipment would allow you to wield the Time Gem's power—"

"About that... I was thinking after the results the scan gave me – you know, the one where I compared you making an illusion with you using the Tesseract."

"Yes?"

"Well with the Tesseract, it was kind of like you were acting like a live wire. Like you flicked a switch and let the current flow straight through you. That's a simplified version of it anyway. This is a bad comparison but it's like the Infinity Stone's the one controlling the tap and you're whatever it flows into. A hose? Yeah. The Tesseract's both the tap and water source and you're the garden hose. Did I just make that analogy?" Tony put down his coffee. "Huh. Maybe Pepper did have a point."

"It would bring me relief to believe that your analogy would have been better if you actually had slept rather than the alternative."

"Honestly? Me too, buddy."
"I've been waiting for you," Tony said the instant Loki emerged in the living space that morning, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet as he spoke. Loki rarely saw Tony before noon and on the few occasions he did, Tony often elected to communicate in a language of grunts and mumbles rather than using full sentences.

"May I ask why?" Loki would have been more worried if Tony had sounded concerned rather than something that verged on excitement.

"I made something you'll want to see."

"Consider me intrigued."

"All right then, Intrigued. You know the drill: up to the workshop we go."

***

Loki had never seen anybody so eager about a machine that spat sparks like a fountain spitting water – apparently this was progress, though he had yet to hear the reasons why.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Tony said.

Loki looked between Tony and the machine and kept a clear distance from it. "I suppose the lights from the sparks would make a fine display if they didn't raise concern for my own safety."

Tony waved a hand dismissively. "Yeah, never mind that. You're ignoring the point. And the point is that this thing," he said, pointing a finger at the machine, "runs on Time Gem energy."

Loki was taken aback. "It does?"

"Yup." Tony grinned to himself. "It's Time Gem compatible. Well, virtually anyway." Tony's eyes were bright with delight and it made him look younger than Loki had seen him. "Want to take a look?"

"Show me."

Tony twirled his hand and bent his back in what Loki assumed was supposed to be an exaggerated form of a regal bow. "As you wish." Tony flicked a switch and a low whirring noise indicated the thing hadn't been fully activated up until that moment.

The connections between the machine and the Time Gem glowed orange.

"The gem’s allowing you to extend its power," Loki said in shock. "Do you have any idea how much of a step in progress that is?"

"I'd call it a leap in progress. A massive Olympic-level leap." Tony pressed a button that caused the noise to get louder and louder and the smell of something burning began to accompany it. Heat rose in visible waves from some sort of nozzle at the front of the metal container. "I just need to find a material that can fully handle this kind of" – the machine exploded – "...energy."

***

The guise of an unremarkable Asgardian citizen was one that Loki found himself often wearing as
of late, especially with regards to the library. They had granted him access to the towers of the scholars, and it was only under the veil of a disguise that Loki truly realised how much easier it had been when he was recognised as a prince. Not that that would help him now.

He knew little of the scholar he sought an audience with, choosing her as one of the few remaining writers who was still alive and of a sound enough mind to still be active and working.

Loki rapped sharply at her door at the top of the spiral staircase he had been directed to and waited. He expected a response, to hear the sound of footsteps or a voice calling out. Instead, it was silent. Loki knocked again, louder this time. Just when he was about to raise his knuckles to knock a third time, the door creaked open to reveal a wrinkled woman who stooped approximately three heads shorter than him.

She squinted up at him in confusion. "You're not my servant," she finally croaked.

"Is that disappointing?"

She coughed in an attempt to clear her throat but the words came out sounding just as hoarse. "I was expecting him to fetch me my midday bread and honey…"

"My lady, I am sure that can still be seen to," Loki reassured her.

She turned her gaze to him and eyed him more shrewdly than he had thought her capable of. "You fancy yourself quite the charmer, don't you?" Then she broke into a smile. "Oh don't look like that, dear boy. I find myself deprived of decent company on most days. Please," she said, beckoning him in, "come inside."

"That is most gracious of you," Loki replied, stepping through the door as he did so.

"It's been so long since I've last had a visitor," she informed him. "And there's only so many conversations you can have with your servants, you know how it is."

"I do indeed."

"Especially when you get to my age..."

Loki couldn't claim to be personally familiar with that. "I can imagine."

"Heh. The centuries will fly by and you'll be as old as I am before you know it."

Loki doubted he would have the good fortune to survive for that long, not with the penchant he had for making enemies. He gave her a thin smile. "So I have been told."

"Yes, but you never believe it until it's too late. You young gentleman are all the same," she sighed. Loki couldn't remember the last time he had been accused of being a gentleman and wasn't certain whether to be flattered to have earned the title or insulted to be accused of being the same as the rest of them. "You think you'll never get old until it happens."

"In that case, I shall endeavour to heed your warning as best as I am capable of."

She twisted her lips and shook her head slightly. "My, you really are a charmer, aren't you?" She shuffled further into the room, having to lean her weight on a stand as she passed it. "Take a seat, dear."

Loki took the only other available chair he assumed wasn't hers – hers was the closer one marked
by the quill and parchment on the table in front of it. She manoeuvred herself into the chair opposite him and picked up the quill as if by force of habit. There was a slight tremor in her grip and it gave the feather the appearance of vibrating.

“You’ll have to wait until my servant returns before I can offer you anything, I am afraid.”

“Oh, there is no need.”

The wrinkles around the corners of her eyes deepened with humour. “Of course there is. You’ll stay longer if you have something to eat and drink.”

It took Loki a moment to respond. “You are too kind.”

“Anything to liven up my day,” she said and looked wistful for a moment. “They all start to feel the same after a while, you see.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“Dear me, you are intent on keeping me sweet, aren’t you? Go on then, boy. I have no complaints. What can I help you with?”

“This—” Loki began.

“Take your time,” she interrupted. “Please.”

"This might sound slightly odd..."

She leant forward ever so slightly. “All the better.”

"Well,” Loki said, “I was researching a particular topic and cross-referencing materials when I noticed all the writings I could find had been amended all around the same period of time. And what's more, there are no traces of the information the original texts contained.”

She stroked her chin. “All of them were amended?”

“Yes.”

“How peculiar.”

“I thought the same.”

"And you’re after an original version then, I suppose?” she asked.

"Well, yes. But that is not all."

"I do have a lesser known personal library which I assume is why you sought me out. I could lend you items you need if—"

"Actually," Loki intercepted, "the reason I sought you out was because you are one of the authors who amended the scripts."

She looked taken aback. "I am?"

"Yes."

"What book is this?"
“It was called The Origin of the Aesir. It was amended several centuries after first being published.”

A slow light dawned in her eyes. “Yes,” she said. “That sounds familiar...”

“A chance to see the original script would be wonderful, but I do have a number of other questions as well.”

“Ask away then, dearie.”

“Why did they all need to be amended?”

Her gaze had lost some of its sharpness. "It was a long time ago, you understand if some of the details are vague."

“Of course.”

“Let me think...”

"Certainly."

She closed her eyes to focus, frowning in concentration. Then her features went slack and Loki feared she had fallen asleep until her eyes opened, unfocused and uncertain. “I must apologise, I– I thought I remembered for a moment.” She shook her head and tucked away white strands of hair behind her ears. “That entire era is a blur to me now, I hope you understand.” She caught Loki’s eye and his unmasked disappointment. “But don’t fear, I won’t give up that easily. It’s not often that I get the company of handsome young men like yourself. I will try again.” She closed her eyes for longer and just when Loki thought she surely must have fallen asleep this time, she proved otherwise. “It’s there,” she said. “It’s lurking in the back of my mind but I just can’t quite get through to it...” She smiled apologetically. “It seems my memory isn’t what it used to be. Perhaps if I jogged it somehow...” She slowly pushed herself up to her feet, using the table as leverage. “I’ll tell you what, come with me and I’ll see if we can find the original text. I don’t know if I would have kept it, mind you, but it’s worth a look.”

Loki rose to his feet and offered her his arm, which she accepted, shuffling alongside him as they made their way towards another door at the back of the room.

“It’s just through here,” she directed. “It might be a tad dusty in there, I’m afraid. Some of the books haven’t been touched in goodness knows how long and there’s quite a lot of them too.” She paused to regain her breath and then continued on. “Are you in a hurry, dear?”

Only in a mild rush to rid the universe of Thanos before he destroys it. “I will search for as long as it will take,” Loki replied instead.

“You could be in there for some time. How things pile up, I don’t know—” Her words came to an abrupt halt as she stumbled over something on the floor and it would have caused her to fall if she hadn’t managed to catch herself on Loki’s wrist. “Dear me, sorry about that, how clumsy of m—” She cut herself off and stared at him, eyes wide.

Something seemed so utterly wrong in her expression that Loki felt compelled to ask. “My lady?”

“Loki...” she whispered.

Loki stiffened. How had she--
How stupid he had been. He should have realised his illusion would have fallen away the instant
she had grabbed his wrist, the jolt of shock causing him to lose his concentration and momentarily
forget the importance of his disguise. He shouldn’t have let her get so close. He shouldn’t have
risked revealing his true character like that all because her body was frail and she needed assistance
walking. He shouldn’t have let her convince him that he was some sort of gentleman and to act
accordingly.

_Sometimes, Loki thought, I am worse than Thor._

“Tell no one of this,” Loki murmured. Those were his last words to her.

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Another trail of potential clues had led Loki nowhere. One of these days, he would no longer be
surprised when that happened.

He had still held hopes when he had crept into her library in the dead of night and he had still held
hopes when he found the box containing the other publications she had written around the same
era, but it wasn’t until he found nothing but the outer bookbinding of the title that he truly began to
understand what frustration was.

He had found himself cursing the Norns far more often than usual as of late. Sometimes, Loki was
so certain they were the reason for all of this, for all his narrow misses of small victories.

Tony’s progress only caused him further conflict. Of course, Loki wouldn’t have wished for
Tony’s progress to be hindered all in order to quiet his questions of his own adequacy. Sometimes,
it was a relief to see that at least one of them had made _some_ progress. And other times… Well,
other times it caused Loki to question why he was staying on Midgard at all if his presence was no
longer required.

Regardless of which side of the dilemma witnessing Tony’s progress fell on, Loki could not deny
that it was an excellent distraction.

"What," Loki said when Tony presented him with his latest invention, "is _that_?"

"See this thing here?" Tony pointed a finger at the semi-transparent dome shape sitting on top of
the device. "It's basically a variation of the arc reactor, complete with casing and all. I needed
something that’d be able to withstand the energy from the Time Gem without blowing up in my
face and I was thinking my arc reactor did a pretty good job stopping you hijacking my brain with
the glow stick of destiny so…"

“That makes sense.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “it’s surprising how often stuff I do makes sense. Anyway, I had to use
vibranium for the rest of it because it’s the only metal I’ve found that can actually deal with that
amount of energy without exploding in my face. Only the best for an Infinity Stone, I guess.”

“Vibranium...” Loki murmured. “How did you get hold of vibranium? Even on Nidavellir, the
metal is extremely rare. I wasn’t aware that Midgard even has its own sources of it.”

“It’s rare here too.” Tony fingered his beard. “Very rare, actually.” And then with deliberate
offhandedness, Tony added, “I had to melt down Cap’s shield.”

"Ah. And how has he taken the news of the fate of his beloved shield?"
Tony shrugged but there was a rigidness to his shoulders that made the movement look unnatural. "He left it to me. So I guess that means I get to do whatever I want with it." Tony might have sounded convinced but he there was guilt in the features of his face.

"He left his shield?"

"Technically, it belonged to my father."

"Technicalities aside, I find it odd that he would voluntarily relieve himself of his shield, as ridiculous as the item might be."

Tony’s face tightened. “I told him he didn't deserve it. Apparently, he agreed. But hey – the guy's alive – it's not like I'm dishonouring his memory or anything. And if his shield gets to be used as part of protecting the universe, I guess it honours the legacy and all that.” Tony looked everywhere but at Loki.

"I take it this happened during the…” Loki began, pausing to search for a word that wasn’t too harsh, "disbanding of your team of Avengers."

"Yeah. You could say that." Tony's voice was as stiff as his posture.

"And did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Did he not deserve it?"

Tony let out a false chuckle. “You know what? It’s really not that simple. Yeah, we had our disagreements about the accords, but he lied to my face about who killed my parents…” Tony trailed off and swallowed. “I don’t know, maybe anyone trying to protect the innocent deserves the shield.” His face was hard as he determinedly stared out of the window. “I mean, we both were trying to but I— I would’ve killed Barnes if Steve hadn’t stopped me. Sure, Barnes did do it but it wasn’t him, not fully. Hydra fucked with his head. They made him into a monster. They made him kill my mom.” Tony’s face twisted with self-loathing. “And I would’ve killed him, Loki – killed him – all because I was angry and couldn’t see straight. Who’s the real monster there? Me or the guy who wasn't even in control when he killed my mom?"

“I killed the monster that killed mine,” Loki said quietly.

Tony stopped and met his eyes like he was desperately searching for an answer. “Did it make it any better?”

Loki gave a single huff of dry laughter. “I died.”

“Oh.”

“So to answer your question: in short, no. Although I cannot say that I regret it either.”

“I'd wondered how you died. It’d have to be one hell of a thing to take you out.”

“Am I supposed to be flattered?” Loki found some dark amusement in that.

“Take what you like from it,” Tony said. Then he grew more serious. “For what it’s worth though, I’m sorry about your mom.”

Loki gave a stiff nod. “My mother has taken to Valhalla as well as can be reasonably expected.”
“Valhalla, huh?” Tony’s lips lifted upwards. “I guess I should’ve known your and Thor’s mom would’ve been a warrior-mom.”

Loki found himself giving a small smile in return. “Not in the traditional sense of a warrior. She was skilled both with and without a weapon.”

“Figures. You take more after her then?”

“She always told me so.” Though Loki had his doubts after everything he’d done, after all the multiple ways he’d betrayed her. No, a small voice whispered in his mind, not just her.

“That’s a yes then.”

“She wanted me to make the deal with Hela,” Loki found himself admitting. Tony, for once, remained quiet. “Even though a clause was that if I fail I will lose any chance of ever seeing her again.” Loki had so many questions about that.

Tony must have picked up on traces of Loki’s doubt because he suggested, “Because she thinks you’ll win.”

“Or because Hela revealed how much danger Thor was in.” Or because maybe Frigga would be content to spend an eternity without Loki after all he’d put her through.

“Or because she knows you well enough to know you wouldn’t be able to live with yourself – no pun intended – if Thor got badly hurt.”

"I will take great delight in ignoring that tasteless pun," Loki said, pulling for a distraction. It worked – it made Tony laugh.

“Since I never asked – how was Valhalla?”

Loki cast Tony a slightly odd look. “...Good? For the brief length of time I was there.”

“Do you guys get humans in Valhalla? It must be nice knowing you’ve got somewhere to go when you die, and you, pal – you got to experience the whole thing yourself. Kind of like an NDE except you actually died and it would’ve been for good. See, we don’t have that kind of reassurance here. For all we know, this life is it for us.”

“I… I didn’t have the time or reason to attempt to distinguish the race of every person in Valhalla. I don’t recall seeing any Midgardians but then again, I wasn’t searching for them either. I suppose it isn’t impossible.”

“That’s not as bleak as I thought it might be. But if Valhalla’s real then so’s Hel or Helheim too, right? Because that’s got to be more bleak. I think I’d prefer to rot in the ground than face an eternity of that.”

"The Hel I know of is not the same hell as of some of your religions. It is not a place of torture, merely a place for those that did not die a glorious death. But even so, I would expect it to be a grim place.”

"You don’t say," Tony said dryly and cocked his head to one side. “What defines a 'glorious death' anyway? What’s that supposed to mean? Is there a grading system? A scale of one to ten? A panel of judges? Oh god, it’s like a reality show. Please don’t tell me people have to call in to vote for their favourite to get into Valhalla.”
“No,” Loki said, “just Odin.” Or it was just Odin anyway. Loki wondered, not for the first time, if the council had managed to create a solution for the souls that could no longer be directed and given a place by Gungnir.

Tony pulled a face. “Just one guy?”

“That is correct.”

“Doesn’t sound like his verdict would be biased at all or anything. Sounds like a real fair system he’s got going on.”

“If Odin was still king,” Loki said, “as the Allfather of the Nine Realms, those words would technically be treason.”

Tony snorted. “Haven’t you guys ever heard of democracy?”

“Only against Odin’s own wishes, I am sure. But I, for one, am quite enjoying hearing this particular brand of treason.”

“Oh? You like me talking shit about your dad?” Tony grinned at him. “If I do yours, will you do mine? We can start a Shitty Fathers Club. Trade insults, friendship bracelets, yell up at an empty sky, that kind of thing.”

Loki blinked at him. No one he knew would have dared slander the Allfather like that, let alone relish it. Then again, this was Tony Stark. Loki supposed his expectations should have been adjusted accordingly. Authoritarian, the man was not. But to actually come even the slightest bit close to siding with Loki against the Allfather… That was something Loki was having trouble accepting had happened, let alone responding to it, even if it was in words and not deeds.

“I’ll make you an invite,” Tony continued. “Tuesday weekly sessions – how’s that sound?”

Loki laughed. “Wonderful, if not for our schedules both being a little busy at the moment.”

“Yeah – speaking of busy, I’ve been slaving away over this thing.” Tony gestured to the invention they had temporarily forgotten about despite it being the original purpose of their meeting. “And it’s finally paid off.”

That piqued Loki’s interest. “How so?”

Tony grinned at him. “Let me introduce you to my new laser,” he said and adjusted a dial Loki hadn’t noticed was attached to the contraption.

A beam of unmistakably amber light shot out of a miniature hole by the side of the dial. At first, Loki wondered what he was supposed to be seeing besides the light but then–

“Is that...” Loki uttered.

Tony grinned wider. “What did you recruit Hawkeye for if you’ve got decent enough eagle-eyes of your own?”

Loki was too transfixed by what he was seeing to bother to formulate a response. The change had been so subtle, so barely perceptible that he wouldn’t have registered if he hadn’t already been searching for a noticeable difference. Because right where the light cut through the air, right where it illuminated minuscule speckles of dust floating in the air, it had dawned on him that the pieces of dust were no longer moving.
They were completely and utterly still.
Out of pure curiosity, Loki was half-tempted to wave a hand in front of the beam of light just to see exactly what would happen.

"Wouldn't recommend it," Tony remarked. Loki hadn't realised he'd been quite that transparent. "Not unless you're volunteering to be my guinea pig."

"What," Loki asked, "is a guinea pig?"

"Oh boy. Imagine a really talkative potato with fur and you’re not gonna be far off. No relation of the pig – the name's pretty misleading. It's just a phrase that means to be tested on."

"I see," Loki said. And then, "I believe I technically already did that before when you–"

"No, no – that was analysing. When I say tested on, I mean in the sense of having no idea what'll happen if you do it rather than just taking readings from you. I mean, presumably you'd just be slowed down if you touched it but–"

"Slowed down?" Loki repeated. "Not stopped?"

"Uh – no. See the pieces of dust in the air there? They’ve not been stopped completely, just slowed down to the point where you can't see them moving. This is the furthest I've got. I've not managed to hit them with a pause button yet, just slow them down to like a one frame per minute rate."

"Ah," Loki said. He did not understand what Tony was referring to with the frames but he believed he understood the general gist.

"I'm working on upping the scale – a pause gun would be one hell of a sweet thing to have but uh... My good buddy the Time Gem is only letting me use miniscule amounts of its power at the moment so..."

"Well," Loki said, "it can't go allowing you access to all its power at once now, can it? And besides," Loki added, "maybe it's giving you a hint."

"What – like 'work on something else, dipshit' – that kind of thing?"

"In wording, no, but in essence perhaps so."

"It's not like I've got other options when it's only letting me have a tiny beam anyway." Tony patted the machine that contained that gem. "No offence – I'm not complaining," he told it, "I just want to see what you're capable of."

***

In the following weeks, Loki developed something on Midgard with Tony he never thought he would: a routine.

Days were spent researching, with Loki mostly reading and travelling to and from Asgard and Tony remaining in his workshop. Loki had some degree of success with tracking down the remaining authors, only to find disappointment when none of them appeared to be able to recall much about the rewriting of the books either. In some ways, the lack of clues revealed more than it hid: it meant that somebody or something had tampered with the memory of Asgard’s citizens. But
the question remained of who or what. Odin had been Loki’s first thought – he was hardly above erasing and modifying history to suit his needs after all – but Odin’s own magic, as impressive as it was, was not able to alter minds, unless that was another thing Odin had kept a secret for all these years. Loki supposed he wouldn’t put it far past him.

The possibility of magical tampering was another discovery that meant Loki was forced to read yet more books to see if there was some way of reversing the magic or at least detecting who had placed it upon them, but information about magic that affected the mind was sparse due to it having been outlawed long before Loki had been born.

Loki had come across rumours of those talented with the craft of altering minds who dwelled in a hidden location somewhere in Alfheim but – unsurprisingly – their exact whereabouts had been difficult to locate. Besides their craft being somewhat against the law, there was the matter of that if anybody did happen to stumble across them, it would probably not be all that troublesome for the mages to make the individual forget the meeting ever took place and send them back on their way.

Placing himself among the mages was an option, assuming he was able to eventually find them, but Loki did not like that he knew so little of what they were capable of. If what they did was anything similar to the abilities of the Mind Stone then they could have him do their bidding and could take the Tesseract from him in a heartbeat, not to mention all the other information they’d be able to extract from him. Even if Loki was able to guard his thoughts and true identity in their presence, it was still a risk he’d rather not take unless it became absolutely necessary.

A good portion of the evening he spent sitting in Stark Tower. Tony had decided that it would be his mission to find Loki some Midgardian cuisine he actually enjoyed and Loki had since been introduced to pasta dishes. By that time, they were in the habit of eating together more often than not and relayed information about each of their findings while they ate. Loki had discovered it to be beneficial to his thought process to verbalise his findings to Tony, who had not been familiar with magic for long, as it meant that the information had to be reassembled in a logical structure in order for it to be explained coherently, and Tony was very much capable of enquiring about avenues of thought Loki had not considered. Tony would often speak of getting ‘the sweet end of the deal’ before mentioning what invention he had been in the process of constructing. As of late, he had been attempting to alter the beam so that instead of it slowing down objects in time, it caused them to reverse, reverting to older and older versions of themselves.

“I’m not gonna turn water into wine,” Tony had announced one evening, “or even grapes into wine – I’m gonna turn raisins into grapes.”

That had still yet to be achieved but in the meantime, they had discussed the merits of such a device at length.

“I figured it’d be like pressing a rewind button on someone if I get this to a scale where we can use it on a person,” Tony had said. “Or who knows, maybe it’d even work on one of Thanos’s gems.”

Judging from the reaction of the Tesseract and how it seemed to respond by positively thrumming with excitement to the proximity of the Time Gem, Loki was not quite so convinced.

“I am not certain they would be quite so willing to be used to destroy one another.”

“Early days yet,” Tony had said, tightening one of the remaining screws at the table. “And it’s not as if it won’t come in useful in some other way anyway.” Tony placed the screwdriver next to his plate. “Right,” he muttered. “Moment of truth. You ready for this? Not everyone gets this kind of entertainment while they eat.” He jogged to the opposite side of the room and emptied a packet of innocuous-looking raisins on the settee.
Loki felt his eyebrow hitch.

“Grapes mean success,” Tony said, as if it was a commonly spoken idiom.

“I gathered.”

Tony bent down to squint through the line of sight on his device and used his finger to pull a trigger. An orange beam, slightly larger in diameter than the beam of the light that slowed time, shot out and struck Tony’s target. With a gentle touch, Tony eased the dial anti-clockwise.

The two of them waited with intent, eyes searching for signs of the fruit ripening or its colour restoring.

If the change was happening, it was happening slowly enough that it was almost imperceptible and Loki was uncertain if he saw a raisin grow slightly and look the barest hint more green or if his mind was deceiving him.

“You’re one tricky bastard, aren’t you?” Tony said.

“I thought you already knew that.”

“True,” Tony replied, “but I was talking to the Timey-Wimey gem, not you.”

Most evenings, Tony talked so much that Loki was always slightly both amazed and bewildered at how he still managed to eat his meal at the same rate as Loki did. At first, most of the topics of their conversations revolved around their… work? Loki was uncertain what else he could refer to it as. Unpaid labour? Unasked for quest? Undesired responsibility? Enforced obligation was probably a more accurate term. But on the days they either had little to discuss or little they wanted to discuss, needing a desperate respite from the usual day’s hardship, Loki allowed Tony to speak freely with little interruption. More often than not, Tony appeared to think it imperative that Loki should be more familiar with popular Midgardian tales and stories. Tony would be so eager that it was not rare for him to reveal all of the twists in the plot through his verbal narration of the tales and every so often, Loki would find himself being able to connect some of the bizarre statements Tony habitually made with a piece of Midgardian media. Asgardian tales did not have nearly so much variety and so Loki had developed a habit of adding his own twists and turns to make the tales he told more interesting, even though he chose to narrate far less often. It had been a welcome change to be distracted so thoroughly by harmless tales and stories, one that felt like a breath of fresh air.

Pepper Potts was the most frequent visitor, often appearing to check that Tony had been sleeping and feeding himself, as well as consulting him about the branch of prosthetic technology the company was in the process of developing. Rhodey was another of Tony’s visitors, one who appeared torn between wanting to avoid being in the same room as Loki and making conversation out of politeness. In the end he chose neither, often opting to converse with Tony and let Loki be a part of the background if he happened to be around. Loki had some fun with that, addressing Rhodey with nothing but absolute impeccable manners and revelling in the man's not particularly well-disguised unease.

Rhodey and Pepper Potts were the only other people Tony accepted into the higher levels of his tower. Loki had not given it much thought but somehow, he’d expected there to be more. The files he had long ago read on Tony spoke of rampant parties and debauchery, and now that he gave it more consideration, it seemed odd that Tony had so few he considered to be friends. Tony was hardly bashful and he was well liked among the Midgardians, practically a prince among them, and– Perhaps that was the reason for it then. Loki was certainly more introverted than Tony but he
was not bashful either, and being born a prince gave him a status that automatically elevated him above others. Some wanted to befriend him as a novelty, others for his wealth, others for the glory of royalty, and then there was Odin who had taken him on the whim of him being a useful political tool. Suitable friends were difficult to find, particularly when those unlikely to be too intimidated or impressed by his status inevitably preferred the company of his brother.

And speaking of his brother, Thor had arrived but had yet to enlighten Loki on what the reason for his visit to Stark Tower was. Thor had first assisted the labourers Tony had employed to repair the window and had not left once the task had been completed. In fact, Thor had been persistently attempting to speak to Loki alone and Loki had in turn been persistently taking more of an interest than he normally would have done in what device Tony was in the process of modifying.

Loki usually preferred to avoid the workshop while Tony was metal-working due to the sheer amount of noise: rhythmic banging, scorching and drilling, as well as Tony’s choice of music which, as far as Loki was concerned, would sound far too loud even if the volume was low – which of course it never was.

“Thor, buddy – you wanna make yourself useful?” Tony asked, holding out a container with nails sticking out of it. “I’ve got this that needs hammering and you’ve got a giant magic hammer, I’m just saying.”

“It will be no matter,” Thor said. “Mjolnir is not just a weapon; it is also a tool to build.”

Tony patted him absently on the shoulder. “Drinks on me after.”

Given that Thor accepting the request meant that he was obligated to stay to complete it, Loki was about to take the opportunity to leave and lose what had started feeling like his shadow over the past few hours when he was interrupted.

“Loki?” Thor asked quietly once Loki had turned away.

“What is it, Thor?”

“May I– Can I speak with you before I help Stark?” Thor’s eyes darted between Loki and Tony. “Alone?”

“Ah shit,” Tony said, causing both Loki and Thor to startle. “Okay, okay, I guess you two probably have a lot to talk about. The thing is, I know how your little chats get so if I’m leaving the two of you alone in a room, it’s gotta be one with less of my tech in, kapeesh?”

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Thor had not met Loki’s eyes since they had taken their seats in the living area.

Loki tried to place this, this level of unease that his brother so rarely displayed. On any other person, he'd call it humility.

Thor scratched his beard, his eyes distant, as if he was lost in thought.

Perhaps Thor had changed after all.

Loki had grown tired of waiting for Thor to state what the reason was for his visit. Thor’s presence complicated matters. On some level, calling it a relief to see his brother alive would be an understatement, but on another level, Loki still hardly dared to believe it – or believe it would last, anyway. The only thing worse than watching Thor die would be having to watch it happen twice
and for that, Loki found himself unwilling to spend time in Thor's presence when it was not essential.

The silence strained as Thor remained unspeaking.

"Out with it, Thor," Loki finally said.

Thor dragged his eyes away from the window. "Do you truly despise being around me so much? Can we no longer spend any time together without being at war over something?"

Loki struggled to recall the last time that had happened. They'd always been at war with something: in their childhood it had been imaginary enemies, in their youth and early adulthood it had been real enemies, and then later their enemies had become each other.

"Apparently not," Loki replied. He braced himself for Thor to hurl accusations at him but it did not happen. *Odd*, Loki thought.

"But if it is your wish then I will make this brief: I came here to propose terms."

Loki's eyebrows shot up and he laughed out loud. "Terms?" he exclaimed. "From you?"

"I believe they will benefit the both of us."

Loki laughed again in disbelief. "Oh, this is a new one. And remind me when exactly any of your ideas benefited the two of us."

Thor had the grace to cast his eyes downwards. Which was, Loki thought, a most un-Thor-like thing to do. So un-Thor-like that he almost did a double-take. Thor might have matured slightly over the last few years – but that much? Surely not. There was guilt there, Loki saw. But for what reason, he could not identify.

"It's not too late to start."

Loki's laughter fell completely silent.

"And why," Loki said, anger seeping into his voice "would you start now?"

Thor's fingers tightened on the cushion he held and he met Loki's eyes again. "I believe you have changed."

*A lie*, Loki's instincts told him. A cleverer lie, a subtle bending of the truth. Thor might have believed him to have changed but Loki doubted it was the true answer to the question. For all Thor's disquiet and tension, he had revealed an answer far too easily and the eye-contact had been considered, deliberate. For a reason Loki could never understand, far too many people were under the impression that eye-contact meant honesty – but the liars were also aware of that particular misconception, and the knowledge allowed them to weaponise it.

Loki was almost impressed that, poor though Thor's lie or mistruth might have been, he must have strayed down the path of dishonesty willingly and not entirely incompetently. Any worse liar than Loki, or anyone who did not know Thor quite as well as he did might have been fooled.

*But why?* Why would Thor lie about such a thing? Loki could only speculate so much on what little information he had but whatever the underlying reason was, it had caused the righteous Thor to see fit to evade the truth with something close to anxiety.
"I will humour you and listen to whatever you have proposed, if only to entertain myself," Loki replied.

"Good," Thor said. "I want to know where Father is."

"Not enjoying your rule, brother?"

"You know damn well that..." Thor placated himself by pausing to take a breath. "You know that I did not want to rule Asgard." And gone was the anger that had accompanied Thor's realisation that it been Loki he had been speaking to instead of his father during that conversation. "But, as I have said before, with this threat you have spoken of I can think of none better to guarantee the safety of our people than the Allfather."

"The Allfather is a guarantee of war," Loki corrected him, "not safety." What Asgard would need against Thanos would be a surrender and Odin would never grant it.

"Then if not for our people, do it for our family."

Loki stopped still.

"Family?" Loki repeated. "Is that what this is? Is that what you want? This is the closest our family has been to peace for years and that is because Mother is dead and Father is nowhere to be found and because we are too preoccupied with our impending doom to truly fight each other as we wish to."

Thor looked stunned. "Loki – I... I have no wish to fight you."

"Then if not to avoid a mighty blow from Mjolnir, why in all the Nine Realms would I allow you to release the Allfather?"

"Because he is our father."

"Not good enough."

"Then because I am your brother."

"You being my brother changes nothing. What do you think will happen? I allow you to release Father and we all return to the palace to feast together and spar together like we did when we were children? No. Odin will imprison me and I cannot allow myself to be locked away once more."

"He won't," Thor said so quietly Loki barely heard him. Then Thor spoke louder, "I will not allow that to happen."

"How touching this sudden change of heart is."

"Loki, is now really--"

"And what has spurred that, I wonder. You certainly didn't have any qualms against my unjust punishment the last time. You didn't so much as deign to visit me until you needed me. And now it is much the same. You want me to continue doing whatever it is I am doing, except with more supervision on the off-chance that I use whatever skills or objects I have gained along the way to seize more power. And then you can claim a victory not only for aiding the Nine Realms against Thanos by risking trusting someone with morals such as my own, but for finally bringing me, your lost wayward brother, not just to heel but to the side of the righteous." Loki's face was set in stone. "And all that accomplished with little more than a family reunion." The words had been bitter as
they left Loki’s mouth but his voice became gentler when he added, "It is nothing but a foolish dream, Thor."

"The Allfather has no grounds to imprison you," Thor said.

"Aside from treason, breaking Asgard’s peace terms against other realms, the patricide, the arguable regicide attempt, the attempted genocide, the attempted subjugation of an entire realm, and – ah, yes – more treason following that."

"You told me once that I should pay more attention to the wording of terms before I accept them. I think you should do the same."

Loki frowned. He was not used to Thor taking him unawares. "What do you mean?"

"Your sentence was spending the rest of your life imprisoned," Thor said, and the muscles in Loki’s stomach tightened in fear of what might follow, "and – those hours fighting Malekith and the Kursed aside – you did."

Loki’s lungs had seized.

Thor knew. Thor knew.

Thor knew that his death had been real.

But how?

Heimdall, Loki realised with growing horror. Heimdall must have told Thor, of course he would have done and probably long ago too – how could Loki possibly have overlooked–

And then it was Loki’s turn to not be able to meet his brother’s eyes. In many ways, dying would have been far easier than having to live through Thor knowing.

"I don’t know what you believe happened–" Loki began, unsure of what lie or half-truth he’d have to spin to be at least halfway convincing.

"It was real," Thor said. "All of it."

Loki’s muscles were so tight it felt as if he could no longer move.

"Was it?" Loki murmured.

"I do not know how you did it but Heimdall saw you die as I did and then hours later after I was long gone, he saw you sit up again."

"And naturally," Loki said, letting the cruel sarcasm soak his words. "because I only resurfaced hours later, there are no other explanations except that the act must have been genuine."

"He saw your wound close within a matter of seconds, Loki."

"You never had much of a grasp for magic, did you, Thor?"

"I admit that I don’t. But I know this much – you aren’t a healer. You know illusions and a handful of other basic spells from other disciplines, but you aren’t a healer and you certainly wouldn’t have been able to close such a wound without centuries of practice."

"That is not the magic I speak of. I have other magics too, other origins. Or did you forget?" Loki
let the last word hang in the air between them.

Thor let out a chuckle and it was a sad sound. “If the Frost Giants were capable of surviving such wounds, we would know. But that is irrelevant. Loki. Everything you said – everything you did – that... That was all real. You were all real and I...” Thor swallowed. ”I underestimated you. I... I didn't consider that it all might have been real once I knew you were alive again. And for that I am truly sorry.”

Loki couldn't stand it, how sincerely touched Thor was, how Thor spoke as if he had redeemed himself, how Thor's eyes had become slightly wet and it was simultaneously the most gratifying and disturbing and pitiful thing all at once.

"I held you as you died," Thor whispered, "and I still doubted you. Even after you said you didn't do it for him – oh, Loki..."

Loki recoiled backwards. He could withstand it no more.

"I said I didn't do it for him," Loki snapped, "not that I did it for you." Only an idiot would believe him now, only an idiot who witnessed Loki vowing it while staring right into his eyes, the last thing he thought he'd see – but then the only idiot who would believe him was sitting opposite him.

"For mother then," Thor said.

And that was easier. Even though Thor still looked doubtful, even though the reason for Thor speaking as if a single wrong word could shatter their newfound fragile civility into thousands of tiny shards was because he knew, it was still easier if there was still a chance that Thor might be convinced it had all been for Frigga instead.

"And what would you give me in return?" Loki asked.

"What?"

"You spoke of a proposition earlier," Loki reminded him.

"Yes..." Thor said. "I... I believe I might have some information that will interest you."

The nerve of Thor. To suggest that he – a warrior, not a scholar or even a fighter with the slightest modicum of interest in academics or research – and in such a shorter time period too – could have retained information Loki was not capable of finding.

"Oh please." Loki's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Do tell."

"It's the Aether," Thor said and Loki's head shot up. "I know where Odin sent it."

And for that, Loki would have delighted in punching Thor. Either that, or finding Thor a gift greater than Mjolnir.

Thor must have seen Loki's expression because Thor then added, "I found one of the people he sent it off with."

Loki’s jaw fell loose and he would have cursed Thor, cursed the Norns, cursed himself for his own bad fortune if he had been capable of speaking in that moment. How long had he spent meticulously following trails upon trails of clues when all Thor had to do was simply happen to speak to the right person? How was Thor so consistently favoured in his fortunes? Why when this was Loki’s task – Loki and Tony’s task – was he finding himself outshone once again? This was
Thor – Thor’s place was the battlefield, not instigating research.

"And I suppose you won't tell me where he sent it unless I cooperate with you," Loki said.

"You know the reasons why," Thor said and, to his credit, there was a slight hint of apology in his voice.

"And what if I refuse your terms?" Loki sounded far more convinced in the possibility of this outcome than he was in reality. "Would you put the safety of the Nine Realms in danger all for one man?"

Thor's mouth turned downwards and he fidgeted with his hands. "You understand why I shouldn't be king then."

"Oh, but this isn't a question of should-haves and shouldn't-haves – this is a question of what happens now. Because I doubt that even you would be quite that reckless." Loki looked to his brother. "You must have grown a little then, Thor."

"Then I would ask what happens to you after this is over, Loki. I could make it so you can walk free as a prince of Asgard, or you could spend the rest of your days running from the rest of our people."

Loki thought that with the Tesseract at his disposal, it would be rather difficult for them to catch him. But the thought of returning home – as himself, in his own skin... That still impossibly held some appeal, even if he was uncertain how long he would wish to remain there for.

"So you are proposing that if I tell you where Father is, you will... what exactly? Voice that I should be freed? Rally up the citizens of Asgard to pressure that council?" Loki let out a bitter laugh. "You know full well that I was never well-loved by the people."

"Perhaps," Thor admitted, much to Loki's surprise, "but you were never hated or despised either. And I would do more than voice my concerns: I would vouch for your honour."

Loki lapsed into silence. He blinked once. Then twice.

"My honour?" Loki repeated.

"You made it to Valhalla – even the Allfather saw your actions as honourable enough to grant it to you."

*So only in death was I ever worthy?*

"Vouching changes little–"

"I have the favour of the people and one of my acts, if you agree to our bargain, will be to officially null you of your sentence. Even if the Allfather was to try to reverse it, by his own terms you are free. You were bound to imprisonment until death – surely you see that? That's the exact brand of trickery that you always loved: making a person's own words their undoing."

"I have to admit, I am vaguely shocked that you managed to figure that out."

"I learned from the best," Thor said and there was warmth in his words. "I may learn slowly, but I do learn." Thor’s smile began to fade. “We should establish the exact terms before either of us agree to anything. If you tell me where the Allfather is and if he is alive and well, I will officially null you of your crimes committed in the past and will be your defence if Father should attempt to
imprison you again for the same crimes. I will also tell you of where Odin sent the Aether in hopes that it will aid you."

Loki did not miss that Thor had stated where Odin sent the Aether rather than where the Aether was.

“I will have a few adjustments of my own, of course,” Loki said smoothly and Thor’s face grew wary. “If the Aether is not to be found, our bargain will be void.”

Thor did not appear happy but he nodded anyway. “Do we have an agreement then?”

"I had not finished," Loki said. "Even with your word, I do not intend to remain so close by while Odin is freed. You may have given me your word but I have not forgotten that Odin has not, and I do not want him interfering when I have other more important matters to attend to. Once I tell you, you must wait at least a month before retrieving him–"

"–a month!"

"Yes, a month." By Loki’s estimates, a month would give both himself and Tony a nice amount of leeway for the use of the Time Gem, as well as a lengthy opportunity to explore whichever pathway Thor had provided.

Thor frowned. "Do you not think that you are pushing for your luck and overstepping boundaries?"

"Of course." Loki grinned. "A little opportunism is healthy."

Thor sighed. "Very well then, we have an agreement."

"I still have another term."

"Another?"

"Yes, another." And then, mostly because he could, but also just to see the expression on Thor’s face, Loki added, “I’ve always wanted a ship of my own.”
In the end, Thor had agreed to the ship clause. There were a number of conditions, namely that Thor would commission an airship to be built only after Odin was deemed safe and so long as Loki remained in Asgard's good graces. Thor had phrased it as if Loki was already in Asgard's good graces, which Loki thought was laughable.

And then the information was to be exchanged. After much arguing, it was eventually agreed that an impartial judge was required; Friday fulfilled that role suitably, taking in the name of the realm and the location Loki had left Odin's body, as well as what information Thor gave her in a separate room.

Friday had questions about Niflheim and how to locate the statues Odin was disguised amongst before eventually deeming Loki's response as an adequate one. Whatever Thor had been disclosing to her had taken far longer for reasons Loki could not identify.

Friday made an announcement when she had reached a verdict that both responses were – as far as she could tell – acceptable.

Loki and Thor met back in the space for seating and Thor’s greeting smile was tentatively warm.

Thor opened his mouth.

"Where is it?" Loki demanded before Thor could speak, his words puncturing Thor’s hopeful demeanour.

"Knowhere," Thor said.

"Nowhere?" Loki echoed. Then his fury set in. "And they name me a trickster. I must admit, I had not thought myself to be so susceptible to being fooled in such a way. What happened to your precious honour, Thor? I cannot be held responsible as an influence because if it was my antics you were attempting to mimic, then surely the attempt would have held some semblance of grace."

"You misunderstand me, brother. I said Knowhere. As in a place of not-knowing."

"That... That does not make any sense whatsoever."

Thor held out his arms helplessly. "I was not the one who named it." Thor looked to the ceiling. "Now – Lady Friday, tell me: where is my father?"

Loki did not bother to inform Thor that Friday did not reside in the ceiling.

"Your father resides on Niflheim," came the machine's response.

Thor turned to Loki, his eyes growing harder and harder.

And there it is, Loki thought. The disapproval he was far more accustomed to. The disappointment was a vast improvement over the gratitude; at least Loki knew what to do with disapproval.

"Loki. Why," Thor said, each word becoming more and more infused with anger, "is Father there?"

Loki folded his arms. "I believe you are already aware it is because I must have left him there, Thor."
"But Niflheim!" Thor exclaimed. "Niflheim is so cold... Father would have... Loki – you must tell me: did you allow father anything to protect him against such cold? How could you leave him there?"

"In answer to your first question: no. In answer to your second–"

"Father is never forthright about his weaknesses, but he is old and even he could not..." Thor trailed off in horror. "He would have frozen." Thor stood upright. "Do you have any idea how much danger you put Father in? Any idea, Loki? He was already nearing his Odinsleep--"

"He was past nearing it, actually."

Thor’s stare had morphed into one of absolute horror. "And so you... left him to freeze on the bleakest realm of them all with the company of noone but statues of ancient exiles?"

"I thought it fitting. Don't you agree?"

Thor's shoulders were heaving up and down with each of his breaths. It was a mechanism of Thor’s Loki was familiar with, a series of movements Thor made when he wished to contain his rage.

"You..." Thor began. "We agreed that Father has to be alive and well."

"And he will be," Loki said, "once he has been warmed up somewhat."

"You..." Loki said, "once he has been warmed up somewhat."

Thor's glare told Loki he thought him nothing short of despicable. "And you couldn't have simply locked Father up somewhere? You couldn't have ensured he would receive food and drink and would remain warm?"

"Certainly not," Loki said. "His magic is powerful, even when he is weakened. I have told you already that I cannot risk Odin halting my plans and if Odin was mobile and conscious, it would only be a matter of time before his escape would be inevitable. Now," Loki said, with a less than pleasant grin, "you see that we are both men of our words."

Thor sat back down, slowly.

"I believe you were telling me about Knowhere," Loki prompted.

And with a weary sigh, Thor complied.

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The relief that came to Loki upon discovering that, no, of course Thor’s discovery had not meant Thor had bested him in an intellectual pursuit, was immense. Loki thought himself an idiot for not realising sooner that Thor beating him to the chase of discovering the location of the unaccounted for Infinity Stone was down to nothing but sheer luck rather than skill. Thor’s luck, as it so often was with Thor, had come down to how charmed other people were by him.

And Thor had just so happened to have already befriended one of the people Odin had entrusted with the task of delivering the Aether – and that person had been Lady Sif.

Before Loki could ask where in the Nine Realms Knowhere was supposed to be located, Thor had rushed to explain that Sif and the Warriors Three had kept their silence partially because the Allfather had offered to forgive their previous treason if they did, and partially because there would be very few who believed them if they had spoken the truth.
“Odin sent Sif and the Warriors Three *outside* the Nine Realms?”

“With his dark energy, yes. It must have exhausted him.”

Loki rather thought Thor was missing the point. “Odin *knew*? Odin knew that there were other planets and species beyond the Nine?”

Thor shifted in his seat. “It would seem so.”

Loki let out a bark of a laugh. “Part of me is not surprised.” But in truth, that was not the complete tale; the other part of Loki had been surprised to learn Odin had known of other worlds and had elected *not* to conquer them.

“Father had his secrets,” Thor said, and even though he had acknowledged the fact, Loki was disappointed to see how little it had changed Thor’s regard for his father. Thor still held much reverence and esteem for Odin, it was clear in how he spoke and in his eyes. ‘Father had his secrets’ Thor had said, as if they should have accepted it as part of Odin’s right to privacy.

“Speaking as one of his secrets,” Loki said, his voice becoming harder, “I would have to say that Odin retaining his silence generally only benefits Odin. Do not make the mistake of painting Father as an altruist, brother.”

Thor’s mouth gave an unhappy turn. “I… I know that Father is not the man I once thought he was.”

Loki eyed Thor suspiciously. “You do?”

Thor confirmed the answer with a single nod. “I realised not so long ago that when you pretended to be Father, you were far kinder towards me than Father ever was.” Thor gave a chuckle that lacked humour. “I should have known that Father would never have granted me the freedom to walk away from the throne.”

“Of all the things I’ve been accused of, behaving too *nicely* has never been one of them.”

Thor gave a laugh then, a genuine one, and reached out to clap Loki on the neck. Loki stiffened with the sudden contact but Thor remained oblivious, too caught up in whatever had caused the sudden change in his spirits to go from amused to earnest.

“I have missed you, you know,” Thor murmured.

Loki pulled backwards, not out of fear or revulsion or anger, but because in that moment he almost believed it.

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Loki listened to Tony's ramblings about his struggles creating the device he claimed would reverse the age of objects as he ate. Why Tony was so fixated on turning raisins back to grapes he could not say, but he supposed the size of them was appropriate for the size the beam of light allowed them to work with. Then once it was over and Tony had quieted a little, Loki made a quiet announcement: "I know where the Aether may be."

Tony gaped at him and Loki enjoyed eliciting that reaction far more than he should have done.

"Wait a second – you know where the Reality Stone is? The hell, Loki? What – did you find the Norns after all? And what was up with all that missing info? And more to the point – do we
actually have an ally? Who’s controlling the Aether?”

Loki chose the last question to answer first. "A being named The Collector has it."

"The Collector?” Tony pulled a face. “I’ve gotta say, alarm bells are beginning to go off. Don't trust anyone whose nickname sounds like the name of a serial killer.”

"He is a collector of objects." And beings, Loki privately added, although they must be one and the same to him. "Odin must have thought the Aether would be safer with him than on Asgard."

"Are you telling me Odin willingly just gave a thing like that away?"

"Those with more faith in the Allfather might claim that Odin received payment in making the Nine Realms safer. I, on the other hand..."

"You’re smarter than that. What did he get? Gold? No – if you can control the whole of reality, couldn't you just summon a bit of gold? Unlimited resources is a way better business model than... How the hell do you quantify an Infinity Gem anyway?"

"I do not know if Odin received anything in return." Although, Loki admitted to himself that he was intrigued by that particular prospect.

"Oh." Tony looked slightly disappointed.

"I'm not even certain where exactly his museum is supposed to be either."

"And that's another creep box ticked."

Loki cocked his head to one side. "I don’t follow."

“If I listed out everything that could make a guy creepy, he’d match all the criteria."

“All this based on the fact that he owns a museum? I must admit, I am curious what else is on your list.”

“Er – traditionally a bit of a loner, broody, terrible facial hair...”

"How relieved I am to not meet all the qualifications of your list."

"Yeah, it’s kind of hard to have terrible facial hair when you don’t even seem to get stubble. And okay, being honest, I’m sure if you had facial hair, it’d be immaculate. But regardless – trust me," Tony said, "you can turn on the creep factor when you want. A terrifying amount."

"Thank you?"

"Ever considered changing your career path from lurking on the dark side to becoming an ambitious thespian?”

Loki laughed at the thought of it. "I suppose the stage would be the one place where lies are welcomed."

"You'd do great here on Earth. Look at all that raw talent. And – from one junkie to another – it's one way to get your attention fix."

Loki found himself slightly less amused. "I’m not the one with the need for the eyes of mortals to be trained upon me."
Tony had the audacity to roll his eyes. "Here we go again with the mortal thing. Sure you're not a vampire, sweetheart? Because – speaking of checklists – you're pasty pale, don't look like you should go out in sunlight, rock a suit, and don’t look anywhere near your age. And coming to think of it – how old are you, anyway?"

"I think," Loki said, "that you're digressing from the original point."

"This had an original point? Right. Yeah. The Collector guy with his museum of weird stuff. See? I was paying attention. So when are we paying him a visit?"

Loki blinked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"When are we going?"

"We?"

"Uh – yeah. I thought we agreed anything dangerous and it's better not to split up so..."

Loki rearranged his features to appear slightly less caught off guard. "Ah, yes. The problem with us visiting the Collector is that he will be slightly... difficult to reach."

"How difficult are we talking here?"

"As in he hails from outside the Nine Realms."

Tony's eyebrows lifted. "What's that supposed to mean? He's from another solar system? Another galaxy?"

"I believe so."

"Huh."

"The Bifrost will not be able to connect with such a place. And as I have not visited Knowhere before..."

"Nowhere? How can a place be nowhere? Why's that even be a thing? Surely a place has gotta be somewhere, you know, otherwise it's not a place."

"Knowhere," Loki emphasised. "As in know not where."

"Ever thought of auditioning for Hamlet, Shakespeare? You should totally check out the local theatres, there’s gotta be something for you there. But seriously – where the hell is Knowhere supposed to be?"

"That," Loki said, "remains to be seen."

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And so it was that Loki found his next task to be searching through Odin's very own archived material in hopes of some mention of The Collector or Knowhere or so much as at least an acknowledgement that some place outside the Nine Realms had been known to Odin.

Loki couldn’t understand why Odin would keep it a secret. Why Odin, the king who conquered all the realms he encountered, would not mention that there was an uncountable number of worlds untouched by the Aesir. Surely, if he knew of others, he would have set his sights on those to conquer them too... Unless, Loki thought, he couldn't. If Odin knew it was an impossible task or if
Odin preferred to have the Nine Realms under the illusion that he was the master of all the known worlds without having to undertake the sheer amount of effort it would take… Maybe Odin had grown weary in his age and had simply settled for the ruler of the Nine Realms instead of the universe.

But the question remained of how Odin discovered this knowledge to begin with, and why no one else knew of this. Or how Odin had met the man who named himself The Collector. Or why Odin had entrusted this man with something as important as an Infinity Stone. The more Loki thought about it, the more questions he had.

The Collector, as described to Thor by Sif and then relayed to Loki, had been painted as a possessive character, one who brooded over his hoard like some sort of dragon. Neither Sif nor the Warriors Three had mentioned any special abilities that the man possessed, but they – including even Fandral, who rarely possessed the self-awareness to know when he was the weaker opponent – had all claimed instinct alone had made them cautious. The man must have had a powerful presence to temper Asgardians without flexing a single muscle, Loki concluded. And powerful allies, if that was what Odin had been to him.

Odin’s belongings contained centuries and centuries worth of scribbled notes and signed documents, letters from royal advisors and political leaders with high influence in other realms. The sight of it all was almost enough to make Loki seriously contemplate just asking the Allfather, but removing the Allfather prematurely from his frozen prison would bring him tremendous dissatisfaction.

Loki began his search with an approximation of the timeframe: when the information had mysteriously disappeared or had been erased from the minds of the population. Perhaps it was in hope that his efforts had not gone to waste and that he had been following a trail of clues that were indeed relevant. But Loki doubted, or perhaps hoped, that the two discoveries – in one case possibly, and in the other definitely – both happening to have a common denominator of the Allfather was not a coincidence. Given how Odin concealed sending away the Aether, Loki did not need to search far to know that Odin would have hidden that secret well. But would the Odin of over almost two millennia ago have done the same? Loki could not know for sure, but at least having a vague idea of a potential timeframe allowed him to eliminate entire rooms worth of information, even if it was only on a temporary basis while he tested his theory.

Loki started with information Odin would have thought only he would have access to; if it was Odin who had been meddling with memories and the documentation of history, then Odin’s belongings would be the likeliest to not have been tampered with.

Odin’s own personal vaults were less guarded than places within the palace such as the weapons vault, but the doors were still guarded adequately enough that it would have caused Loki trouble if he could not teleport inside.

His father had never allowed Loki unsolicited access as a child or even an adult, and Loki had known better than to request it. Not even the servants were granted access. It was exceedingly rare that he had been granted a visit, and more often than not the purpose of it had been for Odin to give both Loki and Thor a look at pieces of history Odin had saved. Some of the objects were sentimental – Frigga’s handcrafted pottery gifts, for example – whereas others reflected triumphs of the kingdom, such as signed peace treaties and alliances. There were shelves of papers, stacks of paintings, and rows and rows of cabinets of small belongings that had accumulated over millennia and millennia. It could take weeks, even months, to filter through all the content.

The deeper inside Loki walked, the mustier the smell grew and the thicker the layers of dust
became. This was probably the only room dust had been allowed to accumulate in, and the volume of it was the main indication of how old the items had become. Every so often, Loki would stop to pick up a stray object to wipe clean and inspect, or reach to a parchment on one of the shelves and try to gauge the date in the faded lettering.

Yes, Loki realised with gloom, he would be here for a long time.

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Sometimes Loki was envious. Not of Thor – those days had long since past – and not of those that were not burdened with his, ah yes, glorious purpose – Loki did not allow himself to think of their comparatively easy existences – but of Tony. Where Loki's duties had become monotonous tedious dull work in the weeks past, Tony's seemed to be genuinely enjoyable. Tony made advancements in leaps and spurts and Tony took a particular delight in the potential each discovery of the Time Gem's capabilities brought him. Tony was able to rise from slumber each day without knowing what he would discover whereas Loki knew exactly what would happen: he'd read and search and was likely to find little except for yet more dust. Tony would scan and experiment and invent and create and interpret, and all Loki was doing was burrowing through parchments and objects that were better left forgotten. It wouldn't have been so intolerable if Loki's role had at least some variation other than the style of script or the state of decay.

Loki found he would much rather have been in Tony's workshop. There was an air of genuine excitement there and the gratification that occurred with knowing progress was happening somewhere. On Asgard, every time Loki discovered something, it only unearthed more questions, and every time Tony discovered something, he came closer to truly wielding the Time Gem.

After another day spent searching Odin's vault, Loki had returned to find that Tony had indeed managed to create a device that allowed him to slowly reverse the state of whatever object fell into the path of its light. The beam of light, Loki noted, had grown in diameter since he'd last seen it. Tony had demonstrated the device on plants and fruits and solid household objects, and Loki watched as the circle the light hit began to shrink or ripen or heal.

Loki thought it odd how much he would have prefered to be on Midgard instead of searching through Odin's hoard of items, and odder still that he had not yet become accustomed to how quiet his days were without Tony's constant chatter.

Tony's chatter was not the kind that did not allow Loki to insert a word in edgeways, nor was it the kind that was only used to mask over the awkwardness between strangers. It was not rare for Tony to express genuine interest in what Loki had to say, whether it was of other realms or the nature of Infinity Gems or some idle comment on Midgardian customs, and despite such a large quantity of words leaving Tony's mouth, he had demonstrated that he possessed the ability to actually listen. Naturally, not always. But enough that Loki was no longer surprised when Tony would refer to something Loki had said long ago or implement one of Loki's ideas into something he had been creating.

Loki had been wondering how long it might take Tony to adapt his design to be able to transform objects into their future state rather than their past state, when his hands habitually picked up a piece of parchment from one of the many shelves in the room.

The lettering had been so dulled by time that it was barely legible, but the style of it – a receipt – was instantly apparent. The fact that it was a receipt was not what had captured hold of Loki’s attention however; what had got a hold of his attention was that this was no ordinary receipt. This was the receipt for Mjolnir, commissioned by the Allfather and forged by the dwarves of
Nidavellir. But what in particular stood out to Loki was the date. The date that was centuries and centuries behind Thor’s coming of age, the age he had been when Odin had presented him with the trials to earn his warrior’s token.

The note that accompanied it was concise in a true dwarven fashion. It read: 'We hope our skills serve Princess Hela well'.
Princess Hela.

*Princess* Hela.

Not Hela, Queen of Hel, but *Princess Hela*.

Not a princess of a domain of the dead, but a princess of the Nine Realms; she must have been, otherwise the dwarves would not have been physically *able* to furnish her with a weapon.

Loki stared at the writing for longer, as if expecting the letters to rearrange themselves into something else, something that made sense.

Except that, Loki realised, on some level this *did* make sense.

Loki saw little reason for Odin to have hidden her existence so thoroughly or commission her a weapon such as Mjolnir if she had not been important to him. And Hela might have been able to be mistaken for elven at a distance but up close, her features were predominantly Asgardian.

Which meant that Loki's origins were not the only secret Odin had hidden.

Loki thought that Odin managing to smuggle a baby back to Asgard after a war without anybody noticing anything amiss had been one thing, but this was an entirely different matter: this was an adult, an entire entity – his *own offspring*.

Loki couldn't stop himself reading the words over and over:

*Princess Hela*

*Princess Hela*

*Princess–*

Loki could believe it of Odin to have altered the minds of all he knew and the documents of history to have served his own ends, but the question remained of *how*.

*And Frigga?* Loki wondered. *Was this another secret Frigga had agreed to keep, another thing she had fundamentally disagreed with but still would not protest loudly enough against?*

From what Loki remembered of her, Hela didn't look like Frigga. But neither did she look like Odin, not like how Thor resembled Odin, with the same profile and eye colour.

And if all of that was true – if all of the evidence was what it seemed – then that meant Loki had a sister.

A *sister*.

A sister who just happened to be Queen of Helheim.

Loki wished family members who'd been previously unknown to him would stop appearing unexpectedly at inconvenient moments – if he could refer to her as a family member, that was. If anything, she was Thor's. Thor had been Loki’s brother for too long for Loki to be able to truly think of him as anything else, but Hela was of no blood relation to Loki. The revelation of her
lineage should have been a dilemma for Thor rather than himself.

Thor might have liked to have a sister at one time but Loki suspected Hela wasn’t what Thor would have had in mind somehow.

For a brief moment, Loki contemplated showing the receipt to Thor. Would it have brought him satisfaction to destroy Thor’s misplaced faith in his father with only one swift move? Or would Thor only willfully ignore it or invent excuses, each one more implausible than the last? Loki doubted that even a victory – Thor admitting out loud that their Father might have been a great figure but was not a great man – would bring him satisfaction. Sometimes there was nothing that filled Loki more with a viscous sweetness than defeating Thor, and other times besting Thor felt like something more akin to wounding a small animal, which in turn only riled Loki’s temper more. Whatsmore, there was the possibility that Thor, King of Asgard, being distracted could cost the realm greatly.

And while Loki was thinking on the topic of royalty, he wondered how exactly Hela had come to be Queen of Hel. Had it been Odin’s decree or a title of her own making? Had her blood granted her her throne or had it been the souls that inhabited the realm?

But none of it – not the receipt or the note – could explain why Odin had chosen to purge her from history.

The receipt stated a date a thousand years before Thor had been born. Before Odin had even married Frigga, Loki realised.

And then there was nothing Loki was aware of but his absolute need to know, his desire to discover something that would connect the pieces and resolve all his unanswered questions.

The latest revelation of Loki’s research made him investigate with a newfound efficiency, hunting through the items Odin had stored away over the millennia with unprecedented speed.

The traces of Hela were scattered but Loki was getting better at finding them. They were in places that had not been touched in ages long past, tucked away out of sight and in places awkward to reach. Most of the objects he found only allowed him a brief glimpse of the past, such as maps of other realms marked with military strategies, records of armour and weaponry that had been ordered for Asgardian soldiers, and then there was the painting.

How odd it had been to see Mjolnir raised in the hand of someone who was not Thor.

There was no mistaking Hela. There was no discernible difference between the Hela depicted in the painting and the Hela Loki had met, just as there was no mistaking a younger Odin, standing by her side with his own weapon clutched in his hand.

Based on appearances, Odin had little need for his own sceptre, not when he had Hela as a weapon.

There were thousands and thousands of corpses scattered like stars in the night sky and Odin and Hela were at the centre of it like a newly forged sun.

Odin had enforced his wrath across the Nine Realms like how Thor had first enforced his wrath with Mjolnir against the Jotuns, except that Hela had been Odin’s weapon rather than Mjolnir, and she made Mjolnir look like little more than a tool in her hand.

How many had been slaughtered? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? More?
Loki knew Odin had led wars but Odin had never made a mention of the sheer scale of them.

If this was how many Hela had killed in life, then it was little wonder she had earned the title of Goddess of Death in death. Loki wondered how exactly that had been brought about. Hela certainly would not have lacked for enemies.

Whoever her enemies had been, Odin had disposed of whatever evidence they might have left on their behalf. Loki assumed that, naturally, doing so would have also benefited Odin somehow.

Loki couldn’t tear his eyes from the painting.

Something was wrong – more than Odin and his daughter, more than the sheer number of bodies, more than the fact that Mjolnir considered Hela to be worthy – Loki could just not place what it was.

And then Loki saw it.

Upon first glance, he had assumed the weapon Odin carried to be Gungnir, but Gungnir’s tip was not shaped in that fashion and if Loki looked closely, he could just about make out something glimmering and emitting a soft light from the head of the weapon. Loki had been too hasty to have called the object merely a weapon; it was more than that, more than an elaborately decorated sceptre. There was a reason this sceptre had been familiar to him: it was the sceptre. The sceptre that had contained the Mind Stone.

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"You're er... quiet. Quieter than usual. Broodiness maxed out?"

"I am fine."

"Yeah, I can see that."

Loki's pasta continued to sit on the end of his fork.

"You know most people skewer pasta, right? That's why forks are the norm for pasta. Otherwise, we'd just use spoons. And I swear to god, if you tell me spoons are better for pasta–"

"Tony," Loki said. "I said I am fine."

Tony held up his hands. "Alright, alright, you're fine."

"I am thinking and that is all. Some of us become quieter the more we think."

"Yeah, I've never understood that. Rambling does wonders for the brain. Sometimes you've just gotta let your mouth do the thinking for you."

"Your mouth might."

"Talking out loud kind of forces you to have only one train of thought at once. Makes life a hell of a lot easier than trying to keep track of all of them."

"And thus the mystery is solved."

Tony smirked. "You say that like it's an insult."

"I did imply you speak too much."
"Yeah, but you also implied it's because otherwise I'd think too much."

"I said no such thing."

"And thus is the nature of an implication," Tony said in a poor imitation of Loki's voice.

"If you mean to mock me, may I recommend doing so in such a way so I do not have to guess who it is you are attempting to impersonate? Otherwise, your lacklustre impression serves to humiliate yourself more than me."

Tony shrugged. "You think that'll humiliate me? Boy, you should see some of the pictures the press have of me."

"I dread to imagine."

"Or the voice recordings. Or the videos. Or the– You know what? Maybe I should leave it at I've had way worse and way more public incidents. A bad impression isn't gonna make the cut."

"Perhaps I made the mistake of underestimating how much competition there would be."

Tony flashed a smile. "Rookie mistake. And can I make a comment? I'm gonna make a comment anyway. You're clearly on the lookout for some good old-fashioned verbal sparring, a trade of insults, a battle of the wits." Tony waved a hand. "Whatever you want to call it. Point is – you're particularly spiky today. Let me guess, arguing with Thor wasn't satisfying enough? He's a good guy but his comebacks aren't exactly imaginative. So – lucky you – you get to trade insults with me. Is it weird I'm finding this fun? I mean, we haven't even started on the returns yet but I guess this might be the only time a member of the human race could actually benefit from your sibling drama."

Tony was closer to the truth than he knew. Impossibly – no, improbably – making a stab in the dark and just happening to hit with something remarkably close to accuracy.

Sibling drama indeed, even if she was Thor's sister. Perhaps she would have been Loki's too if Hela hadn't been residing in Helheim for only the Norns knew how long.

Tony's amusement faltered when he registered Loki's flicker of hesitation.

"What's up? Thor beat you to the punch again?"

"Hardly," Loki scoffed.

"Then what is it?"

"It's... personal."

Odd that 'personal' was the word Loki had chosen. Hela was no relation of Loki's and yet... What was this – some compulsion ingrained in his system to protect the Allfather's secrets? That would be ridiculous. The Allfather deserved no such thing.

Tony looked as if he had been wanting to say something else but then what left his mouth was, "Alright."

Loki hadn't been expecting it to be that easy.

"I learn fast," Tony said. "And prying into the business of Norse Gods doesn't usually end up well for me." Tony left a moment's pause. "In fact, it usually ends up with a god's hand wrapped around
my throat."

"Does that mean I am not the only one?"

"Yeah. Thor did. It was— It was after Ultron broke out."

"I would have thought Thor would have learnt it is a common tactic of the enemy to separate the team that opposes them after the lesson I taught him."

Tony's fingers absentmindedly rubbed his neck.

"Thor wasn't wrong to blame me, I was the one who—"

"The day you heed Thor's judgement," Loki said, "is the day that you fall into complete idiocy. My brother's intelligence can wildly swing from being able to give the illusion of being vaguely acceptable to wildly incompetent without warning."

"It was years ago. Besides, Thor kind of had a point. Straight to the source and all that."

"Allow me to put this into perspective," Loki said. "Even I have not harmed you while we have agreed to be allies. Not even when you alerted the Jotuns to our presence because you were dithering about whether or not you believed me, tempting though it might have been."

Tony was quiet.

"It didn't hurt that bad. I just kind of forgot it happened."

"Thor should have known better than to inflict the same damage on Midgardians as he would have done to Asgardians. Even his Asgardian allies would not brush aside a slight like that so lightly."

Tony shrugged and opened his mouth, about to retort. Then before any words left his mouth he averted the topic. "You know how I was trying to make the Time Gem shoot out a fast-forward beam?"

Loki allowed the diversion; it allowed him to settle his debt to Tony for not riling him with further questions about what it was he was so preoccupied with. "I recall it well."

"Well, guess what?"

"You've succeeded?"

"Uh – no. Well, sort of. It can fast–forward but it uh... It tends to burn a hole through stuff at the same time."

"Hardly ideal."

"That's what I thought."

"So what did you do?"

"Adjusted the beam-shooter thing. I've really got to work on a name for that. And after, stuff got a little less singed. But it varies. It doesn't matter what I adjust or what variable I change, I can't get it consistent. I can't figure out what I'm doing wrong. Is this an Infinity Stone mood thing? I am gonna have to take it to the park if I want it to play nice?"

Loki laughed at the image it conjured.
"No," Loki said. "It sounds as if it not the gem's mood that is affecting the outcome, but yours."

"Mine?"

"The gem channels its power through you, does it not? Despite you having built yourself multiple devices now, I doubt anyone else would be able to wield them. Your inventions have serviced as your means of connecting with the gem, of you discovering how to connect with the Time Gem through them. What you do not realise is that you are also a variable. The Time Gem may be warming to you and you are sending signals that you desire more power, therefore it grants even more to you."

"...Huh."

"Just as you are having to assess the Time Gem, the Time Gem also needs to assess you." Loki glanced sideways at Tony. "I suspect your device works perfectly. The problem is more likely to be the Time Gem not knowing what it is you want."

"That... That actually might make a lot of sense."

Loki grinned. "Power like this does not flow in only one direction."

"Does this mean I get to enrol in more Gem Theory classes?"

"I suppose I would consider your application."

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"Thor?" Loki asked.

"Yes, Loki?"

Loki did not mention Hela. Another time perhaps, a time when Thor could afford distractions. And if Loki got his way, perhaps a time when Loki could orchestrate events to make himself seem oblivious to her.

"It's about that ship you promised me."

"Are you referring to the one I'll commission if Father is alive and well again?"

"That's the one." Loki put on a show of a smile. "I was hoping to make a certain amendment."

"The deal we made is the deal we shall keep."

"As you may suspect by now, a trip to visit this Collector character is going to be necessary," Loki said and Thor did not look impressed. "I believe he may be an essential component in our quest to rid the universe of Thanos."

"Whatever you are trying to get at, Loki, we made a deal."

"And if The Collector has the Aether, which we have good reason to suspect he does, then he may be useful. If not," Loki added, "then that will most likely be useful information to know as if he does not have it then Thanos probably does."

"I still do not see why—"

"We need a ship," Loki interrupted.
"Not until Father–"

"People could die if we wait until Father is well again – do you really want that on your conscience?"

"Not if you null your clause about waiting. If you do that then I shall commission your ship."

"You know why I can't do that, Thor. Try to see the large picture here. This could have an impact on the entire universe, why should Father–"

"You would have to wait regardless for the ship to be crafted, would you not? In the meantime, Father could be found and healed without–"

"And afterwards, when he searches for me?"

"You know that he hid the fact that worlds outside of the Nine exist. If you were to go there, how could he send Asgardians after you?"

Loki still did not like it.

"The ship does not have to be elaborate. We only need to be able to travel across space."

"You know there is a reason we prefer Bifrost travel over flying through space. Asgard has not been known for its ships and most of the realms don't have a reason to continue building them with access to the Bifrost."

"Yes," Loki said, "but there is a realm that has created ships designed to travel through space: Midgard. If a handful of them were to collaborate with Asgardian shipwrights then–"

"Then ask them yourself, Loki."

"You know why I cannot do that."

"I will not go back on my word."

"Even when–"

"That is final."

Loki stared at him, a combination of shock and indignance. "You are going back on your word by not agreeing to help us when you claimed you would."

"Now you want my help? Before, when you scorned any attempt of mine to reach you?"

Loki rolled his eyes, then dropped all pretences, letting his hands fall and his face open. "Yes."

"Can you guarantee this trip will help you against Thanos?"

Loki met his eyes. "Yes."

Thor shook his head. "That's not the truth."

Loki was taken aback. "You're learning."

"Yes," Thor said. "I've had to. Which is why I'm saying let me retrieve Father now and then I will help you."
Loki shook his head. "You're not listening. You're still not listening."

"Actually, I was listening closely. And I do not understand why you want to involve Asgard at all – the airships are designed to traverse from realm to realm, not over vast distances across space. I think," Thor stated, "that the best way I can help is by asking you a question: why are you asking me for a ship when surely you have other sources?"

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"Tony," Loki said.

"Mmm?"

"You do realise that if we intend to travel through space, we're going to need some sort of vessel."

"Our own little Starship Enterprise."

"The name can be negotiated."

"Why do I get the feeling that's you being generous?"

"I suppose if you are making it, then it would only be fair to allow you to have a hand in naming it as well."

"Er – what was that about making it?"

"You are a highly skilled craftsman and metal worker with a large number of resources available to you and you hail from a planet where space-travel has been in use for decades."

Tony blinked. "You want me to build a ship. You think that I can build it. A spaceship."

Loki frowned. "I thought that much was obvious."

Tony blinked again. Then he laughed and grinned widely. "Wow. Can I just say what a nice change it is to be overestimated instead of underestimated? You think I can build a spaceship. I mean, if I had a few years then yeah, I probably could. But I'd need an entire team of people, I'd need actual astrophysicists and people who genuinely know what they're doing. I'd need so many test-flights I get sick of hearing about them. I'd need... Hell, I'd need to do a ton of research. And even if I could manage to accomplish it after all that, we're still talking years here."

"...Oh."

"Why? You found us a route to Knowhere yet?"

Loki had not been so lucky.

"No. I thought it might have been more efficient to put plans into place for us to have a way to get there in the meantime while I search for one."

"Even if I was to go wild and buy off NASA or something, it'd still take us years to get from one planet to the next. And that's from this solar system. Never mind how many galaxies away Knowhere might be."

"Unfortunate."

"So – got a Plan B?"
“Fortunately, yes,” Loki said. “If we cannot commission a ship or build a ship, then we have no option left but to acquire one.”

Tony's eyes were positively alight. "I'm listening."
Chapter 30

"So, uh... Where exactly are we gonna commandeer a ship from?" Tony asked.

Loki forced his fingers to stop fidgeting.

He’d had little desire to think of the legions of planets he’d never known had existed. He’d done his best to banish the memories from his mind of everything that had happened after he fell for a good reason: Loki had discovered the only realisation worse than believing he would be falling through an empty void for eternity was realising that the void was not in fact empty after all.

Thanos’s fleet had travelled through the cosmos like a swarm of locust, descending upon unsuspecting worlds and devouring their resources and people. Sometimes the fleet only took what they needed; sometimes weapons, sometimes materials and means of transportation, sometimes threads of information Thanos was chasing. Other times the worlds would be less fortunate and their favoured members of society and the true-hearted warriors would be granted as gifts to the Lady Hela. Those warriors were the lucky ones; it was the ones who were judged not true of heart and spirit who were the unfortunate ones. Thanos would take those warriors for himself.

They were to become Thanos’s initiates.

Together the initiates trained under the watchful eye of The Other.

The Other was ruthless, without mercy. The Other did not allow mistakes in the arena and he filtered the best from the worst by pitting the initiates against one another until only those who could survive were left. The training was gruelling and no time was allocated for resting or healing. They fought again and again and again until Loki no longer felt the ache of his muscles and injuries and the only options left were to kill or be killed.

Loki had been good at surviving – until he wanted to die, that was. But in a strange twist of fate, Loki failing to die when he had let go of the Bifrost and fell into the clutches of Thanos and The Other had reawakened a primal desire to live. Because he had wanted to die, but not like this. Not while being forced to war and battle like he was some sort of slave, nothing more than another creature in a colony of insects.

Then they had the attention of Thanos. Thanos did not make them fight. Thanos did so much as lay a finger on them. But Thanos was worse, so much worse.

Loki sometimes felt as if he only won his contests on the days or nights he was so exhausted he could barely move because of his burning hatred for The Other. His fantasies of revenge served as fuel but he knew The Other was safe while he was still of use to Thanos.

The other initiates could not be trusted. Loki was unable to tell which had truly turned to Thanos’s cause, which ones made a facade of it, and which ones would turn him over out of fear.

Thanos was worse because the resentment that had armoured Loki against The Other did not exist with him. Thanos penetrated his way through with his value for Loki’s intelligence, for his litheness and resourcefulness and deceitfulness. Thanos spoke of how useful Loki and the few remaining initiates would be, how they could redeem their unworthy souls by helping him with his one task, how glorious it would be when Hela finally accepted the hand of Thanos.

Thanos was a madman but there were days when Loki did not know what was real anymore and he was so immersed in his own deceptions that he had almost convinced himself that he too believed.
There were days when Thanos was so lucid and calculating it made Loki wonder whether Thanos was right. Perhaps everything would be better if Thanos succeeded in his quest to impress Hela because then at least Loki would finally be rid of what was in store for him. But the sheer amount of death and destruction the price would come at was one that made even Loki baulk.

There was nowhere Loki was safe, nowhere he could escape to, not while he was kept on that ship. It went on and on, Thanos giving grand speeches and beginning to give the initiates more and more tasks to fulfil for him, each time growing larger and larger in scale and magnitude. For his final test, Thanos touched them with the Soul Stone once more. One of them he asked to find the Time Stone, another the Reality Stone, another the Power Stone, and Loki the Space Stone. But Loki was special. Loki got a gift: the sceptre. But the sceptre was closer to a curse than a gift. The sceptre was the reason The Other could call upon him without a moment’s notice. The sceptre was the reason he could not allow his act to falter for a second. The sceptre was the thing that kept him linked like a mockery of a family tree with Loki connected to The Other, The Other connected to Thanos, and Thanos allowing the power to flow down the branches.

But Loki did not wish to dwell of any of that. He had flung the memories as far as he could into the dark corners of his mind for a reason. But he needed to retrieve that information now, he needed to recall the name of one of the planets they had landed on during the initiation process.

The planet had an abundant supply of ships, though Loki could not vouch for the quality of them. Because even Thanos, with all of his power and might, needed something to fuel his fleet with. They had sought out a source not quite in the far reaches of the galaxy, but one where there would be little the planet could do once they became aware they were having their resources taken. If Loki couldn’t even recall its name, he could hardly expect the Tesseract to be able to teleport them.

“Er… Loki?”

Loki’s head snapped towards the sound.

Just Tony, Loki reminded himself. Just Tony.

Tony was looking at him in such a way that Loki was hit with the fear that Tony had seen too much.

“Taradaxia,” Loki said. It took conscious effort for his voice to be level.

“What?”

“It’s where we will acquire a ship.”

Tony eyed him for a long moment then averted his gaze. “Alright. What the hell is Taradaxia?”

“It’s a planet whose primary function is to serve as a fuel export.”

“Space-Walmart-gas-station doesn’t sound like one of the Nine Realms.”

“It’s not,” Loki confirmed.

“Then how are we getting there?”

Loki summoned the Tesseract to hand as an answer.

“It’s funny – I never thought of you as the kind of guy to hang around pit-stops."
Loki pressed his lips together for a moment. He had no desire to disclose the details of what happened after he had fallen into the void so instead he said, "It wasn't for myself. It was for... an acquaintance of mine."

"What sort of passport stamp do you get for the space-truckstop planet?"

Loki could have thanked the Norns for how easily Tony went off at tangents. "I assure you, the universe is not so organised as to have a such a system in place to monitor travellers."

"The universe is a big place. Guess bureaucracy's got its limits."

"You Midgardians take bureaucracy far past the limits of what it should be."

"Why do you think I’m no longer CEO? Even when I employed other people to do the paperwork for me, there was still way too much of it."

“Of course,” Loki said dryly, “I should have known it was paperwork and not anything to do with any slightly more exciting vocational activities.”

Tony smirked. “Do you mean skiing? Because that was one time and I almost broke my leg.”

“You know exactly what I meant.”

“Wait a second – you know what skiing is?”

“Quite honestly, I am surprised that the sport has retained its popularity for so long.”

“If you aren't used to flying, it's pretty fun. It’s kind of hard to remember – it was college and I wasn’t sober for any of that trip.”

“That appears to be a recurring theme with your stories.”

“Constant binge drinking is what happens when you spend years trying to drown out the guilt of never telling your mom how much you actually give a shit.”

Loki did not know how to respond to that. His thoughts wavered to Frigga and then back again. But how could Tony have said it so flippantly? It was clear it still ate away at him but to take such a vulnerability – such a weakness – and then transform it into something so transparent, something that was practically an outright invitation for others to laugh – that was not something Loki could understand. He supposed, on some abstract level, that there was a strategy there. By inviting others to laugh and by initiating the mockery himself, Tony had practically ensured that no one else would. Loki’s instinct would have to conceal it, to hide it, but instead of doing that, Tony had made the weakness itself into a mask that he wore for others to see.

For half a moment, Loki wondered if there were other vulnerabilities hidden underneath that mask.

“What about you?” Tony asked.

“What?”

And then to Loki’s relief, Tony said, “Been skiing before?”

“No,” Loki answered. “Have you ever stolen a ship before?”

“Nope. I don't exactly have much experience hotwiring spaceships. So unless that's a hidden talent of yours..."
"The engines should need no reworking, rest assured. I have a plan."

"You know what's great? At least one of us does. Go on then. Let's hear it."

"Taradaxia is the main fuel export for that particular pocket of the universe," Loki said. "As I recall, they have a large number of cargo ships to transport said fuel from their planet to others."

"Right. Cargo. Does that mean they'll be better defended though?"

"We need not worry about their defence if we are convincing enough."

"What exactly is that supposed to mean? Are you talking elaborate heist plan or dressing up as them and hoping for the best? And now I come to think of it – how exactly are we getting out? Because I'm guessing no matter how fast their ships are, it'd still take a hell of a long time to fly back to Earth in one."

Loki smirked. "I do have the Tesseract within my possession and, as I recall, it responded rather well to creating a portal when it was combined with your–"

"You want me to hook up the Tesseract to one of my arc reactors. And you're consulting me this time. Smart move." Tony grinned. "I can't wait to see the headlines when I land a spaceship on my roof."

"I admit, this method will hardly be inconspicuous but–"

"I'm Tony Stark. When have I ever been inconspicuous? This suits me just fine. So long as we don't end up with a bunch of angry aliens on our tail."

"Yes, that would not be ideal."

"How long do you need to prepare before we–"

"I see little point in waiting. I have not been able to find anything relating to Knowhere in Odin's vaults. I am sure it exists but I could be searching for months."

Tony's smile faltered. "We're heading off that quickly then?"

"Is there a problem?" Loki asked. "I have said that I am perfectly capable of going without you."

"I'd rather not lose my teammate halfway across the universe if it all goes to shit."

"So if it does go that badly you would rather us both be doomed, is that the way of it?"

"Well, yeah. Unless we figure out a way of communicating from across the universe. Because at least then we'll be able to figure something out between us."

"Such as us mutually coming to terms with our inevitable demise, for instance?"

"Maybe. Well. Hopefully not. I'm a realist, not a pessimist. But my point is if we're separated and it goes south, the odds of one person making it are lower if they've gone solo."

"But the odds of the member of the party who previously would not have been in any danger surviving are larger."

"Alright, alright – I mean I'm still right, but you're not wrong either. Anyway, I need to fess up: the kid inside me would really really like to steal a spaceship. I've had a bunch of names thrown at me
but pirate isn’t one."

"I'm not denying you."

"Oh." Tony looked surprised. "So you're not trying to persuade me not to join you on a space-romp."

"I was warning you."

"Then consider me warned. I'm gonna start packing. Don't wanna forget my towel."

"We should only be gone a matter of hours, there's hardly any need for—"

"Yeah, but this is us. We get the bad rolls of the dice a hell of a lot. So I'm preparing for engine breakdowns, hand to hand combat, high-speed chases – the works. And this is space. I'm not coming back without souvenirs this time."

“Then given your taste in souvenirs, I suppose no small object on Taradaxia that could potentially kill you will be safe.”

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Loki had no such need to pack belongings; all of his essentials he stored in his interdimensional pocket. He remained in the seating area trying to solidify his plan and every so often Tony would return with a different model of his armour or technology – sometimes the armour would send itself rather than Tony having to do it.

Loki heard a noise – not the sound of Tony walking and not metallic sounding enough to belong to his one of his various suits.

It was the distinctive clopping of high heeled shoes that gave her away.

“Miss Potts,” Loki said before he turned to locate the origin of the noise.

Pepper was brought to a halt when she caught sight of the sheer number of belongings cluttering up the space.

“What’s going on?”.

“Ah,” Loki said. “We are having to prepare for a voyage.”

“Why’s Tony taking that many suits? Give it to me straight: how bad is it going to get?”

Loki was able to be perfectly honest in his reply. “Is it not as dangerous as it may appear. Tony is being overcautious.”

“Tony? Overcautious?”

Loki had to smile at least a little bit. “Believe me, I understand the sentiment.”

“Do you? Because if Tony’s worried about something then you should definitely be worried about something.”

“I am not often accused of being reckless or rash.”

Pepper’s gaze was level. “What are you up to?”
Loki thought it best to be frank. “We’re stealing a ship.”

“A ship? Why? What ship can’t Tony buy?”

“A ship that can fly through space at a reasonable enough speed.” Loki formed a half-smile as her jaw fell open. “I do believe you requested that I tell you the next time I intend to take Tony somewhere off this planet.”

“What? But–”

“The risks are low. The inhabitants of the planet are not known to be hostile.” Although they must have made better preparations regarding their planet’s safety after Thanos’s intervention.

Pepper was able to meet Loki’s eyes unflinchingly. “Are you absolutely certain?”

“My skillset happens to be perfectly suited for this sort of scheme and I have a device that allows me to teleport us at a moment’s notice. The risks are minimal.”

Pepper analysed his face, then gave a nod. She looked to Tony’s armour. “Then you do know what this is about, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Loki said, though he had a sinking feeling he knew nothing of the sort.

Pepper was not so easily fooled. “It’s not for me to tell you if Tony hasn’t told you. But I need you to promise me you’ll look out for him. Especially if you’re going to be flying through space.”

“I’m not entirely certain who you believe you are talking to—”

“Please?” she said and Loki received the impression she was not in the habit of begging. “It could get...messy.”

“Not if it goes according to plan.”

“Not like that. I don’t mean physically.”

Loki let out a laugh when her meaning became clear. “I’m hardly known for my benevolence.”

Pepper pulled a face. “I’m not asking you to be his support blanket, okay? I know who I’m dealing with. And I don’t just mean you. I need you to promise me you’ll be there. He just needs someone there sometimes. Especially if...”

“If what? Despite popular opinion, I’m not going to send my partner out of an air-hatch if they happen to slightly inconvenience me,” Loki snapped and Pepper blinked at him. “What? Are you really that surprised?”

“I don’t think you get it. I don’t think you get it at all.”

“You must be truly desperate,” Loki sneered, “to ask me of all people to—”

“Of course I’m desperate! Tony’s barely been back and now he’s disappearing again! And not just on vacation – across space! And you have absolutely no idea what that could do to him.” Loki stared at her in bewilderment. Why was she so fixated on the prospect of space? Tony had been fine with them hopping from realm to realm and Loki failed to see why them navigating beyond the Nine Realms would be so different for him. “Just...” Pepper visibly steadied herself. “Just don’t underestimate it, okay?”
Loki was spared having to answer by Tony making his reentrance and dumping a suspiciously red metallic briefcase on the floor.

“Hey, Pep. Didn’t expect to see you today.”

“Tony,” Pepper replied, her voice clipped.

“Uh-oh.”

“Tony – why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well I didn’t know myself we were leaving until like an hour ago.”

“...Oh.”

“Should probably give you a heads up – there might be a whole lot of PR about my roof. I’ll deal with it later. It’ll be all on me, not Stark Industries.”

“Well…”

“And we should only be gone a couple hours.”

“Wait – is that it?”

Tony shrugged. “Apparently. According to our heist manager over here.”

“Okay,” Pepper said.

“Okay?”

“Just… Be safe.”

“I’ll make it back. We’ll make it back. Always do.”

She put on a show of sternness. “You better do.”

Tony turned to Loki. “Right. Uh… Can most of this stuff fit in your really handy magic pocket hole? Because there’s no way I’m gonna be able to carry all of it.”

Loki rolled his eyes only the minimal amount. “It does have limitations, you are aware.”

“What’s my baggage limit?”

Loki motioned to approximately a quarter of the pile.

“Still more than I normally get to take with me.” Tony shrugged. “Guess we should be off then.”

“One more thing, before we do,” Loki said. He made a motion with one hand and the illusions were in place over both his and Tony’s skin. “To ensure we do not stand out.”

They appeared in the centre of a narrow back road.

*Good. It was deserted.*

Loki had forgotten how grey Taradaxia was. He’d had far more pressing concerns on his last visit,
namely the small troop Thanos had wanted him to lead in from another direction. Even when it came to matters that did not require it in the slightest, Thanos was a strategist through and through.

The entirety of the land mass was a sea of concrete and the air was so thick with pollutants that it made seeing into the distance impossible. Land and air vehicles provided dim lights that filtered through the fog and underneath it all was an underlying stench of fuel. The smog enveloped them like a thick blanket, the thickness of it sticking to their skin and cloaking them so heavily that it almost felt like a solid. Loki tried to console himself with the reminder that it would make their task considerably easier.

"I've gotta say, I’m not digging the whole gas station leak smell," Tony said.

"I did not promise that other planets would be more desirable than your own."

Tony pulled a face. "You're saying the whole planet's like this? I just thought we teleported to a rough part of the neighbourhood. Yeesh, I don’t remember this type of disappointment happening on Doctor Who. Does Taradaxia have a Tripadvisor page? Because I wouldn’t give this anything above two stars so far."

Loki’s lips quirked in a wry smile. “How the universe must quake in fear you voicing your opinions.”

“On one hand, this is space—” Tony caught the look Loki gave him and amended himself. “I mean, more of space. Outside our galaxy kind of space. So yeah – that’s pretty out there. In fact, you could say space is pretty out there. And on the other hand, there’s this. It looks like the whole planet took an architecture lesson from a prison and was told to make it even less imaginative. Where’s the elegance in the design? This planet looks closer to Earth than the moon does.”

“Whether or not you believe otherwise, we are here for a reason other than leisurely travel.”

“Alright, alright. Point taken. Lead the way because A: I don’t know where we’re going, and B: I can’t see shit.”

“Keep your voice down and follow my lead.”

From what remnants of memory Loki had been able to piece together, it was not a long journey to the airship dock. He would have teleported directly there except that there would have been a considerably higher risk of them being detected if he did so.

They crossed at sections of roads and had to double-track multiple times until Loki was more certain of the direction they should have been heading in, gradually moving towards the edge of the city. Loki had been so focused on where they were heading to that it startled him out of his wits when he realised he had failed to notice a figure close to passing them – and he had only noticed it because his eyes had detected movement rather than it drawing attention to itself.

However much it might have startled Loki, it was nothing compared to how much Loki and Tony had startled it in return.

The thing’s eyes largened to around four times the original size and it let out an unintelligible shriek, scuttling backwards at the sight of them.

Loki stared at it in confusion, a humanoid creature with scaled skin and set of tusks sticking up through the bridge of its nose. Its scales were a dull beige that matched the concrete and it wasn’t until then that Loki realised two things.
The first was that the creatures Loki and Tony were disguised as were not in fact Taradaxian, meaning that Loki and Tony stood out slightly more than they had anticipated. And the second was that there were more of the creatures. They were camouflaged so well that the edges of them practically blended into the concrete and the ones that weren’t in motion remained perfectly still, poised like lizards.

“Wonderful,” Loki muttered, flicking his fingers and vanishing himself and Tony from sight.

How could he have been so stupid? He had been so certain that Taradaxia had been the planet with the humanoid feathered creatures instead of the one with the scaled creatures or the one with the walking plants or the transparent amorphous blobs. There had been so many species and races Loki had seen, so many who fell to Thanos or bent to his will.

Even with the stench of fuel in the air, Loki was now only fairly certain that this was the planet there were supposed to be on.

Loki grabbed at the empty space where he thought Tony’s wrist should have been and ended up grasping at Tony’s upper arm instead. Loki corrected himself and tugged – it wouldn’t do for himself and Tony to get separated due to being invisible to each other.

Loki steered them both slowly, unwilling to give away their exact whereabouts to the Taradaxians who were staring with slitted eyes at where they had last been seen.

One of the Taradaxians stuck out its forked tongue – was that to hunt for their scent in the air? – and that was when Loki decided an escape with more speed might be necessary, pulling harder at Tony’s wrist and picking up the pace.

Loki winced at Tony’s audible footstep and one of the Taradaxians must have detected it too because it snapped its head in their direction.

Loki froze, fingers pressing hard against the metal of Tony’s armour.

The creature’s face started contorting, its mouth opening wider and wider and there was something coming out of it, something bright and red and–

Was that light?

It threw its head back, its mouth somehow larger than its head and the light shining out of it dazzling, even if it was directed upwards towards the sky. One by one, the others joined it, acting as if on cue and thrusting out the light with the same force as Thor calling lightning.

Something rumbled overhead in the distance and Loki took that as their cue to leave, breaking into a run. They rounded corners and ventured through gaps between buildings, skirting around the Taradaxians on the streets until they came to a secluded area behind what looked to be a warehouse.

Loki glanced back at the lights that were still visible through the fog, shining through from red to yellow. None of the reptilians appeared to have followed.

Loki dropped Tony’s wrist and the invisibility.

“You do know my suit can detect you, right?” Tony asked. “You still show up on the thermal imaging.”

Loki cursed himself for making yet another oversight and forgetting. “I thought it would be more
practical in case I would need to teleport us away.”

Tony allowed that, inclining his head slightly. "It's funny, it's almost like us aliens showing up out of nowhere alarmed them.”

“Then what were those lights? What sort of defence would those act as? They weren’t even directed at us.” Shortly after the words left Loki’s mouth he received his response.

It was difficult to make out the precise shape through the filter of pollution but whatever it appeared to be large and bulky and was definitely flying low.

“You think it’s after us?”

“Probably,” Loki said. The thing in the sky moved closer towards the red lights. “Most definitely,” Loki amended.

"We don't exactly blend in here."

As if an afterthought, Loki draped illusions of Taradaxians – true Taradaxians this time – over their forms.

“Okay,” Tony said, “mild improvement. But I’ve gotta say, that thing I’m beginning to think is a police-ship probably isn’t an improvement. You didn’t mention the security was that uptight.”

“It wasn’t last time.” Or maybe the Taradaxians had seen few reasons to bother raising an alarm when they were being invaded with nothing they could do to stop it.

“So now we’re all caught up and systems updated and everything – is it a good idea to stick around? They’ve got to be on high alert by now and we could come back any time, it’s not like it’s difficult. I’d recommend not coming back looking like cosplays of The Raven next time though.”

Loki gave it a brief moment of consideration. “Would you believe me if I told you we could work this to our advantage?”

“Would I want to? Yes. I’ll have to hear you first before–” Tony’s words were cut off by a loud blaring of a siren.

“Before something like that happens?”

“Yeah. That would’ve been nice.”
“A little faster, if you don’t mind,” Loki said over his shoulder.

Tony picked up his speed, falling in line with Loki’s pace instead of lagging slightly behind. They were balancing the fine line between trying to get to the port as quickly as possible while simultaneously trying not to attract attention and two figures hurrying from the industrial estate – although, arguably almost the entirety of Taradaxia was little more than an industrial estate – would probably do exactly that.

The siren still had not stopped and the low-flying ship that had appeared with the noise was slowly circuiting its way outwards, apparently having finished examining the area where the glow of Taradaxian light still remained.

“Wouldn’t we better blending in?” Tony asked.

Loki cast Tony a doubtful look. “I believe it didn’t escape your attention that this is precisely what these illusions are for.”

“Yeah – I know by plain sight we’ll look like the lizard people. But if they’ve got scanning tech then odds are we might get red-flagged.”

That gave Loki pause for thought. “I must admit, I know little of scanning technology beside the ones I was introduced to on Midgard.”

“If it’s anything similar to the stuff we’ve got, they’ve probably got heat sensors, motion sensors, facial recognition…”

“That could be a problem.”

“Assuming their tech’s as fallible as standard Earth-tech – discounting my own exclusive scanning tech, obviously – then we’re not as screwed. They’d be scanning from above so that means if they see the two of us out here, they’re probably gonna spot something’s off pretty quickly. But if we’re in the middle of a crowd…”

“Then our individual readings will be indistinguishable from the rest of the Taradaxians,” Loki finished, abruptly changing their route to travel in a direction towards what he assumed would lead to a main road. His suspicions were confirmed by the growing number of roadside establishments, many of which were less fine than others. There were rowdy gambling dens, hostels that looked as if they were used to their guests signing in but not out – and those were only the buildings they could see inside of. The concrete was cracked and chipped, the environment a wash of a grey homogenous texture whose only variance was in how damaged or defaced it was.

They passed a small number of Taradaxians, their blank unblinking eyes giving no indication to their thoughts. Some of them travelled with a confident swaying of their tails, others with more skittish movements that betrayed their nervousness. The miniature horse-sized flying vehicles that passed above them did not linger.

“Looks like we hit downtown,” Tony muttered. “So which way is up?”

“The trouble with that assumption,” Loki said, “is that it implies there are more pleasant areas on this planet.”
“Aren’t there? The entire planet can’t just be a downtown. Down-planet?”

“I would call that overly optimistic.”

“Alright – it’s not Kensington Palace Gardens. But that doesn’t mean there can’t be nicer parts.”

“The more I see of this planet the less I am inclined to associate any positive adjectives with it.”

Tony gave an eye roll, one that looked very odd on his illusionary Taradaxian counterpart. Loki was only able to discern whether or not Tony was truly exasperated when Tony joked, “Amending for my snobby ET then – areas that are less worse than others. Better?”

“That statement I might be able to agree with,” Loki said, dropping his voice now that there was more than the occasional passerby.

“I vote for that way,” Tony announced when they came to a cross-section, pointing to the right where the streets were more noticeably more congested with pedestrians. “And don’t worry,” Tony added, “I lived in New York. You get the hang of walking through crowds without coming into unwanted contact pretty quickly.”

“A noble art though it undeniably is,” Loki replied, taking the turn to the right, “it is not entirely necessary.”

Tony shot Loki a quizzical look.

“The Tesseract,” Loki prompted.

“Almost forgot about that little convenient lending service deal you’ve got going on.”

So long as Loki’s concentration did not falter, that was, as Loki had discovered when the elderly Asgardian scholar had inadvertently startled him out of maintaining his spell.

As it turned out, the only difference the new area had from the previous was that interspersed along in the midst of all the gambling dens were trading dens.

“What do you think they bet on? Chips? Fuel shares? What’s the currency around here?”

“I’ve hardly had time to indulge research of their culture.”

“Well – yeah, obviously. We were kind of busy with avoiding the flying reptile-police.” Tony dodged a nearby salesman trying to present him with a tray of samples of insects and chattering away in a language of clacks and low sounds and hisses. Of course, Loki realised, we’re out of reach of the Bifrost and with it, the Allspeak. “But you,” Tony continued once he was safely out of distance of the salesman, “have been here before, right?”

Loki misliked the direction Tony was steering the conversation in. “Mm,” Loki said instead of elaborating.

“Well you can’t have come here for the food.”

Loki took a sudden turn on to a side street, hoping to use it as a distraction.

Tony did not falter. “So what gives? You clearly didn’t come here for the view either. It’s not exactly a tourist hotspot.”

Loki pressed his lips together and when Tony gave him a curious passing glance Loki only said,
“We needed fuel.”

“Why does something about the way you said that make me think you didn’t ask nicely?”

Loki found some dark humour in that, humour that felt like choking on the pollution in the air.

“Because we have met before,” Loki answered before Tony could make yet another comment about the disaster that had been Loki’s invasion on Midgard.

“So you and your pal did what exactly? Tour the universe together? Sounds like one hell of a long date.”

“Something like that,” Loki agreed flatly.

“I mean, at least it’s fairly original – I’ll give it that. More interesting than dining at a restaurant, that’s for sure. More fun too, I’d bet.”

“Mm.”

“What happened to your guy’s ship anyway?”

“Ships,” Loki corrected without thinking.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Oh he’s that high up, is he?”

Loki stopped in his tracks. “I don’t recall ever mentioning him being a he.”

“Well you’ve confirmed it now.” Tony took one glance at Loki’s face. “Oh. Take it it didn’t end well then.”

Loki would have been glad for the mask he wore, for the alien face that wouldn’t betray him as easily as his real one could. Except that apparently it had. Loki’s jaw muscle clenched as he fought to convey nothing more than passive disinterest and resumed walking, taking another turn the end of the road.

The street was busier, cluttered with Taradaxians and traders and merchants, but Tony was still waiting for an answer. Loki could feel his gaze on him even as he avoided looking in his direction.

“No,” Loki confirmed, wishing with his uttermost being that Tony would leave the topic well alone before–

“Too bad,” Tony said. “He could’ve really helped us out–”

“Enough!”

“Uh…”

Too late, Loki noticed the surrounding Taradaxians were staring – not in alarm but in confusion. Loki had spoken too loudly and in a language that was not known to their ears. Loki tensed, waiting for them to open their mouths and attract another ship with their strange signalling lights or for them to somehow see through their disguises.

Tony’s eyes shifted left and right and then he made the most hesitant clacking sound that had ever reached Loki’s ears and Loki was suddenly hit with certainty that it would be the end of their trip to Taradaxia, that there would be nothing for it but to leave and have to return another time. But then the Taradaxians began to move on, many still giving Loki and Tony lingering stares, but
moving on nonetheless.

They moved in silence until it was once again safe to speak and then once it was safe enough to speak again neither of them said anything.

It was Tony who eventually broke the silence, scratching underneath his nose before speaking. “You could’ve just... asked me not to ask. You know that, right?”

Loki’s mouth felt dry.

“Anyway,” Tony continued, “at least the clicking actually worked.”

Loki managed to find his voice again. “You could have been saying anything.”

“Better to risk them thinking I’m rude or weird or just speaking gibberish than what’d be an actual alien language to them.”

“I suppose.”

“Right. So...” Tony threw a glance above them. “Good news is there don’t seem to be any space-cops on our tail.”

“And the bad news is?”

“The bad news is I still don’t see how we’re supposed to work this to our advantage. Someone or something up there is actively looking for us. Doesn’t seem like a good day to steal a ship from my point of view. They’re already on guard.”

“Tony?” Loki asked.

“What?”

“Have I ever asked you to trust me before?”

“Nope. Think I’d remember that.”

“Then I’m asking you now,” Loki said.

“I have one condition.”

Loki was beyond sick of hearing of conditions and terms and it was for that reason that Loki’s only response was to make a disparaging noise.

“I think I’ve found the gas station of gas stations,” Tony said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Uh – yeah. Where better than somewhere local?”

“Tony – of all the reckless ridiculous things to risk exposing ourselves for that don’t happen to be a
ship, a souvenir is hardly a worthwhile one of them.”

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Loki was still not entirely certain how exactly it had happened as they left the building, but they had somehow managed to leave, miraculously unscathed and without attention having been drawn to themselves.

Loki believed it had started when Tony had said something along the lines of considering it as a prerequisite to the actual stealing. And then they were inside the shop and Tony had been drawn to a display of a selection of maps, talking in an excited whisper about how perfect the maps would be because he’d be able to bring home some form of a replica of an alien planet. Utter madness, Loki had thought at the time. His opinion had changed little since. It was a weak justification to think that humouring Tony would benefit them in the long run, given how verbal Tony could be and how any further protests might have resulted in drawing more attention to themselves – but in all honesty, Tony was unlikely to throw such a tantrum. Tony’s request had been in the name of innocuous fun and Loki could not say why he had compiled against all better reason. Madness, Loki thought again.

The stealing of the maps was simple enough; Loki’s illusions could have made him a master thief a long time ago if he had had such inclinations.

It wasn’t until they were once again walking the streets that Loki forgot the madness and realised that maps normally have a very practical use.

“Are the docks marked on the map?” Loki asked.

Tony came to a stop. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. Duh. Maps being used to find your way around – who’d have thought? It’s not like it’s their intended purpose or anything. I can’t believe I was too distracted by the thought of having something nice for my shelf I forgot what maps are used for. Maybe this is what they mean when they say geniuses don’t have common sense.”

“I must admit, I would have been far more willing to steal a map if I had realised it could actually be of use.”

Tony let out a small snort. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“Done.”

“Sweet.” Tony brought out one of the maps, unfolding some of its pages. “What the–” Tony waved the map at Loki, giving him a glimpse of an ocean of labelled dots. “This isn’t a map of Taradaxia. This looks like a map of... a galaxy? Which is cool but not helpful. Right. Don’t panic, I’ve got another. Might actually be a map of where we are. How was I supposed to know? I can’t read these funny lines and squiggles. Anyway...” Tony brought out the second map he had taken. “Now we’re talking. This is definitely... land.”

Loki leant closer to analyse the map, trying to make sense of the blocks of colour and the strange symbols and lettering he did not recognise.

“You know what?” Tony asked. “Better idea: I’m phoning a friend. Friday? Help us out here. Any chance of correlating the map with where we are?”

“Yes, actually,” Friday said and from there it only took a small amount of guesswork, trying to pinpoint their exact location on the map and figuring out which block represented the dock – which did not take long as it was the largest structure on the map – before they were able to resume
their journey.

As luck would have it, they were not too far a walk from the dock now that they had passed through the busiest of the city centre. As luck would not have it, the sound of the siren and noise of the airship were both getting louder and being halfway to the docks, they were no longer surrounded by as many citizens.

“Well,” Tony said, glancing upwards at the sky and at the shadow that might have been the ship, “I think now might be a good time to do whatever you were planning to do.”

“Yes, I came to the same conclusion myself.”

Loki flicked his fingers and an image of one of the feathered creatures he had mistakenly thought inhabited the planet reappeared, ambling down an adjacent street in the opposite direction.

Tony watched it leave. “How’s that gonna help if the scanners won’t see it?”

“Oh, it won’t attract the attention of the ship,” Loki said. “Not initially, anyway.” He waited a moment for Tony to realise for himself.

“Oh right – it’ll attract the attention the citizens and they’ll send up their light flare things and–” And just as the words left Tony’s mouth, light erupted from the mouth of the nearest Taradaxian. Loki cast his illusion a final farewell glance over his shoulder as he allowed it to continue making its journey.

“I guess if they’re searching for something, we might as well give them something to follow.”

“Precisely.”

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The walls that surrounded the dock were higher than the walls of the rest of the city, stretching further than he could see, and Loki was surprised to note that there were no longer guards patrolling the top of them as there had been on his last visit. The building was perhaps the most typically Taradaxian building in the city: dirty beige thick imposing walls that looked as if they had never been cleaned, large solid unwelcoming doors to one of the front buildings, and some sort of machinery placed in the entrance whose primary purpose looked as if to deter passersby away. The noise was perhaps worse than the sight, the roar of engines emitting from somewhere behind the walls making it almost impossible to hear each other speak. The sound grew louder and louder until a colossal hulking airship rose from behind the walls, large enough to block out what little light filtered through from the sky before it passed above them.

Tony craned his neck to watch it leave. “That’s uh... big.”

Loki could not disagree with the statement. It had looked like a small mass of land rising into the sky.

“How much smaller do they get?” Tony asked.

“Based on what I recall,” Loki said, distinctly aware that his ability to recall had proven to be not entirely reliable, “not much.”

Tony stared. “Wait. You mean we’re stealing one that size? I thought we were trying to avoid drawing attention—”
"The only supply of ships we have are here," Loki cut in. "And besides, the large size will work in our favour."

"So when we inevitably get swarmed by space pirates at some point because they think we’ve got a fat stash of gold or whatever works as treasure in space, we can just... hope they won’t notice the massive arena-sized spaceship?"

"Firstly, you are forgetting that I am an illusionist," Loki said. "And secondly, the large size will allow us to remain undetected on the ship for far longer."

"Speaking of being on the ship – how are we getting there exactly?"

"I was planning to walk."

"Going all invisible man doesn’t sound like a good plan. Look at that building front – you won’t be able to step a foot through there without some security worker sniffing you or something scanning you."

"I hadn’t finished," Loki said. "I was going to say walk and fly."

"Fly?" A light of realisation shone in Tony’s eyes. "You mean with a suit?"

"You did bring a great many spares."

Tony scratched the back of his neck. "Um – about that... There aren’t exactly many people I–"

Tony cut himself off. "You know what? It doesn’t matter. See those things up there?" Tony pointed to a number of thin metal poles that were placed at even intervals on the tops of the walls. "I’m taking an educated guess they’ve also got some form of scanning technology in them. I guess they don’t want anyone swooping down and stealing their stuff." Loki supposed that the Taradaxians must have indeed learned after the last time and that it would explain why there were no longer guards stationed on top of the walls – they were replaced with something far more effective. "I bet the ships will have something that’ll tag them so they can pass through but anything else going through would have to trigger their security systems."

Loki abandoned his previous plan and thumbed his lower lip. "...What about the walls themselves?"

"If my theories right – if the scanners are basically a lid over the compound that could shoot on sight – then it’d only be the top of the walls you’d have to worry about. I’m guessing they’d detect motion or heat or something but..." Tony gave Loki a second glance, "that’s not what you asked. The actual walls themselves... I can’t see why they’d bother or how they’d place scanning tech through the walls."

"Then we go through the walls."

Tony’s stare questioned Loki’s sanity. "And you said I was mad. I thought blowing stuff up wouldn’t fit in with sneaking around and generally trying to not attract attention."

"That’s because I do not plan to have to resort to blasting our way through."

"Then how–?"

"I trust you brought a spare arc reactor."

"Yeah," Tony confirmed and Loki waited for the moment when the realisation would hit. There –
Tony’s mouth fell open and he regarded Loki with utter disbelief. “That’s… Are you actually…?” Tony broke out into peals of untamed laughter and Loki regarded him, uncertain if he was being subject to mockery. “Oh my god– That’s– That’s insane.” Tony’s laughter subsided and there was something about the way the crinkles in his face formed around his eyes and mouth that said approval. “And also brilliant.”

Loki could feel himself beginning to smirk and had neither the motivation nor the ability to restrain it. “I rather thought so myself. Providing that it works, of course.”

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Before the Tesseract’s intervening, it would not have been possible for Loki’s illusions to have concealed it in such a way, not when it was such a volatile and unpredictable force with a life of its own and power that could penetrate straight through his illusions. But with the aid of the Tesseract, there were considerably more options available.

Loki and Tony approached as quietly as possible, fully aware that unless there were any scanning technologies they were unaware of outside the vicinity of the walls, noise would be the most likely thing to give them away.

“Alright,” Tony said, “this arc reactor is essentially one of the spare batteries I’ve been carrying around for my suits in case I need them. You just plug it in and it just kind of completes the circuit. Which means that instant you touch both of these things here,” Tony said, pointing to two barely visible prongs of metal on the back of the arc reactor, “the power will start running through you.”

Loki could not help but internally huff that Selvig did not have to resort to such a thing back on Midgard, but then Selvig had had more time. “That does not sound pleasant.”

Tony shrugged every so slightly stiffly. “It’s not so bad. It’s kind of hard to describe. It’s not like you get zapped with an electric shock or anything, it just feels… wrong. Or maybe that was just because a chunk of metal was lodged in my sternum. Kind of hard to differentiate the two.”

Loki recalled his own scar, the circular shape from the wound Kurse had inflicted and gave a small nod. “If you would,” Loki requested, holding out a hand for the arc reactor. Tony deposited it in his hand and Loki placed the fingers of his left hand precisely where Tony had pointed and drew the Tesseract out with his right.

The illusion on the other side of the wall was already in place.

Loki’s palms tingled as he summoned his focus, then the tingling sensation grew to a warmth and as he concentrated that warmth grew to a temperature that became just shy of uncomfortable. He traced a circle in the wall with his eyes over and over again to distract himself from the possibility of pain, from thoughts of the portal from his attack on Midgard.

And then it appeared, a circle no larger than a door, its edges osculating like waves. They were able to see through the gap that had tunneled through the few feet of wall, Loki’s illusion of concrete draped like a veil on the other side the only thing preventing them from seeing through to the inside of the dock.

“It worked,” Loki breathed, letting out a startled noise that did not sound all that far off a laugh of disbelief.

“Just out of curiosity,” Tony said, taking one step closer, “what happened to the middle of the wall?”
Loki grinned. “I thought I’d pay my brother a gift in kind for refusing to commission us a working ship in ample time.”

Tony stared. Then blinked. Then burst into laughter, having to muffle his mouth to avoid too much of the sound escaping. “Can you– Can you imagine the look on Thor’s face?”

“Can I imagine the precise expression on Thor’s face while he sits the throne and a cross-section of dry concrete wall inexplicably appears in front of him in court, you mean? Yes,” Loki said with relish, “I absolutely can.”

“You know there’s only one downside to that plan, right?”

“And what’s that?”

“We don’t get to witness it.”

“That is something of a shame,” Loki agreed. “I suppose our imagination will have to serve.”

“Yeah, I don’t think either of us are lacking in that department,” Tony said with a grin and if Loki had been smirking just ever so slightly before, he made no effort to stop it growing now.

They took a step toward the portal.

“Well,” Tony said, “worst comes to the worst – we teleport out.”

Loki nodded, feeling some of his previous humour diminish as they got closer to the other side. “Let it be said that now will not be the time for straying.” And then he vanished them both and stepped through the veil.

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It had been a stroke of good fortune that the security of the dock outside of the main and most likely only entrance was maintained by the barrier that acted as a ceiling; it meant that once they were inside the only means of detection would be if one of the Taradaxians was to notice them rather than any technology.

The difficult part would not be penetrating the dock. The difficult part would be boarding a ship and continuing to remain undetected.

It was only as Loki stepped through the illusion of the wall that he could truly appreciate how utterly huge the interior of the dock was, the walls stretching too far and wide in both directions to see the end of them and several ships of approximately a similar size to the one that had passed over them occupying the space on the ground.

Tony also appeared to be taken aback – or at least, that was how Loki interpreted Tony’s silence.

Loki had considered appearing as Taradaxian to eliminate the problem that invisibility presented while travelling with a partner but the advantages of invisibility outweighed the disadvantages – the workers might have had specific uniforms or a strict procedure to follow or something as simple as their faces being unrecognisable was likely to present issues.

Loki was not overly fond of Tony knowing exactly where he stood and the same not being true in reverse.

If Loki focused intently enough, he could feel the pull of the Time Gem on the Tesseract, the vein
of curiosity and something akin to kinship stretched between them, a sensation that served as an indication to Tony’s proximity.

It was only when they were inside the walls that they could see some form of weaponry stationed below the rods Tony had identified as scanners, large bulky machines with some form of nozzles at the end of each one.

“Wonder what they do about the pigeons,” Tony muttered to himself, having glanced at the same machines.

“Presumably, they would not have a kind fate.”

Loki’s attention was diverted by a flurry of movement from the workers moving between the front building and one of the ships that was stationed close to it. It was only as Loki looked more closely that he picked up on the rest of the workers, some coming in and out of other stationary ships, others disappearing in and out of the front building, a few signalling to each other with handheld flags.

Something stirred by Loki’s arm.

“So…” Tony murmured. “Pick a ship?”

Right. That was their entire purpose of being here. Loki nodded. Whichever ship he’d choose, he’d have to make the decision quickly. There was only a narrow window of time between this moment and the commotion of the next vessel taking off and the longer they lingered, the more likely it was that something would go wrong. Loki misliked leaving the choosing of the ship to chance. What if he chose a ship that was too difficult to overpower? What if he chose a ship they would not be able to operate themselves? What if he chose a ship ill-prepared for journeying to Knowhere, wherever that ended up being?

The priority, Loki decided, would be to overpower the ship as quickly as possible. Which meant choosing one with less security and subsequently one transporting fewer valuables. But how was he supposed to tell them apart? If he chose the shabbiest looking ship, there may be a possibility of having to repair it and if he chose the smallest ship he could find – not that any of them were small by any definition – there would be fewer places to hide and there hardly seemed much difference between the remaining ships anyway and–

"Fuck it,” Tony muttered, grabbing Loki’s wrist and pulling him towards the nearest ship with an open door. Loki would have been relieved for the opportunity to blame Tony if that particular ship turned out to be a poor choice if not for the Taradaxian who happened to be standing inside of the door, only just coming into view as they rounded the corner.

Loki yanked his arm in a different direction and then he was the one pulling Tony towards the next ship.

Its doors were closed, the nearest pair situated at the top of a ramp, and the ship seemed deserted, no workers in sight. It was only as they approached it that they could make out a seam in the metal that ran parallel to the edge of the underside. Loki led them in a race up the ramp and came face to face with the frame that marked the outline of a door, only to discover there were no handles or other discernible methods of opening it.

“Tony?”

Something pushed past Loki and he could hear the light taps of Tony’s hands examining the door.
“Shit.”

“What is it?”

“There’s a tiny receiver thing over here but I don’t know what it’s for. Some sort of keycard? Retina scan? Fingerprints? Do these guys even have fingerprints? Anyway – point is, we’re not getting in. Maybe if I had enough time then maybe I’d be able to see if their coding’s similar enough to ours and trick it somehow or hack into it but...”

“We don’t have time,” Loki said. Already, the stream of workers heading into one of the ships further ahead was thinning, each one holding up an object too small for him to be able to identify that was checked over by a worker at the entrance before being allowed access. Loki thought it a great shame the security worker appeared to have deemed it necessary to hold whatever the identifying objects were as it would have probably given away the fact that something was amiss if their hand passed through an illusion of the object.

“Next?”

The stream of workers was barely a trickle now. The doors to that ship would be closing any moment, and with it closing the opportunity to board it.

An idea struck Loki. “Perhaps not.”

He led them back in the direction they had came from, summoning a walking image of one of the workers he had seen earlier, one who appeared to have the task of directing the others. He made it remain a safe distance away from the previous ship, close enough for it to be easily identifiable, but far enough that verbal communication would be out of the question. It gestured frantically with a handheld flag for the Taradaxian at the entrance of the door to join it, an expression of distinct panic spread across its features. The worker hesitated, glancing behind it inside the ship and then Loki made his illusion give a frustrated impatient summon with the flag, making the movement more urgent and commanding. There. The Taradaxian had left its post. Loki’s illusion remained ahead of it, moving at a rapid pace before it would eventually disappear behind a ship further ahead.

Loki and Tony only just managed to board the ship before the door automatically closed shut behind them.

“Is that it?” Tony whispered from next to him. “Was that all of them?”

“No,” Loki said.

Through the entrance to the ship was a narrow corridor and Loki could see what lay ahead of them.

The interior was a huge chasm, a giant dome of a thing with hundreds and hundreds of spherical instruments lining the circumference, the shape of them and how they glittered in the darkness reminding Loki of frogspawn.

And they were not alone.

There were workers scattered around the ship, busying themselves with various tasks and none remaining still for long. Some of them appeared to be counting the spherical instruments, others checking the readings of metres and testing equipment.

“Are those what I think they are?” Tony asked.
“Are what? I can’t see you, remember?”

“The things I’m guessing aren’t baubles.” Ah. The mysterious spherical objects. “Because they sure look like spacepods to me.”

Loki supposed a pod was not as impressive sounding as a ship but still thought they may be worthy of investigation. “Let’s take a closer look, shall we?” So long as they were quiet, they should not run into any trouble unless— “Wait!” Loki hissed. “What of their scanners?”

“Neither me or Friday have picked up anything in here and if they’re guarding against being infiltrated, they’ll expect it to be from the outside, not the inside. As far as they’re concerned, everyone on board is cleared to do their thing – so why bother with more security than they need?”

Loki hoped Tony was right.

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"Right. I guess it's the same case again. Pick a ship, any ship."

Loki waved an arm in frustration. "It's not as if any of the pods have distinguishing features – they're all the same."

"I mean, they all have individual marks I’m assuming are identification numbers written on them but other than that, yeah, they're pretty much identical."

Some were visibly more worn than others, with the company brand Loki could not fathom how to pronounce on the exterior shells faded or obscured by dirt. Each of them was the exact same structure: clear transparent bubble-like formations at the front attached some form of metal cuboid behind it Loki assumed contained fuel.

“You know what?” Tony said. “I wasn’t expecting this to be what would be inside here but it actually makes sense. If they’ve got hundreds of fuel deliveries to make for planets near each other it makes more sense to send a massive ship carrier with loads of tiny ships inside instead of a load of large ships. Or just one ship that has to make loads of stops. It’s actually pretty efficient.”

“I suppose so.”

“It’s kind of like piling a load of delivery guys in a van. You don’t just get the van to drive somewhere, you get it to unleash all the delivery guys where it stops.”

Loki was too busy trying to find his way inside one of the said pods to pay too much mind to Tony’s analogies. Every so often, he would scan his surroundings to double-check they were unlikely to be heard and to keep a tally on the slowly rising number of workers inhabiting the ship.

There was a fumble to his left and then the sound of Tony groaning.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s another identification scanner.”

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In the end, they had few options remaining.

When Loki had first suggested stealing a ship, he hadn’t quite anticipated how many beings would occupy them. He had initially considered the vessels on board the ship a small blessing that might have uncomplicated matters somewhat until the issue of the identification scanners emerged. But
there was a viable solution.

Loki and Tony sat in the shadows by their chosen vehicle, selected on the basis of Tony seeing a vague palm tree shape in the alien lines of its identification number and Loki seeing no logical reason to object.

More workers had entered the ship, ones that did not just appear to be there for some sort of briefing or maintenance, ones who were beginning to enter the pods by scanning something they wore around their wrists.

“Er – Loki?” Tony asked, voice lowered. “Before we go and, you know, grab ourselves a spacepod – do you reckon a pod like this will actually be enough for us?”

“Possibly,” Loki answered. “Probably.”

“What I meant was can they travel as far? Are there certain pressures they can’t withstand? What if they’re only designed for certain atmospheres instead of actual space-travel? How are we supposed to know—”

“By following the other pods,” Loki said. “At least for long enough to determine what they can withstand.”

Tony was silent for a moment. And then, “Called it. I knew this would end up taking longer than a couple hours.”

Loki and Tony remained there in silence, waiting for someone to approach their chosen vessel, unwilling to risk speaking while there were significantly more Taradaxians surrounding them. On multiple occasions one or two Taradaxians would approach their pod, looking as if they were heading straight towards it with the intention of boarding it, but then they would veer off to one side or another and Loki would be left impatient and with his muscles cramping from crouching in such a position.

And then it happened: two workers got closer and closer and were definitely definitely definitely heading towards their ship, communicating with each other in their strange language of hisses and clicks.

Then Loki struck.

It would have simpler to kill them and certainly less effort on Loki’s part, but Tony had insisted there wasn't any need. And then when Loki still hadn’t been fully convinced, Tony had argued there was too much risk for noise and that if Loki couldn't think of an alternate solution it would only prove his lack of imagination.

It was for that reason that the two Taxadarians found themselves inexplicably deposited outside of a dwarven tavern on the opposite side of the universe.

Loki reappeared back on board the ship, wristbands in hand, and projected the stolen image of the two Taradaxians over himself and Tony.

“You know what?” Tony said. “If I was suddenly dumped on an alien planet, I think at a bar is the best place to be. Firstly, it’s way nicer than being held hostage, and secondly, they’re pretty universal, everyone knows how they work. Not sure what they’ll pay with but er… We can go back for them. After. If we can find them again.”
Loki released a breath of laughter, his tongue pressing behind his teeth. “I suspect they’ll stand out a little.”
"It's small," was the first Loki said when they climbed through the door.

“It’s a spaceship – spacepod, I mean – and it’s ours.”

Loki looked pointedly from one side of the pod to the other. “Yes. All three armspans of it.”

Even the technology of the dark elves – the race that had supposedly been extinct since Bor’s reign – had been more elegant than that of the Taradaxians. The front end of the pod had a panel curved to match the window it was attached to, the surface of the panel crowded with buttons and steering mechanisms. Behind the control panel were two seats and at the joint where the glass-like material became metal, the walls became lined with hatches and cupboards.

“I think you’re missing the point here. We have a spaceship. Who cares if it’s small and if we’re basically travelling in a space version of a pizza delivery van so long as it works?”

The rest of the pod Loki had found to be equally as unimpressive, the cooking and food storage unit through in the next section being approximately half the size of the control section, and the largest section of the ship fully occupied by tanks of fuel for transporting.

Once they had finished inspecting their spacepod, which, regrettably, did not take long, Loki settled into one of the two chairs behind the control panel. Tony hovered around his chair, always touching it but never quite sitting in it, frequently distracted by reaching for some lever or button or switch. Along the way, he would mutter to himself, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he did it out loud.

“...Shift stick… Accelerator? That’s got to be some kind of communications thing...”

Loki adjusted the seat, allowing himself to lean back with his hands behind his head. If even Thor had managed to figure out how to activate and fly an unfamiliar dark elf ship, he had faith that Tony would manage it far more competently.

Tony was too wrapped up in attempting to decipher the foreign buttons and mechanisms to notice Loki’s lack of assistance, busy familiarising himself with all of the various keys and miscellaneous appendages of the control panel.

The ship had hummed to life some time ago, the vibrations of the engines causing the floor to have a slight tickle.

The wait for the large carrier ship to take off was tedious. For what felt like hours, they watched as more and more workers bustled to and fro. In the meantime, they had a near mishap when a Taradaxian of a higher authority opened their door and said something in an utterly incomprehensible language but apparently the only response it required was a nod and it pressed something on one of its devices.

"Register," Tony said by way of explanation when the alien had left. "I think. Guess we’re close to the take-off."

He must have been correct because not much time had passed before, one after the other, various different engines and mechanisms began firing up in a chain reaction that got louder and louder as it progressed. What had only been minor vibrations became more and more violent and there was a sudden blast and then the vibrations were no more.
Loki sat up straight in his seat.

The ship had taken flight, he realised. If he was able to see out of the carrier ship he would have been able to watch as Taradaxia disappeared beneath them. Some part of him slightly regretted not being able to wish it good riddance before it occurred to him that the lack of windows in the carrier ship would shield him from having to bear witness to everything around him slowly becoming darker and darker.

There had been a time when the view of the edges of Asgard had been one of his favourite sights but that had been a very long time ago.

They had flown so high that Loki could no longer tell if they were moving or not, and it was a far smoother glide than what he would have suspected such a large bulky ship to be capable of. Even so, Loki’s fingers were gripping the underside of his seat with what must have been a considerable amount of pressure, given how the metal started to give way beneath his fingertips.

Neither of them spoke and despite the continuous roaring of the engines, the air in the pod felt too silent, too still.

Loki refused to think about what lay outside the walls of the ship but his intent only brought it to the forefront of his mind. It wasn’t until that moment he realised he had been anticipating Tony fulfilling the role of distracting him from his own thoughts as he so often inadvertently did. Except for when Loki needed him to, it would seem.

Loki searched for something to say, anything to keep thoughts of the void at bay.

“Do you believe you’ll be able to pilot it?” Loki asked. He was immediately aware of its redundancy as a question, how he already knew Tony had identified the majority of the controls, or at least the essential ones, long ago.

Tony nodded, eyes fixated on the window as if he could see beyond the walls of the carrier ship.

“...Good,” Loki said when Tony did not elaborate.

The cushioning of the chair felt too solid already, Loki was certain he could feel the metal frame pressing against his thighs and back but no matter how he repositioned himself he still felt it, those hard lumps jutting against his bones.

It took some force to make himself begin to release his grip on the chair – if he was not careful Tony would notice. Or alternatively, Loki would break the chair. If was a choice between the two, he would rather indefinitely fly through space seated on a chair that did not remotely resemble anything intact rather than face the former option.

It took only a glance at Tony to come to the conclusion that his worries of Tony noticing his behaviour were unnecessary; Tony’s eyes had not moved off the window. Those eyes were not merely observing, they were filled with something that looked like some bastard brother of focus, like if he stared with enough intensity something would catch fire. But there was something else too, something that Loki was hesitant to name that lurked beneath the surface, something that might even be–

Loki’s thoughts were knocked askew by the sudden jolt of the ship. Its walls rattled, sending Loki’s hands back to gripping the chair. Tony inhaled a sharp breath, reaching out on reflex to clutch the thing he had previously identified as a gear stick. The walls shook again but Loki was prepared this time, collected enough to recognise it as what it was: little more than minor
disturbances brought about by changes in the air.

As abruptly as it had started, it stopped.

“You’re not required to pilot just yet,” Loki reminded Tony, half to ease the tension and half in desperation for something even remotely resembling a shred of humour.

Tony looked at his own hands as if they were foreign to him and released the gear stick. There was a light sheen to his skin that was not usually present and he had yet to utter a single word since the ship had taken flight.

“Tony?”

Tony jolted.

“I’m–” Tony started. “I’m just gonna check out the…” Whatever the last word had been, Loki failed to catch it. Tony motioned with a finger behind the door before disappearing through it.

Loki watched him leave, left with a certainty that this behaviour must have been what Pepper had been referring to. Loki had seen it: the fear, the raw instinct for survival, but he could not place why it had taken root in Tony.

Tony had neither a fear of heights – how could he when he was perfectly content to soar the skies in his armour? – or a fear of travelling to other worlds. The only difference Loki was distinctly aware of was that this time they would have to travel through space rather than teleporting and–

Was it the reflection of the void Loki had seen in Tony’s eyes? Or was him only seeing his own fear projected back at him?

The answer should not have mattered. It was nothing Loki should have concerned himself with, nothing he should pry into, not unless… Not unless Tony was unable to pilot the pod.

Loki examined the control panel, his fingers tracing over the thick buttons and levers. Thor managed to fly a dark elf ship without prior experience, Loki reminded himself, almost repelled by how petulant his own thoughts sounded. And if Thor had then surely Loki could too if need be.

For half a heartbeat, Loki considered walking through the metal door, the echo of Pepper’s request to 'just be there' echoing from his memory – though whatever she had meant by that he was not certain.

But the more Loki stared at the door, the more resolved he became. If he had been on the other side of it, if his own body had betrayed him in such a way that left him so fragile, then it was infinitely easier with no one to bear witness to it.

In an unanticipated turn of events, the speculation provided an excellent distraction. All he had to do was to keep wondering and not let a moment’s silence cause his mind to lapse during the brief time in which it was not occupied.

By the time Tony returned, Loki had only managed to identify only a fraction of the pieces of the control panel that Tony had, and even then, few of them with certainty.

“You would not believe the size of the bathroom we have,” Tony said as if nothing unusual had occurred, the words leaving his mouth in rapid succession. “I have to tuck my elbows in just to get in. I’m starting to get cabin fever just by thinking about it. But on the plus side, we’ve got a shower. I didn’t know to expect that. Wonder what their water processor is like? Where do you
think it's hidden? Did we miss it in the back or something? Gotta be glad they’ve figured out how to fly without zero gravity. When I take a piss I prefer it to actually go where I want it to – the other way sounds messy. Do you reckon they recycle water on these things? Don’t worry – I haven’t actually tested that out so nothing’s potentially contaminated or anything. I–”

“You don’t need to disclose the details of… those kinds of activities.”

Tony returned to his chair. “Sure, there are plenty of things I don’t need to share. But you get them for free. Why – you think this is oversharing?” Tony let out a slightly off-pitch laugh. “Trust me, this isn’t oversharing. Or maybe I just have lower standards than you. Or now that I come to think of it, maybe your’s are just impossibly high. Because sometimes I don’t think you’re even familiar with the concept of oversharing. You go around claiming to be all god-like and you think you do a great job of not looking like a wounded puppy whenever someone mentions your family or your–”

“Are you quite finished?”

“But it’s not just you. Thor swings from a terrifyingly powerful 'holy shit he’s actually a Norse god stepped right out of legend' to a giant labrador so much I’m basically starting to think of him as the stormier version of Clifford the Big Red Dog. And yeah, Thor’s cape colour is completely appropriate.”

Loki allowed a moment to pass. “Tony?”

Tony spread his arms wide, his eyes lacking the spark of enthusiasm that the act required, even if the gesture was only used ironically. “Here in the flesh.”

“Are you certain you’ll be able to pilot?”

Self-doubt did not suit Tony. “Probably.”

Loki nodded ahead of them. “Because I believe something is happening.”

A strange dim glow of light was filtering in through a fissure that had appeared in the underside of the ship and for a moment Loki was certain their ship must have broken somehow. Then the crack grew larger and larger and Loki realised it wasn’t a crack at all: it was the seams of the ship opening.

The full view of what lay outside the walls of the ship was directly in front of them. There were stars, so many countless stars, and the light of the nearest sun reflected off the surface of a world not all that far from where the ship was drifting to a stop.

Then Loki could breathe again, the tension having dissolved from his body. For one moment, he had been convinced he would be forced to stare into the depths of the void again but there was no complete darkness to be found. Instead there was a view that was not all that dissimilar to Asgard’s: a view of stars and nebulae and other worlds, a sight that was a feast of colour and light.

Some of the pods closest to the mouth of the ship were stirring, rising from their stations and reminding Loki of bees exiting a hive.

Tony was utterly still.

Then the pods began to fly out of the mouth in a uniformed order, row by row, until it was almost their turn to leave.

Tony made the slightest of movements, his fingers hovering over the gear stick. Loki did not
comment on the tremor.

Then the pod in front of them began to move and both of them were faced with the inevitability that it was their turn.

“Here goes,” Tony said, a slight quaver in his voice. He pulled a lever and the engine of the pod began to thrum with life. Then Tony pressed something else and the pod rose steadily for a few feet, all the signs that had been so promising marred by the dreadful grinding sound that accompanied it.

“Er…” Tony hurriedly pressed a few more buttons, one causing something wet to squirt at the screen, another making a light illuminate the interior of the cabin.

They were late – their delay was out of synchrony with the other pods, and the other workers would surely have noticed by now.

Tony’s hands moved the wheel, and then they surged forward, the noise eradicated.

Their flight was not in any way gentle. Rather than flying in a smooth line, they veered from side to side haphazardly and failed to remain at a constant height. Then they began swerving downwards, the wall of the ship directly in their path.

“Tony! The–”

“On it.” Tony had already moved to twist one arm over the other in order to reach behind him and yank on a lever.

There was an audible change in the pod’s engine but the wall of the ship remained very much ahead of them, the proximity of it getting closer and closer–

“Tony?”

Tony stomped on a pedal Loki had not been aware was there and there was an abrupt lurch before they were back on course with barely any time to allow them to process that they had left the mouth of the ship.

Loki’s stomach began churning again and he couldn’t reason why. He had walked the Bifrost again, he had watched as the water fell off the edge of his world. He had faced worse than this. There were lights and stars and thousands of visible objects that differentiated and distinguished this from the void and yet…

Loki wanted to curse himself for being foolish enough to believe his fears had left him, for believing he was strong enough to remain unfazed by the prospect of flying through space. The pod gave a sudden jerk that broke his thoughts and then they were in line with following the trail of a string of pods ahead of them, the ones far ahead at the head of the line beginning to descend towards the closest planet.

Loki hadn’t realised he’d stopped breathing. It was only when he started taking in breaths again that the fear of Tony seeing him, a god, in such a state brought on by something so mundane started to take its roots. Tony's eyes flicked to his for the briefest of instances and Loki saw his own terror reflected in them. Loki tensed, ready to face an onslaught of mockery but none came – although whether that was from a lack of a desire to or lack of an ability to, Loki could not determine for certain. Tony was not cruel but he could be brusque. But for the moment, Tony did not appear capable of being either.
Tony's weight was on the control panel, his eyes wide and his breath coming out faster and faster.

Some of the pods just in front of them were beginning to branch off to different sides of the planet, others further out into space.

They had a decision to make, perhaps one that they would not be able to make for themselves given their difficulty flying the pod.

“Tell me what to do,” Loki said when it was clear their situation was not improving.

Tony startled, as if he had temporarily forgotten Loki was there. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, unable to take his eyes off the window.

“Portal,” Tony said. “Now.”

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They made an utter mess of landing on the roof of Stark Tower. Loki was only fairly certain the pod was not in any way broken, although he could not say the same for the roof.

Loki and Tony remained in their seats for some time even after the ship was no longer moving.

Tony fiddled with the ship’s controls, all inactive now the engine was no longer running.

"I’ve been told I never appreciated a good view," Tony admitted. "And I'm sure it was a fucking spectacular view out there. But I– I don't want to deal with everything else that comes with it. Which is funny because an opportunity like that is a scientist’s fantasy and I should’ve– I should’ve been able to love every second of it. But I… didn’t. And I don't just mean because of your typical existential dread everyone gets from time to time thinking about space.” Tony flicked a switch, up and down, up and down. The more restless Tony became, the stiller Loki got. Loki could not understand what it was Tony wanted from him. Was Tony making a confession? A plea for some sort of resolution? "I can blame you for that."

Me? Loki was taken aback.


"I don't recall–"

"Yeah, you wouldn't. You were probably too busy being a new addition to my flooring. They sent a nuke, Loki. They sent a nuke right at the city all because of those little friends you were inviting over."

Loki could not reply for a moment. "They would have killed more of your people than I would have done."

Tony shrugged but the gesture was stiff. "As far as they were concerned, the death toll would've been worth saving the rest of us. But they didn’t think past eliminating the threat. So I diverted the new threat to attack the actual target."

Loki’s mouth grew dry. "You flew up the portal."

Tony let go of the switch. "And I fell back out of it."

Loki wondered why Tony was telling him this, why Tony had without being prompted, volunteered to share this information. Was Tony expecting something in return? Did Tony think it
would bring him relief to share this information? Or worse – was it advice he sought? Or even worse still – had Tony noticed after all and was now expecting Loki to give up one of his own secrets in exchange?

There was a long silence before Loki hesitantly broke it. "How long did you fall for?"

"Don't know. Blacked out. Felt like ages and a microsecond all at the same time, you know?"

Loki knew.

"Why did you join me then?" When Tony looked puzzled, Loki rephrased the question. "Why did you knowingly join me on a journey you knew would take place across space if you are so averse to it?"

"Because I want us to win and this maximises our chances. And… Sometimes I think you've gone lone wolf for too long."

Precisely the opposite is true, Loki thought, if Thanos had never found me...

Loki stiffened in his seat. "Are you pitying me?"

"Pitying? I don’t do pity."

"Then I hope you are not mistaking me for another one of your Midgardian teammates."

"I'm not. This is a partnership, not another team."

Loki allowed that.

“I don’t play well with others,” Tony said. “Which is exactly what Romanoff told me right before the Avengers happened and look how well that turned out. Bruce went awol, Steve didn’t think I deserved to know who killed my parents, Nat stayed on my side just long enough to help the other side win, Clint hates my guts, Wanda – who I was trying to protect from herself – acted like I was keeping her in a prison, one of my teammates ended up accidentally paralysing another one, and then even after the fight was over, Vision still decided to join them. Not for sides, just because he got closer to Wanda than I anticipated. So, yeah – I’m done with teams. I’d prefer to trust someone to stab me in the back rather than being taken by surprise – at least then you know what you’re getting."

“Is that what I am? Someone you can trust to stab you in the back?” Loki couldn’t understand why the prospect of it bothered him somehow, why Tony’s assessment of his character should have had even the slightest bit of effect on him.

Tony was quiet for a moment, considering his words before answering, “I don’t know what you are.” He let out a single chuckle. “But I’d prefer it if you don’t stab me, front or back.”

Loki felt the barest traces of a smile. “I suppose that isn’t an unreasonable request.”

“I figure I’ll be fine. At least until we’ve dealt with Thanos problem. And then after that… I was meaning to talk to you about that at some point actually. Might as well be now.”

“Oh?” Loki had given little thought to the after, had seen little beyond their mission because success had seemed so unthinkable.

“Yeah – about what happens after. Because let’s go all out and say if this works – if we actually
end up being able to travel through time and win – then what?”

“Concerned I’ll stab you?”

“A bit. I mean, I don’t think you don’t find me as annoying as you used to, but it’s hard to tell with you sometimes. No – what I’m more worried about is what happens if we end up with time travel at our disposal indefinitely. Because that could be... dangerous. You don’t seem like you’re interested in crowning yourself the king of a planet any time soon but you’ve got bigger problems right now. And I don’t know what’ll happen if those problems are taken away and you end up with too much free time on your hands again.”

If Loki was being entirely honest, neither did he. It was strange to think of their mission as having an end, of the possibility of them actually succeeding. “Then what are you proposing?”

“A truce. After.”

“You do realise that a truce would require you to trust my word?”

“Well I’m not gonna have anything else once this is over. I’ve got nothing else left to bargain with. Except that I’m not going to let you go back in time when this thing is done on the off chance you go over to the dark side again.”

Loki bristled. “Is that truly necessary?”

“Hope not. But I’d be stupid to take any chances.”

“What do you want then?”

“I’d like to remain unharmed. Oh – and a lift back home when this is all over would be nice. That’s... all, actually.”

“Done.” Loki was not going to remind Tony that he appeared to have forgotten about the Tesseract.

Tony blinked at him. “Seriously? Just like that?”

“There’s no need to sound so surprised.”

“Tell you what, I’ll even throw in an extra something for you if you keep your planet invading to a minimum. Ever fancied a pair of flying boots? AI in your helmet? Hell, I’ll even invent custom designed shampoo if you want.”

Loki hid a smile. “We’ll see.”

There was a rap at the door, followed by Pepper letting herself inside, barely fitting in the remaining space.

“What time do you call this?” she demanded.

“We’re fine by the way,” Tony said.

“That’s not what I meant to say. What I meant to say was what have you done to your roof? Have you seen it? And...” She trailed off, her eyes on Tony’s face. “Also – are you okay? Sorry. I should’ve asked that first. I just meant you took longer than a couple of hours. I thought since you told me it wouldn’t take long I might as well stick around and get some work done since I’d only be wondering...” Her expression morphed, becoming something that bordered upon comical, her eyes moving to the control panel. “Oh my god. This is an actual spaceship.”
Tony grinned. “Wanna see my spaceship?”

“It’s not only yours,” Loki reminded him.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t fit the quote.”

“Sometimes,” Pepper said, her tone a mixture of exasperation and fondness, “I think it’s for the best we broke up.”

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It was later in the evening, much later, when Loki finally raised tried to raise the question that had been on his mind since they had left their newly acquired ship.

“Tony – are you **certain** it’s a good idea for you to join me–”

“I meant what I said before. Our odds are better if we’re not separated. And I… I can work through it. It won’t be easy but I can make it through it. There’s too much depending on this to risk not doing it.”

“What about your inventions with the Time Gem?”

“Who says I can’t do both? We can empty the storage fuel from the back and build a mini lab if it comes to it.”

Loki assessed him for a long moment but there were no traces of doubt on Tony’s face. “Very well.”

“We’re gonna have to take it for a few test drives before we start going anywhere far. Okay – I didn’t get that much of a good look at the other pods but some of the chain was definitely breaking off to head for open space so it’s safe to assume we’ll be able to fly this thing pretty much anywhere. Except maybe underwater.”

“That sounds promising.”

Tony nodded. “I just need to learn how to fly it. Properly this time. Because it isn’t just space that… you know… It’s not being in control. Like with the nuke. I didn’t have time to think my way around it. There wasn’t anything else I could’ve done. I was out of options. And I don’t want to be out of options when we’re up there. I need to be able to think my way out of situations because that’s what I do. That’s how I’ve survived this long. Am I making sense?”

Loki inclined his head. “Perfect sense.”

“I am? Good. Er… Know anywhere quiet we can take this thing for a test drive?”

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Loki hadn’t thought he would have voluntarily returned to Svartalfheim again in his lifetime, not after what had happened there. It had been the place of both his death and his rebirth and it seemed oddly sacrilegious to return there for the purposes of learning to fly a vehicle. Still, being inside of the ship was certainly not the same as walking the black sands and they only remained on the surface of the planet to practice landing and taking flight.

“Can you get that dial up by your head?” Tony asked. “Firstly, you’re taller than me. And secondly, it’s probably not a good idea to play twister while we’re trying to figure out how to pilot
this thing."

Loki pulled it without complaint and a mechanism locked into place that sent them hurtling upwards into the sky at a sudden speed, the clouds beneath them lying like a desert.

“Alright!” Tony grinned. “You wanna take the wheel? I need to investigate more stuff over this end so…”

Loki pressed his fingertips over the surface of the wheel, gave it an ever so slight turn and–

“You’ll have to be more forceful than that,” Tony said, looking up from where he had crouched in the gap underneath the panelling. “This stuff doesn't know the meaning of subtle gestures.”

Loki pressed more forcefully and it began to respond to him, the pod curving further skyward in an arc. Loki angled the wheel upwards and they flew higher and higher before he brought them in a swoop that stopped just short of the ground.

Tony stuck his head up above the control panel. “Are you showing off?”

“Only a little.”

“Okay, carry on.”

“Pardon?”

“Carry on – I think I’ve figured out what these things do.” Tony crawled out of the space. “Only one way to find out for sure.” Tony placed his foot over one of the pedals. “Brace yourself.”

“What--”

Tony pressed his foot down.

Then Loki heard it – the air bellowing around the back chamber of the pod, and everything he had learned about steering the ship was becoming obsolete because the ship was no longer under his control.

Tony released the pedal and the noise stopped. "In my defence, that's not what I thought it'd do."

"Tony – what--"  

"This is the kind of thing they should've marked with a blatant red sign. Or at least have some other warning. Seriously – who designed this thing? How can they manage stuff our own rocket scientists can't while not having a grasp of basic big nope buttons?"

"But why would--"

"I think it was supposed to be some sort of fast release for the carrier fuel. Or it would've been if we hadn't already left the spares in the tower. So we just ended up driving this high up with an open trunk."

The rest of their experiments and tests were not nearly so eventful. They found a mechanism that acted as an extra defensive layer to the ship, a button that blared a loud horn, access to some sort of digital screen that unfolded from a flap in the ceiling, and those were only a handful of their findings.

“Is that our navigator?” Loki voiced aloud, examining the screen.
Tony poked the screen but the lettering remained just as unintelligible. After considerably more pokings, the display changed, reverting from an image of clusters of dots that might have represented stars to a slightly displaced and pixelated version of the same image.

“Er – it was our navigator. But I think it’s crashed. Couldn’t deal with us being off-map. I guess it’d be a lot more helpful if we actually understood their language as well.”

“Perhaps we should have kept the Taradaxians as hostages,” Loki replied, only half serious.

“They’re having a forced vacation.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup. And I need to give landing this thing another try – good thing we have a soft landing – and I was thinking we might have to do this the old-fashioned way. Just to make sure that thing is actually a navigator so I won’t end up wasting my time trying to fix it – can you see if you can make sense of it?”

“I can’t read that screen any more than you can.”

“You don’t need to read: you just need to look. See if there’s a match.” Tony pulled out one of the maps he had taken from Taradaxia.

Loki unfolded the pages, then turned it over in search of a key or indicator or at least something he could as a starting point when something odd struck him. There, on the other side of the page, in a miniature section bordering the perimeter of the map, he could read some lettering. It was only an uneven scattering of words in some far away galaxy, but they were legible. How was that…

“Tony?”

“Found something? That was quick.”

“I need you to read this.”

“Why? You wanna how to pronounce a drawing of a triangle with an X through it?”

“I need to determine whether this has a root in Allspeak or whether it is something else entirely.”

That piqued Tony’s curiosity. Tony learnt closer, leaning over his shoulder, and read aloud, “Xandar.”

Loki snatched the map back, the possibilities racing through his mind. Loki didn’t know why it hadn’t occurred to him sooner, why he had assumed that Odin had stopped with conquering the Nine Realms. Because if there were traces of translatable Allspeak in the distant reaches of the galaxy, then it had to originate from somewhere, surely. Unless, Loki thought, it was the other way around. There was no way to be certain.

Loki’s eyes jumped between the words, more and more pronounceable ones making themselves known. Some were named as if by machines, their titles a series of nonsensical numbers and letters, others had shorter names composed with far too few vowels, and then there were the words that were more familiar to him, titles like ‘Sovereign’, ‘Oceana’, and ‘Dust Fall’.

And there, sitting in the midst of them, was Knowhere.
Neither Loki nor Tony had seen much point in stalling – they had acquired a means to find Knowhere and they had a ship in which to get there. Delaying would do little but further their apprehension and make the day they departed closer to the day Odin would be revived.

Unsurprisingly, Loki had little interest in remaining inside of the Nine Realms after Odin would be reunited with the throne.

Running more flight tests and installing the makeshift workshop in the rear section of the ship took only a matter of days. Loki was certain someone somewhere would disapprove of him summoning portals for a task as mundane as transporting objects and he found great satisfaction in continuing to do so, particularly when the more often he did it, the easier it became.

Tony’s area of expertise lay with more subtle crafts: ensuring his arc reactor technology would be able to power everything inside the rear section of the ship.

They had as large a supply of food as the ship would allow and only a minute amount of space able to be delegated for other miscellaneous personal items.

Then they were ready. The ship was perched on the roof, all belongings and essential items were already on board, and Tony had bid his goodbyes to Rhodey and Pepper.

The reappearance of the ship, clearly visible from the tops of other towers and skyscrapers, had not gone unnoticed by the citizens of Midgard. It had brought about speculation from multiple news reporting outlets that the reason Tony Stark had made very few public appearances as of late was due to him being heavily involved in a space exploration project. All things considered, the rumours had been surprisingly accurate.

From the angle of their position inside of the ship, it was impossible to see the Midgardians on the streets below in detail – it was only once the ship began to take flight that the angle allowed Loki to see them all beneath him, craning their heads to peer at the flying object in the sky.

Tony handled the controls a certain degree more stiffly than he had during their flight practices and for a moment Loki was left baffled when Tony elected to operate with one hand and in a clear deliberate gesture, stuck his thumb up at the window before returning to using both hands.

Loki expression alone must have given away his thoughts because Tony explained himself without requiring a verbal prompt. “It was for the cameras. My roof’s been trending in the news for the past three days so someone must’ve snapped a shot. I like to think future-me will think it's funny. And I figured I should probably do something so no one thinks I’ve been abducted because if anyone’s noticed you’ve been around, they’d assume the worst.”

“Well, if you had made it clear it was that much of an issue, I would have–”

“It’s not that much of a big deal. And if the Collector is actually an ally of ours, it’ll make zero difference to you because you won’t need to come back to plain old Earth again. So you might as well save your stealth and avoiding detection and any of your usual roguish talents for when we need them.”

“My skills aren’t in limited supply.” And then, as if they had not already gained enough attention from passersby, Loki opened another portal in the sky of New York.
Despite being better prepared than the last time they had ventured into space, the sight of it was no less easy to bear. What was easier to bear, however, was the knowledge that they were able to fly the ship with a reasonable degree of more competence.

“Okay…” Tony said a few seconds after they reappeared in the spot where they had first flown out of the cargo ship. “Space.” He was perfectly still apart from his foot jostling up and down. “We just need to wait for the navigation systems to realise we’re actually in range of... however the hell their navigation works. Clearly, it’s a bit different to sat nav. But apparently just as prone to crashing and wasting everyone’s time.” Tony poked the screen. “C’mon, C’mon... There we go. Something moved. I think. Did you get that? Right there? That pixelated cactus just morphed into a garden fork. Which is good. I never thought I’d think a cactus morphing into a fork would be a good sign of anything but here we are. Wait – am I imagining things? Did that actually happen or have I been staring at it too long?”

“...Yes?”

“Yes I’ve been staring at it too long or yes it did happen?”

“The latter.”

Tony slapped his thighs with his hands. “Always nice to have confirmation I’m not insane. And okay, I’m definitely not imagining things – the whole thing’s clearing up now. Come on, you beautifully ugly piece of– Aha! Gotcha. I knew you’d come through in the end.” Then Tony turned to Loki. “Uh – you did remember the map, right?”

“You insult me.” Loki brought out a copy they had made of the map, one with the route they had planned drawn over the top of it.

“You get why I had to check. It’d be really embarrassing if we had to turn back at this point.” Tony scratched this jaw. “Forgetting the map would be a very me thing to do though, don’t you think? Because a spaceship and planets and uh... space itself is a little distracting. It’d be a bit too easy just to overlook packing a piece of paper. One time I managed to overlook the fact that if I very publically gave my address to a terrorist, my house actually might’ve ended up under attack. Which it did. With Pepper inside. It’s probably that kind of thing happening again and again that led to her saying she couldn’t handle the stress. I mean, I sometimes can’t handle the stress so I don’t see why she should’ve had to put up with it. I do stupid shit all the time. And I know it’s stupid and one day it might get me killed but that part of me doesn’t seem to have an off switch.” Tony drummed his fingers against the wheel and nodded at the screen. “Is it done? You think it’s finished?”

“It appears to be.”

“Right. That’s my cue. Loki – you happy to do your thing? Because my jaw feels looser than usual and like all these words are gonna start pouring out and I get the feeling you might eject me if I start rambling about my exes for much longer but hey – apparently thinking about that is better than thinking about where I am right now. So if there’s one place I want to be right now, it’s in the room with no windows.”

Loki would not have been opposed to being inside of a room with no windows but he chose to say nothing on the subject. “I will set us on course,” Loki vowed instead, the words feeling almost as unpleasant as the taste of bile in his mouth.

Tony stood up, the movement too fast and abrupt to be fluid. “Thanks. You’ve no idea how much
this’ll help me out.” He clapped Loki on the shoulder. “I owe you one.”

Loki was too startled by the unforeseen contact to react before it was over and then when it was over all he said was, “Another one?”

Tony paused by the door to look back. “Yeah. I suppose it is.”

***

Knowing there was an exit, an escape from having to face the blanket of space that was just a few feet away, only made it worse.

Loki refused to be defeated by something only his eyes could see. He would not be cowed by something that did not even have its own mind, something that did not have its own thoughts.

And so he remained, sat in his chair, knees bunched up against his chest, engaging in a staring contest with the universe itself.

Perhaps the worst part was that, by all rationality, it was not space he should have been afraid of – it was its inhabitants. In his mind he knew this and no matter how frequently he reminded himself of it, the fact remained the same: on some level he would rather be staring into what lay underneath the hood of The Other than be confronted by the view of what was in front of him.

Because this was the part that came after.

This was the part that came after the void, the part that came after The Other’s training. This was travelling at the side of the man whose infatuation could put an end to life as the universe knew it. This was the man who excelled in cold strategy and logical reasoning and yet could not deduce that the Goddess of Death considered him with as little importance as an irksome fly. This was the man who spoke of destroying Loki’s home as if it was something he should have been grateful for.

This was a part of himself Loki could defeat – would defeat.

So why was it then, that when he finally felt nothing, did it not feel like a victory?

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It had taken much time and much more cursing of Friday for not being able to operate the screen before Loki completed the task, aligning the screen with the corresponding section of the map and setting the ship’s course in the correct direction. Then at long last, Loki was able to make his way through the sliding doors without berating himself for having to resort to using it as an escape.

The workshop was clustered with tables and benches and equipment that Loki was not able to identify and there was barely any space in which to stand. Materials and metals were strewn over the tabletops and the edges of the room were lined with stacks and stacks of containers.

To proceed into the room, Loki had to squeeze his way between the narrow cracks formed by tables misaligning.

Tony was modifying one of his previous inventions with the mannerisms of someone so utterly lost in their work that it surprised Loki when, without turning around, Tony asked, “What’s up?”

“How?”

Tony gave Loki a cursory glance. “You look sick. Caught a bug or something?”
“No–”

“Been working out then?” Tony resumed his work, enlargening a hologram of one of his designs and rearranging its components.

“In a space *that* small, I doubt–” Loki realised his mistake and stopped himself, only just coming to realise that his scalp had a certain clamminess and that sweat must have been the reason why. “Believe it or otherwise, I am capable of showering and me having emerged from said shower does not imply that I am ill or otherwise psychologically impaired.”

“Good – had me worried there for a moment. How much would it suck if our only navigator came down with the flu?”

And then the wave of nothingness that had come over Loki turned into something hollow, something that scraped ever so slightly at his insides because he would have to sit out there again and again until they reached Knowhere. And there was the envy he was so accustomed to, except that this time it was for Tony and how he was safely locked behind windowless walls and all it had taken to grant him that gift was a single conversation Loki could not have.

“We all set then?” Tony asked.

“In theory.”

“Guess that’s the closest we can get for now. So. What brings you down to my humble abode?”

“I would like to remind you that this is *our* ship.”

Tony picked out a select piece of the hologram with his fingers and tossed it in a digital bin. “And all the stuff in here is *my* stuff so…”

There were few times in his life that Loki had welcomed such a trivial argument with as much relief before. “If I dispose of a significant amount of my belongings in a room that does not mean I can validly claim the room as my own.”

“Not in the paperwork you can’t. But in people’s minds you can.”

Loki looked pointedly at all of the clutter that had spawned within such a short period of time. “Is this what you would call psychological warfare then? All this for an attempt to stake your claim–”

“Actually, it’s more of a byproduct instead of an actual attempt to–”

“Of course it is.”

“You bored or something?”

“I thought that once I set us on course it would be more productive for me to be in here rather than doing nothing but” – in his head, Loki privately added the word *avoiding* – “watching the view.” At least that was a task Friday was able to accomplish, even if she was only capable of observing out of the device Tony had attached to the front window rather than interacting with the ship.

“Then you might as well clear space for a seat. I’m not going anywhere soon.”

Loki shifted some of the smaller boxes of items and claimed his place.

Tony turned his back on his design. “Wanna meet Rizzo?”
“Who?” Then it occurred to Loki that there was a large cage at the side of the room, so well concealed amongst the disorder that it had somehow managed to escape his attention.

“Friday did the shopping a couple days back and got everything we need. That one there” – Tony pointed to one of the creatures inside of it, a rat making use of one of the hammocks – “is Jingles. There’s probably a Splinter somewhere in there. Don’t look at me like that – rat names are in short supply and I don’t think they’ll be too fussed about having to be named after boys. Hang on – what’s that Disney rat called? Remi. I forgot about Remi. So that’s half of them with names by now. You know what I call this? I call this progress.”

“I assume you did not bring them for recreational purposes.”

“You got that right. I’m not great at keeping pets. Better with robots.”

“I thought you said that humans use guinea pigs as test subjects.”

“Mostly a figure of speech. Mice or rats are more common for testing on in labs. And trust me, these girls will have a hell of a better time here than the lab they were at. We’re not going to intentionally get them hooked on meth for a start.”

Loki watched the creatures resting, sleeping in a pile one on top of the other. “You humans have strange practices.”

“You think that’s just a human thing? Because everything I’ve seen so far on this road trip of ours across the universe has pointed to the fact that once a species evolves to be sentient enough, it starts getting weird.”

“There may be some truth to that.”

“You bet there is.”

“And what exactly is the purpose of the rats?”

“Saving the universe.”

Loki paused. “Ah.”

“We’ll be screwed if we accidentally destroy ourselves instead of sending ourselves back in time so…”

“So you mean to test the technology on the rats when the time comes.”

“Yes. And no. I mean to start now. I didn’t have enough time to test the reverse-beam on something alive before and I need to know that the thing we’re using it on will actually stay alive and whether it’ll reverse the development of neural pathways and memory. Because if we have to use this or something similar on ourselves to go back in time, I need to know if I’m gonna have to send myself a memo.”

“How do you intend to do that? I suppose an obvious solution would be you training the rats and then testing their learned behaviour once you have reversed their ageing.”

“Exactly. Well, almost. Since you’re in here and you suggested it, you’re practically asking to become my lab assistant anyway. How’s that sound? Better than watching, I bet. And it makes it less weird for you be lurking around here – I’m not used to having an audience while I work. The ship will start making loud angry noises if something starts going wrong or if it sees something
incoming Friday doesn’t. So what do you say?”

There it was: a means of escape, a means of a distraction, and an acceptable excuse to remain behind windowless walls, all bundled within one offer. He would still have to return to the cabin for navigational purposes but at least he would have reason to be elsewhere the majority of the time. Loki did not answer immediately, instead leaning closer to the cage to inspect the pile of sleeping bodies as if he was trying to make an estimate of how many there were. Five? Six? And then when sufficient time had passed that he would not sound over-eager Loki answered, “Very well.” One of the rats stirred at the proximity of his voice, squinting blearily at him. “For the purposes of getting closer to being able to travel through time.”

Tony rolled his eyes but the movement lacked any real irritation. “Of course it is. Couldn’t have me think you agreed out of the goodness of your heart now, could you?”

Loki almost smiled. “Certainly not.”

***

What Loki had not quite anticipated was how much of his time would be spent retrieving escaped rats who were far more interested in exploring the workshop than learning from any training he might have had to offer them. It seemed the firmer he was about them not being allowed to leap across from table to table, the more determined they were to do so, taking the opportunity to scurry up shelving and storage containers and use him as some sort of portable climbing apparatus while Tony worked on testing the reverse-ray against on other objects.

Eventually, after some guidance from Friday, Loki had coaxed one of the rats who had a particular fondness for Midgardian cereal into learning to spin in a circle if he rotated his finger above its head. Not so long afterwards, Tony had set its age back to what he estimated was only a short number of days. Loki rotated his finger. The rat did not move. Loki tried again and the only response he received was a curious sniff.

Loki had been ready to draw a conclusion, to declare that the reverse-ray did not only have an effect on physicality, but Tony had insisted that the test needed to be repeated in order to be considered reliable and so it was that Loki found himself having to go through the same process again and again with a different rat each time.

The results did not differ. Every time, the animals would no longer perform the trick and when Tony undid the effects of the ray by having it bring them back to their present physical and mental state, they would perform it again.

“What do you reckon they remember going back and forward?” Tony had asked once neither of them saw the point of repeating the test yet another time. “If their brains are stuck in the past, do they perceive what already happened to them or does it feel like a weird jolt to them when they’re suddenly somewhere else? Because the last they remember, they were probably back in their lab and suddenly they’re here with us. Or when they’re back in the present, do they know their brains went back for a moment there? And when their brains went back and they’re taking in new data, like sniffing us, for example, does that mean that we ended up encoding our smells to younger versions of their brains? And would that mean that data was already there before we reversed their brains because their brains had already encoded it?” Tony noticed Loki’s expression. “Don’t panic, we’ve done enough for today. Time to call it a night, I think. Tests for another day.”

Loki suddenly found himself a lot more grateful for his new responsibilities as the keeper of the animals rather than having to draw solid conclusions himself. The speculation he entertained and even enjoyed the challenge of to some extent, but he was very much aware of his ability when
trying to find a single answer to only discover several more questions in its place. It was a relief for Tony to have this problem rather than himself.

Loki did not miss how Tony had to take a resolute breath before activating the door, how much more tension there was in his stance now that his mind was not occupied with Midgardian science and the Time Gem. Loki had been putting serious consideration into claiming that not being Midgardian meant he could go for far longer without requiring sleep until he had witnessed that movement. Needing less sleep was not far from the truth but that factor, along with how locking himself away would have felt like another defeat, was why Loki did not remain far behind.

Tony had entered the cabin before him, making his way over to the left side before pushing a button that released metal shutters which covered the entirety of the windows, sealing them completely.

Loki remained standing, the anger that he need not have spent hours feeling as if the void itself was waiting for him rooting him to the spot, the anger that he would have known if only Tony—If only Tony had what? Why would Tony have reason to mention the shutter mechanism to him if he had no knowledge of how the void haunted him?

There was that bitter taste left in his mouth again.

The chairs were able to be adjusted to tilt back far enough to be at a comfortable angle to lie on but there wasn’t anything else remotely comfortable about them. They were slightly too narrow and placed too close to each other for comfort — only a few feet apart, something that could not be avoided with the confines of the ship and a lack of space anywhere else.

Loki shifted in his seat, turning to one side but finding that piece of metal once again making itself known to him even through the blankets Tony had purchased for their journey. Loki shuffled again, trying to see if he could subvert it but having no success, the only result being a few creaking noises.

Even with the windows secured the cabin was still not quite in total darkness, the buttons and levers emitting dim red and green glows.

“It feels like I’m trying to take a nap at Springfield Power Plant.”

“You know that means little to me.”

“I know.” Silence fell. And then, “You’re missing out on a lot, you know.”

“I haven’t had the time nor motivation to indulge an exploration of Midgardian media.”

“There’s a lot of trash to sift through but we’ve still got a lot of great stories. And classic rock is always a win. We’re shit when it comes to loads of other things but I can’t really say how we compare to the rest of the universe. The Taradaxian’s don’t seem the type to know what blu-ray is. You know what would be a total surprise? If they were really into chick flicks. Or stand up.”

“I may not know much of Midgardian tales, but I know that in comparison to all of the other species I have come across, you alone as a race have singularly derived an entire subset of humour based entirely on making references to your own media.”

“We’re the only ones?” Tony’s laugh sounded oddly proud. “Of course we are.”

“Every species has a distinguishing feature they value about themselves,” Loki said. He was going
to follow it up with another sentence but then it occurred to him that he did not know what trait the Jotuns had.

Tony let out a yawn. “Every time I think the universe can’t get weirder it proves me wrong.”

“It’s spiteful like that.”

“Nah.” There was the sound of leather rubbing against fabric, a sound Loki assumed was caused by Tony turning in his seat. "The worst thing about the universe isn’t that it hates you or that it’s out to get you or has plans for other people but not you. It’s just its complete indifference. The universe doesn’t give a shit about us, about anyone. It’s cold and too big to even conceptualise and… I don’t know where I’m going with this. But sometimes chaos is comforting. Because sometimes you can make stuff out of random chance. At least it means you actually have a chance because the universe is impartial and it’s not working against you. You can blame it on bad luck, not a bad dealer.”

It took a moment before Loki replied. “You and I see the universe very differently. I am not certain you would say the same if you had the same familiarity with the tapestries of fate as I do.”

“Even if this tapestry thing does exist, you said it sees possibilities, not predestined stuff. No one’s not supposed to do anything, no one’s not supposed to do anything. Shit happens and you make choices. Hopefully so less shitty stuff happens.”

There was a long pause. “I recall you telling me about the theory you Midgardians have about a multiverse,” Loki began. He hesitated for a second before pressing forward. “Tell me – is there one in which I never discovered my true heritage? Is there one in which I never fell” – there was the barest trace of hesitation before Loki added – “from grace? Is there one in which I am... Happy. ...not quite so popular with my enemies?”

“In theory, an infinite number.”

“I see.” Loki had never experienced envy of himself before. “And I suppose in a disproportionate number of these realities I am still... very much myself.”

“Can you even have a disproportionate amount of infinity? I’m not sure you can. And if it makes you feel any better, they’d be a number of infinite versions of you who both are and aren’t as unlucky and as prone to making as terrible decisions as you. No offence, but you have made terrible decisions before. I mean, so have I so I’d also have an infinite number of Tony’s making both infinitely worse and infinitely better choices than me.” Tony yawned again. “Maybe I’m not in the best shape to do theoretical math right now.”

“Sleep then.”

There was a stretch of silence. “I... I want to. But I also don’t want to. What if the moment I’m not occupied with working or talking I’ll suddenly remember where I am and it’ll all be too much?” Tony let out a laugh that had no trace of humour in it, a harsh and sour thing. “Is that pathetic?”

Loki fingered the stretch of skin between his thumb and forefinger, unable to think of a response that could be even remotely halfway adequate. “I don’t think you’re pathetic.” Loki wasn’t familiar with the role of being a comforter or having to reassure but he knew Tony and Tony relied on empirical truth, not falsehoods. He couldn’t assure Tony that there was nothing wrong, that there was nothing to be afraid of, or that they would both survive, but he could offer the truth. “You’re still here, despite it all.”
“It’s this or potentially let everyone I know die. Either way, it all comes back down to fear.”

“Only those who lack the intellectual capacity to realise they should be afraid are the ones who are never afraid. And those sorts of people are good for very little.”

“I’m in a ship I can fly, there’s no one chasing us or asteroid fields or any other imminent danger. And if there was, we could just teleport away. Logically, I’m safer on this ship than crossing a street. And I’ve survived far worse than this. This is just flying a ship.”

“Maybe it’s not about what you survived.”

“I’m not following.”

“Maybe it’s about how you survived it. Your particular talent for thinking your way out of situations and inventing has probably saved your life more times than you can count.”

The chair next to him creaked. “So’s dumb luck.”

“Luck isn’t a thing you can rely on.”

There was that laugh again, but less harsh than earlier. “Yeah, that’s not reassuring. I guess that’s why this is hard.”

“It is.”

“But thanks. About the brain stuff, I– I appreciate it. And it’s given me an idea, actually. About trying to think my way around not thinking. Don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier, it’s so simple.” There was the sound of Tony’s fingers scrabbling in his pockets. “Classic rock’s always had my back.”

“Goodnight then.”

“Yeah. Night.”

Then there was a quiet click and Loki could hear Tony's music, made faint and distorted by the distance.

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Neither of them had slept well.

Loki felt far from graceful, his thoughts too groggy to be clear and moving requiring far more effort than it should have done.

Once Tony was awake he was normally very awake, alert and just as talkative as his usual self was. But Tony was neither of those things.

Loki remained lying in his tilted back chair, staring at the ceiling and half-heartedly trying to summon the energy to move. Most of his memories of the previous night were filled with strange fleeting dreams he could not recall but was certain must have involved the void somehow, the increasing urge to maim his seat, and the continuous tinny sound of Tony’s Midgardian music.

Tony was the first to break the stillness, dragging himself to his feet and letting out a groan. “Ow. My back. That’s it – I’m officially an old man.” Tony rubbed at the corners of his eyes. “Right. I’m gonna see if a shower will wake me up since coffee might be in short supply.”
“You brought a coffee machine?”

“No. Had to go with just powder to save room. What? It’s an essential for mornings worse than this. Assuming it even is morning. This trip’s gonna throw my bodyclock way off. Screw it. If we’ve woken up, it’s morning. It’s got to be morning somewhere, right? Forget being pedantic or going off what time it’d be back on Earth.”

“For the sake of simplicity,” Loki said, “I am in favour of this proposal.”

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“Are you psychic?”

Loki was startled out of his conversation with Friday – Tony had returned to the cabin sooner than anticipated, opening the doors just wide enough to stick his head through.

“Pardon?”

“How the hell did you get the shower working? There are ten different dials and none of them seem to actually get any water out. And I’m a tech guy – admittedly, not a plumber – but if either of us should’ve figured it out it should’ve been me. Do you have unnecessarily complicated showers in Asgard too? Is that how you somehow got it working?”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to–”

“Maybe I’m just tired and lazy. Help a guy out? Which thing do I turn?”

“I’m not sure I remember.”

“Then come take a look. Refresh your memory.”

“I really don’t–”

“It’s either that or you have to risk dealing with me not showering this entire trip. Your call.”

Being unable to think of a conceivable response in time – Loki cursed what exhaustion did to his mind – he made a show of rolling his eyes and standing.

He hadn’t quite anticipated being faced with that much flesh when he stepped through the door, although he supposed it should have been expected for Tony to only be wearing a towel given the circumstances.

How someone could be so nonchalant about revealing that much flesh, Loki could not say. Thor had often teased him when they had been boys because Loki would remain fully clothed with not so much as a slither of the skin on his wrists or legs showing while Thor and the Warriors Three would roam around the realms half naked whenever they detected the slightest bit of warm weather.

Loki also hadn’t expected to have been confronted with a scar that bore as much resemblance to his own, only this one was larger and cleaner and placed higher up.

“Funnily enough, having a hole inside you leaves its mark.”

Loki did not miss the irony. “I know.” *Funnily enough.*

Tony allowed him to pass so he could enter the bathroom first.
The sight of the shower was a confronting one. Tony had not been exaggerating when he had given an estimate of ten dials; there were twisting ones, winding ones, ones that had rusted over and ones that had strange dark stains on them.

Loki opted out of touching the unidentifiable substances and the dials that had been left to rust – clearly they were not mechanisms that were frequently used. But that still left a total of six dials. *How many different options does a shower need?* He couldn’t imagine what they were all for. The nozzle did not look all that different from standard Midgardian ones.

But hesitating would bring attention to the fact that Loki was even less familiar with the ship’s shower than Tony was as much as him choosing the incorrect dial would. He chose a large square one that rotated easily in his hand for no discernible reason other than it happened to be there and he had to choose one of them. At first nothing seemed to happen but then there was a disconcerting hiss coming from the pipes that did not quieten.

“Uh… That doesn’t sound healthy.”

Desperation drove Loki to choose another and the hissing turned into a bubbling.

“I’m opting out of being boiled alive,” Tony announced, taking a step backwards.

Loki turned the dials back and straightened, waiting for his lie the previous day to be called into the open, to have to fumble for more excuses.

It took an embarrassing amount of resolve to turn around to face Tony.

And Tony – Tony was looking at him with the same expression he had when he reached a conclusion, only it lacked the usual joy.

_No, no, no, no, no –_

This was far worse. This was worse having to grabble for more lies, worse than Tony just knowing he had lied about his appearance after he had sat facing the void. Because now Tony knew he had reason to lie about it.

After all Loki’s efforts to conceal his hatred of the void, after everything Loki had done to keep his mask in place, Tony _knew_.

Tony did not say anything at first and Loki watched him swallow, unable to move, unable to think.

Loki braced himself for the scorn, for Tony’s epiphany of _you’re just as pathetic as I am_, but it did not come. If it had, Loki saw no reason for the traces of sadness in the lines of Tony's face. He braced himself for the next worse outcome: pity.

Pity would be almost as intolerable as the loss of respect, the knowledge that this was what a god had been lowered to.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. _And there it is. “Sorry I didn’t notice.”_

But it wasn’t said with pity, it wasn’t _pity_ in Tony’s eyes. It was something else. Loki tried to identify it but he couldn’t see beyond the reflection of himself.

Then Tony stepped to one side, allowing Loki to pass between where he had been stood and the door.
Loki did not hesitate to exit.

“I’ll…” Tony started from behind him. “I’ll get Friday talking to the ship. You don’t have to navigate if you don’t want to. That's if... That's if you want me to?”

Loki couldn’t quite bear to turn around to face him again, not so soon after what Tony had just done for him, what he had offered to do specifically for him. But he knew Tony would catch sight of his barely there nod, that slight incline of the head.

And for that, Loki was not without gratitude.
The doors slid open and from somewhere behind Loki there was the sound of a throat clearing, practically delicately done by Tony’s standards.

Loki did not turn around.

He knew this had to happen eventually: there were only so many places on the ship he could remain without encountering Tony. The bathroom he’d avoided because, based on the various clangs and grunts, Tony was attempting to get the shower working. The kitchenette he’d declined as an option due to how there was barely space for the two of them to stand in, and he had little reason to want to return to the cabin. By process of elimination, the workshop was the only remaining choice.

In any other situation, the workshop would have been one of the first places he would think to avoid, given how workshops were so often paired with Tony, but considering how few other options he had and the inevitability that he would have to speak to Tony again at some point, he’d opted for the room with the largest area.

It also happened that the workshop offered a convenient excuse in that he’d need to enter it anyway to complete the list of daily tasks Friday had supplied with him in regards to his new duties as the keeper of the rats. This way, he had a chance of making what might be a halfway convincing act of him not in fact avoiding Tony, but merely going about his duties instead.

*His duties,* Loki thought, as if he was some sort of servant. In some ways, he supposed they both had been forced to become servants to the cause, working tirelessly and without pay for an indefinite length of time and with the only reward being themselves and the people they knew not being killed. *Lower even than a servant then,* Loki corrected himself. *Servants receive pay.*

In spite of how much he resented the principle of it, he could not fully bring himself to resent what his duties required of him in the present moment. It was difficult to dislike dealing with the rats, not when they had such an innate curiosity for anything both inside and outside of their cage. It was proving impossible to reach inside the cage to clean something or replace their food without his fingers being sniffed or pawed at or his arm being climbed like a bridge by the braver and more adventurous creatures.

Tony’s steps sounded closer.

Loki hadn’t been certain how much time Tony would give him but he had hoped for longer. Idiotically. Given the circumstances, they could not avoid each other indefinitely. In fact, it would inhibit what little momentum they had.

“So...” Tony began and Loki knew that would be when it would start. Because of course Tony would want to know. Of course Tony would be curious about what could rattle not just his partner but also a god. Perhaps on some bizarre level, Tony might have even sought camaraderie with someone whose experiences might not have been all that dissimilar from his own. “I think we’ve got a lot to--“

“A lot to *what* exactly?”

To think that he had hopes of Tony indulging him and *not* asking questions for just a short while longer.
Anyone else might have flinched. “I was going to say a lot to do. With our experiments.”

Loki could feel the fight leave him in the next breath. “Oh.”

Somehow it was difficult to make sense of it. Tony knew and he wasn’t asking further questions or making demands of him or…

Loki couldn’t help but wonder why Tony was humouring him so much. It might have made him angry once, the notion that a mortal was humouring him. But the anger wasn’t there so much as relief was. Wasn’t this the best option if Tony had to know? Would he rather have Tony behave in the same manner as someone like Thor would? Would there have been anything more excruciating? No – he would much prefer to have Tony playing on the same side of the board as him as opposed to rivalling him. But even so, the niggle of doubt about the possibility of him being wrong or that it wouldn’t last lingered.

“Yeah...” Tony said.

“I–”

“It’s fine. Let’s just… Let’s just get started.”

Could it have been that easy? And yet it was. And it wasn’t.

Tony did not pursue the topic any further and it remained between them, making them both so acutely aware of its presence despite neither of them acknowledging it out loud – Loki because acknowledging it would give it more life and power, and Tony because… Well, Loki was not entirely sure what Tony’s motives were. Perhaps the prospect of it hindering their progress and his own cooperation was enough to keep Tony’s curiosity at bay. Perhaps it was more out of convenience than kindness.

And yet he was able to recall multiple instances of Tony not shying away from conflict or arguments in the past, regardless of what impact it would have on their progress.

Maybe this was what a gift was if it had no physical form, only to be given in the form of a gesture. Loki might have been tempted for a moment to give his thanks aloud, if not for their unspoken law about not acknowledging it.

“I believe,” Loki said, “we were planning to test what role the reversal of the rats’ minds has with regards to when their learning and memory originates.”

“Bingo. Might be a couple of minor issues though. I didn’t think of bringing a CT scanner or PET scanner or anything like that – there’d be no room for them anyway – so I’m thinking in order to get a full look at everything that goes on inside their little heads, I’m gonna have to come up with something like a makeshift MRI scanner. Which, considering how small their brains are and how I’m not a neuroscientist, might have a few problems.”

“I don’t understand–”

“MRI stands for magnetic resource imaging so we’d need to–”

“I meant,” Loki continued, “that I don’t understand why in order to establish cause and effect, you need to examine their brains with these imaging devices. As we discovered yesterday, simply monitoring their behaviour was enough for us to determine whether they were retaining information or not. And if we are looking to establish at what point their new memories take hold after their minds have been altered, I see no reason why a similar test would not suffice.”
“Huh.” Tony cocked his head. “That’s... That’s actually a very good point. I mean, just monitoring behaviour alone isn’t enough to get a complete full picture but it’s probably the best option we have right now.” A slow smile spread. “You might be getting the hang of this science thing. If you actually come up with a way of testing it for sure, I might have to promote you.”

As it happened, Loki already had an idea. It was the same test as they had done the previous day, except with one small modification: after they first reversed the age of the rats, Loki taught them another trick, this time to hop into his hands if he gave a twitch of his fingers. Then he’d make the same motion when the rats were sped forward to their true age. And this time, when he made the gesture with his fingers, the rats still leapt.

“Well,” Tony remarked. “Would you look at that?”

Loki rewarded the rat currently sat in one hand with a treat the rat accepted despite eying him with slight wariness, as if he might change his mind and steal the food back.

“They remember,” Loki said. “What exactly–”

“I’m not sure. But there are a few things we can conclude, the first being–”

“The first being that once the mind has been reverted, it is still capable of processing and learning new information that can be stored and used in the present.”

“Right. And the second being that once the brain’s been restored back to its present self, it no longer is its present self. Or what was its present self. Because once we’ve sent it back, we can’t get back a perfectly intact version of what it was before because going back means there is going to be change. I can rewind with the reverse-beam but the instant I let it play it won’t be the same movie anymore. It’s kind of like the movie updates itself and you can’t uncheck the automatic updates box.”

“Does that mean that if we had used an alteration of this device on ourselves, we would already know about it?”

Tony released a long breath. “I think so?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “If we somehow used this on ourselves and the whole of New York too then I guess we’d have to remember, wouldn’t we? Okay, going out on a limb here and assuming that us playing Time Lord heroes is the reason everything isn’t as fucked up, then it makes me wonder whether we’d remember only the new version of events – the one where everyone didn’t die – or both versions of events. Or whether it’s a complete override when we modify stuff or if it’s more linear and it’s just like we’ve backtracked a layer over our own timeline before going back to the present.”

It was odd how disappointing it was, how much they still needed to find the explanation for what had happened when Thanos invaded – or didn’t invade – Midgard, how strongly the puzzle was calling out to be solved. Loki hadn’t realised how much he’d wanted it up until that moment, how he had without even being aware of it, pinned his hopes on the tests on the reverse-beam providing an explanation.

Tony’s face was an echo of his own disappointment. “Well... I really hope this Collector guy has some answers because we’re sure as hell not having any luck.”

“Well,” Loki said, “I suppose we know what we have to test next.”

“We do?”

“You said it yourself: we could aim to target an entire location.”
“Wait – you mean New York?”

Loki nodded. “If we were to revert a place instead of ourselves then that would mean we could operate with all the information we have learned and that could also explain why we can’t remember travelling backwards in time – because it would be the location reverting backwards instead of us.”

“That’s it.” Tony pointed a finger at him. “I’m promoting you from lab assistant to lab partner. Right now.”

***

The title of being Tony’s laboratory partner was purely superfluous; Loki role remained exactly the same as it had previously been, with the only exception being that Tony asked him more questions related to their experiments and findings rather than questions more limited to magic or the Time Gem.

Each day, unmarked by any sun, passed quickly with them being kept so thoroughly occupied, and the nights, though less long than they had once been, still felt longer than the days.

Lying in the cabin with Tony in the chair next to him brought back memories of the tent they had shared on Alfheim. There was the severely limited space, having to sleep on objects that should never have had to be used as bedding, and how sealed off they were from the outside world. Only this time there was no mourning, just the two of them being equally determined to ignore their outside surroundings as much as possible. One of the most effective methods proved to be by conversing.

Loki supposed the conversations were mutually beneficial; he sought to temper his thoughts away from space, as did Tony. But that didn’t explain why sometimes, when the exhaustion of the day’s work began to take its toll, he’d find himself almost looking forward to their talks.

It was commonplace for them to speak at length during the day, often regarding various experiments and theories, but critiques of each of their inevitably dismal attempts at cooking the evening meal were not uncommon either. But it was conversing mostly for the purpose of gleaning information and ideas rather than conversing for conversing’s sake and the two were not the same.

They both had a large supply of anecdotes, many of Loki’s revolving around various stories in which Thor had humiliated himself, and many of Tony’s revolving around various stories in which Tony had humiliated himself.

On one such night, Tony introduced Loki to the music he called classic rock but for all his talk about the magic and power of it, it only sounded like raucous noise to Loki’s ears. When Loki had shared his opinion, Tony nodded with vigorous delight and said, eyes alight, “Exactly.”

More often than not, Loki prefered to avoid looking at their progress on the map: it was a depressing depiction of how much of their journey there was still left to make, of how little distance across space they had travelled. But day by day, in increments smaller than the width of a finger, they got closer to Knowhere.

As time passed, it became easier to forget about the outside world, that there was nothing but *space* outside of their ship. Sometimes it was easy to forget that it *was* a ship in the first place and not a small space of their own they had confined themselves too. There were moments when it began to feel like Loki was back in his cell, except that he wasn’t alone this time.
Sometimes, but not constantly, he would have preferred to be alone, if only for a few hours. The bathroom was the only respite of solitude he had and on the days where the thought of having to spend more time in the presence of another person was more exhausting than the reality of having to do so, sometimes something so minor as the sound of someone else’s breathing was enough to spike his irritation. On those days, the length of time Loki spent observing and interacting with the rats increased significantly, letting them run amok the workshop once the materials and tools were out of reach.

But Loki was not the only person the confinement was affecting. Tony’s fidgeting was worse than usual and on a number of occasions, Loki had walked in to find Tony exercising by jumping up and down on the spot. Sometimes Tony would pace restlessly from one compartment to the next in a route that looped endlessly from the front to the back of the ship, and other times he’d toy absentmindedly with various switches and mechanisms.

Oddly enough, when it came to their work, Tony was the most focused Loki had witnessed him and it was as if all the constraints of the ship had been cut away. When they were working Tony could go from being restless to perfectly still, from endless idle chattering to being so enraptured that he would forget to speak. It was strangely contradictory to Tony’s persona, how he could remain so utterly lost in what they were doing and yet unable to focus hard enough to speak on the same topic for more than a few minutes at a time when they were no longer working.

Tony’s endurance was the main reason why they progressed at the speed that they did. In less than a matter of days, he had assembled a machine that was similar to the reverse-beam but was considerably larger and composed out of a large clear cylinder with an opening hatch and the Time Gem stored inside the lid. When activated, instead of shooting out a singular ray of amber, it projected the whole of the interior of the cylinder with the light, filling it like a liquid container.

With the new invention, they were no longer limited to singular objects: whatever objects were placed within the cylinder were able to be altered regardless of whether they were stacked one on top of one another or whether they were solids or liquids or gas.

The only objection Loki had was that he did not quite understand why Tony appeared to have deemed the inside of it as an appropriate place to store his drink.

“So,” Tony said. “Moment of truth. Because the thing is, if we do get this to scale somewhere as big as New York then we need to figure out if the reversing effects still apply to things that are outside the cylinder's reach. Because if not, I guess we’ll just end up with an older New York and no sign of Thanos. But if the particles hold some trace of memory of ones that used to be among them or if the gem’s able to somehow summon the particles that used to be there then… it might actually work.” Tony had not taken his eyes off the thing, so captured by the possibilities it held.

“I assume you have already thought of a way of testing this.”

“Brace yourself. It’ll be the most complicated set-up so far, the most confusing and convoluted experiment we’ve done yet.”

“Oh?”

Tony reached inside the machine and retrieved his mug. “Ugh.” He pulled a face. “Instant.” It clattered when he placed it down on the worktop. “Alright. So that’s the set-up sorted.”

“All of it?”

“Yep.”
“Oh. And what exactly are you hoping to accomplish?”

Tony grinned. “You’ll see. Hopefully. If this goes how I hope it’ll go. So – now for the actual testing.”

Tony turned a dial on the back of the machine and the effect was not immediate: it came slowly, the orange light gradually becoming stronger and stronger. And then there was just a flicker of movement inside of it, something that could have been passed off as a reflection in the glass except…

Were those hands?

They had entered the cylinder, first just the fingertips but then the rest of the palms and down to the wrists. The wrists were completely cut off at the hatch of the door, giving them the appearance of being disembodied and floating. And they were not empty. There was something inside of them.

Was that a mug?

*Oh, of course –*

They were Tony’s hands. Or, more accurately, they had been Tony’s hands. If everything within the volume of the cylinder was being reversed – including everything that had once been in the cylinder – then what Loki was seeing was Tony retrieving the mug, only in the opposite order to how he had first witnessed it.

Tony adjusted the dial again and they both stared in silence at what was now the scene stilled.

“Are you–” Tony turned to face him. “Are you getting this? This is huge!”

“I know,” Loki breathed.

“But this is– This is the closest we’ve ever got to time travelling! I could reach in there right now and steal that mug from myself and alter the course of history. Who says you have to start big? I mean, I’m not actually going to, not yet. Because paradoxes are a whole other can of worms and I’m not even gonna start thinking about them until we’re at least… I don’t know, most of the way to time travelling.”

“Tony,” Loki said, “this is already close. If the cylinder was large enough for us to walk through the hatch then we would be stepping back through time without our minds being altered.”

Tony visibly swallowed. “Well… When you put it like that. I guess– I guess I wasn’t prepared to have it so soon, you know?” He fiddled with the seam of his sleeve. “I mean, technically we can’t time travel yet. And if we did, we’d be limited to somewhere the size of the container…” Tony trailed off in thought. “Stepping stones,” he announced abruptly. “It’s a stepping stone. And just because we can’t fit in there doesn’t mean that anyone smaller than us can’t.”

“You think it’s time to try sending the rats back in time?”

“Later. But not yet. There’s no point yet, not if I can’t figure out how to make this thing bigger without its power getting diluted. It’s not like it doesn’t have the juice, it just doesn’t seem to want me to have all of it yet.”

“Then take it as a blessing that the gem is not bestowing the whole of its power upon you at once. If it did, it could easily destroy you, perhaps even by accident.”
“Here’s to not being smited,” Tony announced, clinking his glass against Loki’s.

They had discovered a couple of bottles hidden away in the back of a cupboard they hadn’t checked in the kitchenette as thoroughly as they thought they had and saw no reason why they should both not consume what was clearly Taradaxian alcohol or why they shouldn’t have a minor celebration after the success of their day’s work. “Oh – and actually sort of getting there with figuring out this time travel stuff. That’s probably worth slipping in somewhere.”

“I believe it might be.” Loki took a sip and pulled the glass back. “This tastes oddly similar to elvish wine.”

“So you do have drinks that aren’t just mead, despite what Thor wants us to believe.”

“My brother’s tastes are hardly cultivated ones.”

“I’d agree with you except for one thing: Jane Foster.”

“Yes,” Loki said, “I’ve never managed to understand what exactly the two of them have in common.”

“You mean why an astrophysicist wouldn’t be interested in a weirdly human alien who comes from a place where you can just catch the Bifrost-train to other planets?”

“There is a difference between talking and getting that familiar.”

Tony smirked. “Maybe she thinks his muscles are a bonus. Because, in case you haven’t noticed, Thor’s jacked. Or who knows, maybe they both got a bit starry-eyed talking about the stars so much.”

“My brother has demonstrated almost every day he continues to exist that he holds little value for intelligence.”

“You certain? Because, sure, Thor isn’t a genius but Thor loves talking about how many awards Jane’s won with that big brain of hers.”

“Ah,” Loki said, taking another sip, “then it must to be my intelligence he holds little value for.”

The look Tony gave him was a sharp one. "Only when your intelligence means you do a good job of destroying things. How many planets did you attack and he still tried to talk you out of your supervillain shtick? Because if that isn’t valuing you, I don’t know what is.”

“I don’t require validation from–”

“You do realise you’re the one who brought it up, right? I’m just the one that corrected you.”

Loki frowned and opened his mouth to argue.

“Anyway,” Tony said lightly, taking a swig from his glass. “You said this is similar to elven wine?”

“I did.”

“Hm. Not my drink but, all in all, not bad. Shame neither of us can cook a decent meal to go with it.”
"I am unused to preparing Midgardian ingredients and using these sorts of cooking utilities."

"Oh, right," Tony scoffed, "like you had to cook for yourself when you were a prince."

Loki still hadn't gotten quite used to thinking of himself as a former prince of Asgard. Although, now that he came to think of it, there was one other realm he might have technically still been a prince of.

"Adventurers don’t take their servants with them on their expeditions. We had to learn to hunt and cook our meat over fires and find wild fruits and vegetables in the forests and land."

"But the point is that when it comes to cooking in a kitchen we’re both screwed. But, who knows, maybe your food would have some actual flavour if I thought to ask you to bring along some Asgardian food."

"What you optimistically give the name meals to has the opposite problem: they have far too much flavour."

"Is it bad that this is the best I’ve ever cooked? You know what? This is probably why I don’t cook."

"No," Loki corrected, "this is why other people don’t allow you to cook."

"Why would I learn to cook my own food when I could just buy other people’s already better made food? It’s not laziness if you’re supporting local businesses and the economy. And hey – you didn’t eat that badly back when I was in charge of ordering, did you? I thought I did a pretty good job of introducing you to food from around the world. I mean, you’ve literally introduced me to other worlds – pretty much every world in the Nine Realms except Asgard and…” Tony counted down on his fingers. “What’s the other one?"

"Muspelheim."

"Right, Muspelheim. Which one’s Muspelheim?"

"You wouldn’t like it. It’s far too hot."

"What are we talking – sunscreen factor fifty?"

"We are talking continual volcanic eruptions and ever-flowing rivers of lava."

"Yeah, the sunscreen’s not gonna be much help."

"I thought as much."

"Well,” Tony said, extending an arm to refill their glasses. “At least this means I don’t owe you a drink anymore.”

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"What kind of truck drivers have wine hidden away in the glove compartment, anyway?"

"The more I learn about Taradaxians," Loki replied, placing his drink on the control panel and then thinking the better of it, "the less I understand about them."

"Tell me about it. I found a load of scales that had sort of congealed with a load of black gooey stuff on the dials in the shower and I think some of it must’ve got in the pipes as well. Which is
something I really don’t want to have flashbacks to. But speaking of the shower – I got it working. And Friday’ll be talking to the ship any day now. I’ve got her working on a software for it because apparently, aliens work in ternary instead of binary.”

The sense of elation that had been a combination of their accomplishments of that day and the liberation of the wine – not that it was particularly potent, just enough to leave a small glow in his stomach – stuttered.

Loki had not masked it quickly enough.

“Look,” Tony said, “I get it. You don’t want to talk about it. And I’m not qualified to talk you into talking about it so I… I’m just not going to.”

For a short number of seconds, it became incredibly difficult to talk, incredibly difficult to formulate a verbal response. “Tony,” Loki said. "This hasn’t– This hasn’t gone unappreciated.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I know.” Loki was able to meet his eyes. “I wasn’t going to. I just… I wanted you to know.”

Tony broke the stare and nodded. “And now I do.” The words were not spoken matter of factly or without deliberate choice.

“And now we never need to speak of it again.”

Tony gave a huff of laughter. “It’s not… It’s not actually that bad.”

“Are you presuming to know what happened to–”

“I meant talking about it, not what you went through. But, er – clearly it’s time for a change of topic. You know something I found out about myself just before we left? I’m an alien. Apparently, me building spaceships isn’t out there enough for the real diehard conspiracy theorists so they had to go one step further and accuse me of being an alien.” Tony sounded oddly enthusiastic about it. “If anything, I’m slightly pissed it’s taken them this long. I thought when I’d be accused it’d be because my tech is so far advanced and I’m clearly inhumanly intelligent and charismatic. Not because of me crash landing a spaceship on my roof. That’s kind of embarrassing. If this happened ten years ago instead no one would believe me if I said I had a spaceship even when there are pretty clear photos and video footage of our spaceship crash landing. And then there are all the witnesses who also saw it happen. But you know what’s worse? Other people just think I did a really bad job of designing one of the first proper flying cars. It’s insulting.”

Despite Loki’s previous perhaps slightly rash anger, there were pricklings of amusement beginning to rise. “Your reputation is at stake.”

“I’d prefer to be accused of secretly harbouring a spaceship that that. And, yeah – I’m totally harbouring a spaceship. I’m just not great at going incognito. But I guess they’ve seen weirder things. Especially coming out of my tower.”

“Now, them accusing me of being an alien I could understand.”

“Yeah. That’s the funniest part. I hopped out of a spaceship with an actual alien and for some reason I’m the one the conspiracists think isn’t from Earth. And speaking of our ship – we’ve gotta give it a name.”

“It that truly necessary?”
“Every good and even bad piece of tech gets a name. At least all the tech I’ve invented does. And since we’ve kind of adopted this one I kind of feel like it should get a name too.”

“I remain indifferent.”

“I guess that’s better than referring to a ship as a she.”

Loki gave him a questioning look. “Is this a ship with something like your Friday inside?”

“Nope. Just a ship. Any ship. Any material – wood, metal, you name it.”

Loki pulled a face. “Why in the Nine Realms–”

“I don’t know. But it’s–”

“An absurd tradition?”

“Yes. That. Now – a name. The Undersized doesn’t really have the same ring to it as The Titanic. And we can’t call it The Starship Enterprise – not even ironically. You know what’d really match our ship?”

“I have already informed you that I have little interest in naming our vessel.”

“The Planet Express. Get it? Because it’s like express pizza but for space? And how many times have I compared our ship to a pizza delivery van? Also, we’re naming it after an actual spaceship so…”

“If you say so.”

“Wow – you really don’t give a shit, do you?”

“If I didn’t know better I would accuse you of not paying attention.”

Later, much later, after Loki had thought Tony had long since been asleep Tony surprised him by murmuring out loud, “Loki?”

“What is it?” Loki couldn’t say why he felt the need to speak just as quietly, it wasn’t as if they were in danger of waking anyone else from sleep.

There was the sound of Tony turning over and it was too dark to discern whether it was to face towards him or away. “Do you think it’s actually possible?”

Loki had an inkling as to what Tony was referring to but he found himself asking anyway, “Do I think what is possible?”

“Do you think we have a chance of beating this guy? Thanos? And doing all the time travelling and everything else that comes with it?”

For the second time that night, Loki was at a loss for words. He found them though, after a tense moment of silence. “I don’t think it is as impossible as I once did.”

“By your standards,” Tony said, “that’s practically optimistic.”
Although Loki’s relative optimism hadn’t entirely abandoned him, its foundations had become a little more unstable.

He didn’t know how Tony was doing it. How Tony was translating something as abstract as complex as magical energy into something that could be directed and controlled with wires and cables and component parts.

Except that, as it had turned out, Tony was still not directing enough of it.

The walls of the cylinder had been removed and for the past couple of days, their prime objective had been enlarging the area the Time Gem could encompass. Tony’s mechanical tampering has gotten the area approximately twice the size it had been but for all it seemed as if the size had been growing exponentially, it had slowed dramatically before it came to a standstill.

“Perhaps you are reaching the maximum you can accomplish with your technology without also connecting to it on a magical level,” Loki had suggested as a theory.

“But that–” Tony broke off in frustration. He had been growing more agitated the more days that had passed without progress. “It could take years if I have to learn magic properly. The last we tried how long did it take me to so much as detect it?”

“The speed of your learning wasn’t slow,” Loki admitted. It had been far faster than he would have expected from races that did not have innate magic.

“Really? Because it felt slow. Three days and all I got was being able to say ‘yup, there’s magic there’ if I concentrated hard enough. It’s not like I really get how it fundamentally works. But when I work like this – when I get to toy with it and tamper – it starts to make some sort of sense. It’s like I’m investigating a new element all over again, except this one’s extra special and sparkly. And my problem isn’t actually getting the Time Gem to work anymore. Because I’ve got that pretty much down. I can get it to rewind and that’s the major thing we need. My problem is voltage. I need more drive, to be able to turn up the dial, to make everything bigger.”

“Then perhaps lessons in understanding the flow of magical energy – not just energy specific to using the Time Gem – is in order.”

“How long’s that gonna take? Are we talking a week long course? The length of time it’d take me to get a degree? How long–”

“That would depend on how quickly you learn.” The words sounded more snippish than Loki had initially intended.

“And what if it doesn’t work? What if we’d just end up wasting more time?”

“Then we’d have to think of something else.”

“Great. That again.”

Loki lost all his pretences of patience. “Well unless you have any other suggestions, Tony, I suggest you stop listing all the possible ways we could bring ourselves more misery.” He paused as Tony blinked in apparent shock and when he spoke again his tone was less harsh. “The definition of stupidity is repeating a failure and expecting a different outcome, so when we are not having
“But it’s so arbitrary! Does the gem have a limit? Like it’s fine for me to use it up until a certain point I then have to get at least a B on my magical theory test to carry on? And it’s having no problem letting me use it, it’s just the amount of power I have a problem with. And, hey – maybe I’m just annoyed because I thought we concluded I’m better off understanding the Time Gem _my_ way instead of someone else’s because everyone knows magic is _your_ thing and─” Tony stopped mid rant and his jaw fell slack. “Oh.”

Loki frowned. “What?”

“Magic _is_ your thing. On multiple levels. That’s the whole point because you” – Tony pointed a finger at Loki – “are a walking battery.”

Loki remained no less confused.

“The Tesseract,” Tony stated and understanding began to dawn. “It boosts your magic. Without you even realising it. Am I right in saying you channel its power? Even if you might not be aware you’re doing it?”

Loki gave a nod of confirmation.

“So if the Tesseract can boost your magic, why can’t it give a boost the Time Gem too? Think about it!”

If the Tesseract granted him power without him even asking for it, could it do the same if he asked it to lend its power to another one of the Infinity Stones?

“But I am not able to operate the Time Gem,” Loki voiced aloud. “How could I direct the flow of energy if─”

“Make it go through me. I’ll be the lightning rod. The conductor. Whatever you want to call me.”

Maybe it was Tony’s wording, specifically the comparison to lightning that made Loki begin to have more doubts.

“I’m not certain that’s a good idea.”

Tony pulled a face that expressed otherwise.

Loki decided that an elaboration was in order. “You are mortal and I don’t know the threshold of the Tesseract’s power you are able to withstand.”

“I survived teleporting. Coming to think of it, teleporting doesn’t even hurt anymore. Looks like the Tesseract tolerates me. But there’s only one way to find out how much it likes me. Light me up.”

If Loki was being truly honest, his decision might have been more influenced than he liked to admit by Tony’s previous short-temperedness and his own irritation with how eager Tony was to be as reckless as possible. It was a shame, Loki thought, that Tony had missed what he considered to be quite a spectacular roll of the eyes.

“Don’t claim I gave you no warning.”

Loki hadn’t tried this before. Manipulating the raw power of the Tesseract instead of anything
else. But Tony’s theory had some merit behind it despite his lack of a grasp for magic, and the curiosity, the question of whether it could actually work and whether he could make another discovery about his own abilities, was enough to push him to continue.

Still, he wasn’t ignoring the potential that Tony could be damaged in doing so and it was for that reason he remained cautious.

Loki began by closing his eyes to seek out the feeling of the power – this time trying to look beyond the way the Tesseract allowed him to travel or create rifts or teleport. At first there was nothing more than a faint tingle, something so subtle he wasn’t certain if it was a result of his imagination. Then the sensation increased as he concentrated further.

It was like lifting a veil.

Where before he could only make out vague shapes and outlines, now he was so acutely aware of its existence it was difficult to understand how he had not been aware of it before.

But the strangest thing was the absolute certainty that the power was a part of him. It flowed through his veins as if they were pipes but it did it with such a gentle stillness – like water in a canal, not with the coursing torrents that had torn through his body when he had first tried to use it – it was no wonder he had not been aware of its presence. There was no way of knowing how long it had been there, as much a part of him as his blood was.

The fact that the Tesseract had infiltrated his system without him perceiving it was a slight concern. Did it count as infiltrating if he had few objections to it being there so long as it had no control over his mind or actions?

Loki gave the energy an experimental tug. There was a slight shifting of power, as if he had caused the smallest of waves to ripple across an ocean; the surface was malleable but the sea was too vast and too dense for him to be able to easily alter what lay in its depths.

Loki tried again and the wave was bigger this time, gaining momentum and being able to travel farther.

The third time the wave moved with such speed and force behind it that he had been certain it would reach land. He had expected the meeting of water with sand to be the moment when the power would transfer but instead it was more akin to water crashing against rocks.

There was a barrier.

“Is it doing anything?” Tony asked, breaking Loki’s concentration.

Loki opened his eyes. “It needs somewhere to go.”

Tony appeared doubtful for a moment. “You mean me?”

“Right. Uh… Is there anything I should be doing? Other than keeping an ear out for its phone call, I mean.”

“I don’t—” Loki shook his head. “I don’t know. Just try to receive it.”

Tony nodded and closed his eyes, those furrows that made themselves known when he was truly focusing his attention appearing.
Loki could not fault him for a lack of effort.

The next wave was a larger one, one that rolled like a moving wall of water, one that, in a moment of panic, Loki realised he could not stop or slow down.

Loki opened his mouth to warn Tony, to tell him not to accept it, that it would be too dangerous for him to receive its impact, but there was no need. The wave hit the barrier and the impact was so solid it was almost physical, crashing against the lining of Loki's skin and bones.

The barrier held.

“Tony.” Loki had never said the name with such urgency.

The sound of his voice caused Tony’s eyelids to fly open. “Hmm?”

“I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“What did I do?”

“It’s not about what you did, it’s–”

“Alright then. What didn’t I do?

“It’s not about that either. I…” Loki trailed off, not particularly keen to share his newest revelation. “I can’t guarantee I can control how much of the power I unleash.”

There was an unsaid question in Tony's eyes. Loki supposed that, in spite of his own inwardly directed frustrations, it was something Tony should know, that his difficulty opening himself to receiving magic had been the thing that had saved him.

After hearing Loki’s explanation, Tony gave a nod.

“So start off small again,” Tony said with such an air of casualness, as if Loki hadn’t almost transferred enough energy to risk killing him. “That seems like the best option, right? As long as we get a nice friendly beach wave, we’re good.”

Loki couldn’t quite comprehend at how much ease Tony had suggested repeating the process that could have cost him his life and was having to resort to staring in silence while he fully processed it.

“From the way you explained it,” Tony continued, “it sounds like the problem is the energy having nowhere to go. Which means I’m not receiving it so it has nothing to do but build up the pressure while it waits for an escape route.”

“I wouldn’t phrase it like that,” Loki said. “But essentially, yes.”

“So it’s like when there’s a storm and all the electrical potential builds up and up and sometimes it has to jump from the clouds to the ground – or sometimes even the other way around, depending on the charges – because that’s the path of the least resistance. So I’m thinking we bring the ground to the source instead of waiting for it to have to jump.”

“And how exactly…” Loki caught sight of Tony’s outstretched hand. “Ah.”

Loki made no move to take it.

“Magic friendship power circle,” Tony said with complete seriousness. If Loki had not known him
better, he would have ran the risk of missing the joke that was not intoned because of the utter sincerity in which it had been said.

Tony mistook Loki’s hesitance for a lack of comprehension. “Closeness helped me learn magic stuff the first time, remember? It was easier learning to detect magic when you wrapped it around me instead of keeping it at a distance. I figure it might help for learning to receive it as well. Like closing the circuit between us and the gems.”

Loki’s eyes moved from Tony’s hand to his face. “Are you certain it’s worth the risk?”

“I’ll be fine. Just don’t throw an entire sea at me this time.”

Loki remained in deliberation, the words having almost persuaded him but something remaining niggling at him.

Tony sighed. “I do actually wash my hands, you know.”

And then there was that matter. How Tony, without thought, had stretched out a hand for the same person who had almost killed him on multiple occasions. How Tony did not appear to have objections to touching the same hands that were responsible for tens and tens of Midgardian deaths. The same hands that had frozen the lips of Jotuns so they sealed shut.

“Can’t hurt to try,” Tony prompted. “You said it yourself – if something doesn’t go right then we need to try something else. This is my suggestion.”

Loki had no counter-argument and it was a resigned movement, how he gingerly gripped not Tony’s hand but his wrist, his thumb and forefinger wrapped around the flesh.

The skin was warm against his own, warmer than he had anticipated. He had almost forgotten what flesh felt like: he was far more accustomed to contact with those he fought, or, more recently, Thor, who had resumed his habit of making his affections known by patting him on the shoulder or the back of the neck.

Still, the sensation was not entirely unpleasant.

Pathetic.

Pathetic that he was so starved of fellow companionship that even the touch of a mortal was a welcome change to the eternal solitude.

“Child-friendly beach, okay?” Tony prompted and Loki realised he had been waiting.

This time the waves – and Loki ensured the waves were gentle this time, no matter how tediously slowly they travelled – did not hit a barrier so much as they drifted into a membrane.

After Loki relayed as such, they tried again. And again.

“Can you feel it?” Loki asked.

“I can feel something. I think.”

“Good. I suppose that is a start. Now – I want to focus on that, to allow it to dominate your entire senses. And then when you feel the rhythm of the tide as it moves towards you, I want you to invite it in.”

“What am I supposed to do – send it a card?”
Loki bit down a laugh. “You are taking my words a little too literally, I think. Visualise it knocking at your door if you have to, imagine a phone ringing if that is what works for you.”

“Right.” Tony closed his eyes. “It feels way too much like some pseudo-science meditation bullshit for me to not feel like an idiot when I do this.”

“I do hope you're not focusing on that instead of what you should be focusing on.”

Tony’s mouth twitched.

"Again,” Loki instructed, sending another wave.

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By the time they had decided to call it a day, the membrane had thinned. Not enough for any of the power to flow through yet but enough that Loki was certain there had been an improvement, if only a barely perceptible one.

“Is magic stuff supposed to make you feel this drained?” Tony asked once they had settled into their seats for the night.

“It’s not uncommon. For those unfamiliar with it, it would be expected.” In fact, holding back the wave of power had been more draining than unleashing it for Loki. Not that he would admit to exhaustion.

“How long have you been doing magic for, anyway?”

“Since I was a child,” Loki replied. Then he grew more solemn. “My mother taught me most of what she knew.”

“But not Thor.”

Loki did not bother to repress the small smile that grew. “No.” And then in case Tony came to the conclusion that Frigga favoured her youngest son the most, Loki added, “Thor had no interest in the subtle magics.”

“No. He doesn’t seem the studious type.”

“I believe Thor’s philosophy as a child and young man was something along the lines of preferring to use brute force wherever possible. And not entirely whenever appropriate.”

“To be fair, it’s kind of been working for him so far.”

Loki almost snorted. “How dearly I would love to witness how Thor is dealing with all the current political upheaval…”

“Didn’t anyone give him Politics 101?”

“Many tried.” Loki watched absentmindedly as a light on the control panel flicked on and off.

“And Daddy-dearest didn’t intervene? Politics kind of seems like a thing royal heirs should know.”

“Odin is as blind to Thor’s faults as he is as blind in one eye.”

“And your mom didn’t…”
“She had other ideas.”

“Er…”

“She would rather have had me lurking in the shadows, ever unseen, the hidden figure and unseen hand behind the king.” Because of course that was the only way the rest of Asgard would have accepted him: when he was out of sight. Of course his propositions and policies would have been far more acceptable if they were voiced through Thor’s mouth instead of his own. Of course the people would love Thor more dearly for the ideas he never had rather than Loki for the ideas he did have.

And Loki had long since passed the point of having the energy to still resent his mother for it. If he removed himself from the equation, if he numbed his own feelings on the matter, he could understand the logic behind it. It didn’t mean he agreed with it, but he understood it.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Tony said and the response had been so unanticipated and spoken with such a jarring matter-of-factness that Loki burst into laughter. “No, really,” Tony insisted. “You basically get to be the master of the puppets and if everything goes to shit, Thor gets all the blame.”

Loki’s laughter grew louder, into something undignified and unbefitting of a god, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“Sounds like you would’ve got the sweet end of the deal if you ask me,” Tony finished.

“That,” Loki said, when his laughter had subsided enough for him to be able to speak, “is certainly a different perspective.”

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There had been a number of events that happened that day that were entirely unanticipated, but perhaps the most anticipated had occurred while Loki remained in the cabin as Tony had disappeared to the bathroom.

Because Loki had certainly not been expecting to have been able to hear a sudden cry of "I’m a moron!" through what must have been three metal doors.

He thought it said a lot when he was not entirely surprised that Tony had somehow managed to create a commotion while doing something as mundane as brushing his teeth.

“Do I want to be enlightened?” Loki asked when Tony reentered through the door.

Tony paced instead of sitting down, eyes wide and his face animated. “First off – I figured out what the rest of the weird knobs on the shower are: they’re for cleaning and drying clothes. Yeah, you heard that right. I’m telling you – the Taradaxians are backwards. They’ve got space travel but they still have to wash their clothes like nineteenth-century washerwomen. And secondly – and this is the really stupid part – I can’t believe I got as far as using both the Tesseract and the Time Gem and I didn’t even think of…”

“Think of what?”

“Combining them. And not just for using one to amplify the other. As in for using both of their powers. Anyone ever told you how intrinsically linked space and time are? The space-time continuum is a massive sci-fi thing for a reason. And it just happens that I have the Time Gem and you have the Space Gem. So what I’m thinking is—”
“We merge the powers of the Space Stone and the Time Stone.”

“Exactly. I mean when it came down to it, our problem wasn’t adjusting time: it was adjusting the space that was affected by time.”

Loki sat straighter in his seat. “So with the Tesseract directing the area affected by time–”

“Then – as long as we can actually do it – that should solve our problem,” Tony finished. “I still can’t believe the clue was in the name the entire fucking time. It’s called the Space Stone and we needed to increase the area affected by the Time Stone and we still didn’t manage to figure it out. Nope. Instead we had to try to figure out some insanely convoluted solution instead involving you shifting scary amounts of power, me having to learn to receive magic, and almost getting fried as a result.”

Loki stared ahead in what was not horror but was dismay.

“And another thing,” Tony continued just as Loki thought his rant was over. “Actually, it’s not another thing. It’s back to my first point. Why did I get as far as thinking of combining them but not for what the gem’s are actually intended for? That’s the thing I can’t get past. I was just like, sure, we’ll ignore the thing that’s an Infinity Stone’s entire fucking domain and just try to make it into a power adapter instead. It’s the only logical solution.”

Loki did not move.

“What’s up?” Tony asked. “You’re not saying much.”

“I’m trying to convince myself that not conceiving of the idea is conceivable.”

“Oh. That all?”

Loki gave a nod. “I’ve heard of beings mastering multiple Infinity Gems at once and using them for different purposes but I haven’t heard of anyone actually combining their powers together to unite them for one use before.”

Tony nodded in faux seriousness. “That helps.” He paused before sitting down. “I mean, barely, but it still makes it slightly…” Tony let out a sigh. “No. Let’s not kid ourselves. It really doesn’t help, does it? You know what? I am very glad there’s no one else around to witness this shitshow.”

Loki opened his mouth but Tony interrupted. “If you bring up the Norns again, I swear to god…”

“Which one?” Loki asked with well-calculated innocence.

“Don’t know. I like to be spontaneous. Either the god I don’t believe in or whichever one I have to.”

Loki found a spark of amusement in that.

“Well,” Tony said, “on the bright side, at least me spending weeks learning magic would’ve been a massive waste after all.”

Loki eyed him out of the corner of his eye. “That’s what you claim to be the bright side? Not that we might not have to transfer the power between us at all or that we could be significantly closer to solving our problem, but that you don’t have to study magic underneath me. You can’t claim that you wouldn’t have found some use for it in the future, that you would not wish to study it further and speculate about its applications.”
“Alright, I guess you might be right about some of those points. Not all of them, but some. But speed is preferable here. I don’t think either of us want to be floating through space for years. And speaking of speculations – there’s one thing that keeps bugging me about this plan. Is just scaling the time travel to just the size of New York going to be enough?”

Loki gave it a moment of thought. “I suppose that depends upon your definition of enough. Thanos will doubtless have his fleets stationed across the expanse of the universe.”

“How many does he have?”

“Dozens. Maybe more,” Loki answered without thinking.

“That… sounds like a lot more than he brought as his plus one to Earth.”

“Yes. He’d have no reason to bring all the–” Loki stopped talking as Tony gave him a questioning look. “It stands to reason that the logical course of action would be not to risk bringing his entire fleet such a long way in a bid for one Infinity Stone.”

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“That… sounds like a lot more than he brought as his plus one to Earth.”

“Right,” Tony said, giving Loki another odd glance. “Yeah. So the problem is that if we reverse just New York then outside the zone where the Time Gem isn’t reaching, his armies will still be there. And if Thanos suddenly vanishes then yeah, that’s gonna cause problems for them. But we don’t know how temporary those problems are. Does Thanos have a second in command?” The Other, Loki thought but did not say out loud. “Is someone else just going to take over? Does he have a whole queue of people waiting in line who are just as into Hela as he is? We’re in the dark because we just have no way of knowing.”

That was where Tony was wrong.

It would have been so easy to have put on a show of being as oblivious of Thanos as Tony was, and for a long while, Loki was so tempted that he hadn't even considered an alternative. But Tony had proven himself able to think in different directions than Loki, to be able to invent solutions to problems Loki wasn't even aware could exist. Tony could work with his mind and metal and wires as well as Loki could work with magic and deceptions. And because of that, it was entirely possible that not disclosing such information – especially information that was so relevant to Tony's speculations – could result in more failures.

“There are... others,” Loki said, testing the waters. “Others who are just as dedicated to the cause as he is.”

Tony didn’t so much as blink. “How many?”

“Tens. Hundreds, maybe.” It had been impossible to tell the true converts from the false ones, to know by how many they had increased in number after Loki’s absence.

“But Thanos was the first?”

“Yes.”

“So if we want to stop them forming maybe we need to go back further than New York. If Thanos hired the rest of them or bought them or whatever, then stopping Thanos isn’t going to stop his armies tearing across space.”

“His armies do not have his Infinity Stones.”

“So they’re less unstoppable. Good. But that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be stopped. If we figure
out when he got together the rest of his army and attack him before then – and preferably before he gets his hands on any Infinity Gems too – then that should solve everything that happened after, right?"

“I am not certain we should formulate an entire plan based on the possibility of if.”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing this entire time? If we find the Time Gem, if we make time travel possible…”

Loki supposed that Tony might have had a point.

“The main problem is finding out that one specific bit of information,” Tony continued. “But guys like him leave a trail of corpses wherever they go so we’ve just got to figure out firstly where to go, and secondly how far back.”

“Twenty of your years, as an estimate.” Loki’s own voice surprised him more than it surprised Tony.

Tony’s eyes met his. “Are you sure?”

Thanos’s order had been well enough established to have formed a structure and a tightly controlled system, but not so much that they had numbers in thousands when Loki had been a part of it. Their numbers had increased rapidly with each of the gems Thanos had gathered.

“As sure as I can be with only an estimate.”

“Right.” Tony abruptly broke the eye contact and adjusted the angle of his seat. Loki didn’t want to think too much about what that meant, about what theories Tony might generate not about Thanos, but about him. “But it’s still worth saying that if we learn where we could find him and defeat him before he gets any gems or an army then that’d solve pretty much all our problems.”

“That’s still a big if.”

Even when Loki had first fallen into Thanos’s clutches, Thanos still had an army. He still had the Soul Stone encapsulated inside of that ring. He still hadn’t revealed much about where he had come from, of his past.

Loki didn’t want to remember.

Loki had been thorough about forcing himself to forget.

“But the trail of clues–”

“Could take years to find,” Loki interrupted. “We are working at the scale of the universe, Tony.”

“Just like we were when we were looking for the Time Gem. But we found a way around that, remember?”

“I’m not going back to Mimir’s well.”

“I’m not saying we should. He didn’t sound like a reasonable guy. I mean, he still gave what you needed to find the Time Gem but that didn’t stop him trying to eat you.”

Loki thought that was an inadequate description of what Mimir had attempted. Consume might have been more accurate.
"Good. That would be madness."

"You sure there’s no other weird magic ways of finding someone?"

"Not that I know of. Not with the scale we’re working at. And not with finding him at a specific point in the past."

"Then maybe we’d have to take him when he’s alone. If we know where to find him and at what point in time." Tony’s gaze flicked to Loki. “If you…" Caution did not suit Tony. "If you know where we could find him."

So Tony had guessed.

The only remaining thought that wasn’t about how terrible it was that this had to happen was the underlying relief that Tony appeared to be treating this with equal measures to how he had treated his discovery that Loki had as much of an equal dislike of space as he did.

Loki’s mouth was dry. He occupied himself with a thorough examination of the ends of his fingers.

“He wouldn’t be far from his followers,” Loki managed to say. “And he’d still have the Soul Stone." And the Mind Stone.

“We’ve got two Infinity Stones. Two’s better than one,” Tony said with a shrug. “And if I’m able to turn the reverse-beam on the Soul Stone, that might piss him off a bit.”
Alright, so... I'm back. And I'm competing with the release of Endgame because I really really want to get the Thanos bit of my story complete before the movie comes out. So here's the plan: weekly updates until the Thanos storyline is done.

The break I had with not posting chapters allowed me to get ahead with writing drafts of a good portion of the remaining chapters without stressing there'll be details I'll regret not adding later. So... Let's see how this thing goes.

Loki had his suspicions when their journey across space had gone by with relative smoothness and he supposed they were due for more than a few setbacks.

Admittedly, the first setback had been anticipated; they'd been running short on food and so they portalled back to Midgard to restock their supply before returning to where they had left off.

The second setback occurred while both Loki and Tony had been resting and the sound of an alarm jolted them from sleep. Tony had been the one to realise what the ship had been trying to communicate: that they had been running low on fuel. And so another visit to Midgard became necessary, this time to use the fuel they had originally moved out from the storage compartment of the ship in order to make space for the workshop.

The third setback also happened to be the most enlightening setback. The ship had detected an incoming object and as it got closer it became apparent it was a fleet of approximately ten ships, all heading directly towards them. Whether they merely happened to be crossing their route or whether their intentions were more nefarious than that remained to be seen.

"Please be space-pirates, please be space-pirates," Tony chanted.

"Do I wish to understand why that prospect would excite you?"

"You have no idea."

"For clarity’s sake – were you proclaiming ‘space-pirates’ as a suspicion or a desire?"

"Both," Tony announced. "I'm going with both."

Their idle talk had allowed the fleet to fly closer without them taking action. Acting on impulse, Loki shielded the entire ship with invisibility.

"Radar, Loki, ever heard of radar?"

"What?"

"Scanners!"

Loki had just about enough time to fully come to terms with how much of a better plan it would have been to teleport backwards to give themselves enough time to avoid the ships before the
control panel leapt to life. The screen – the only screen in the cabin – had a large cross from corner to corner and various buttons started flashing on and off, accompanied by some sort of warning siren.

Wonderful, Loki thought. The exact moment they needed to know the precise whereabouts of the ships, their only means of doing so became no longer functional.

“The hell? Did they hack us? Navigation systems down, we need to– Shit.” Tony pressed the button by the side of the door and the metal over the windows opened to reveal the view outside: stars and distant planets and the incoming fleet who were close enough to be visible and fast approaching. “Fuck.” Tony took the wheel and Loki slammed one of the pedals to amplify their speed. They weren’t used to this, having to face what lay outside of their ship, and the clumsy handling was a result of weeks worth of being able to rely on Friday to steer it. Loki didn’t know how or why the ship was misbehaving but the combination of the noise and the urgency of the situation assured that he could not deduce the answers either.

It didn’t make any sense.

Why would members of a fleet bother hacking their ship? It wasn’t as if their pod was capable of carrying an amount of fuel that would have been a significant amount to an entire fleet.

Loki fumbled for the Tesseract, trying to retain his focus to do what he should have done in the first place – summon a portal – but the flight of the ship being unstable as it was caused both himself and Tony to lurch from side to side, making the task considerably more difficult.

After having an elbow to the stomach, his feet stamped on, and Tony grabbing onto his arm to avoid falling to the floor while the ship jolted them, all Tony had received in return was a slight nudge to the shoulder when they switched positions.

Loki had a better reach of the overhead controls from that side anyway. They should have swapped as soon as they knew they’d have to fly the ship manually.

The fleet was just about close enough that Loki could make out figures through the window at the forefront. The ships had not reassembled or slowed down, they merely continued as if they intended to run their ship through, as if it was a mouse at the mercy of a stampede, or as if they simply had not noticed its existence.

And they were coming so so quickly.

Loki had his bearings on the Tesseract and how urgently and desperately he needed to summon a portal must have influenced how it responded to him because all of a sudden the largest portal he had ever witnessed, let alone conjured, was between them and the fleet, spanning across his entire field of view.

The fleet did not have time to react. The fleet was flying at a faster speed than them.

One instant, the fleet was there and the next second all the ships had been engulfed by the portal.

Loki had enough presence of mind to allow the portal to fold back in on itself before they reached it.

To think his first thought had been to send themselves through the portal. What purpose would it have served to have to teleport to somewhere behind them in the path they had made as they journeyed through space?
He might have been prouder if creating a portal for the entirety of the fleet had been his intention.

The solution had hardly been inconspicuous, but its effectiveness made up for all the subtlety it lacked. All they had needed to do was to move the ships out of their way and subvert the potential threat before the ships would be able to respond. Even by the time the fleet would be able to respond, their ship – what was it Tony had named it? The Planet Express? – would be too far gone for them to retaliate or track.

It was only after the fleet had vanished that Loki realised he was needlessly maintaining their invisibility and dispelled it.

“Navigation systems online,” Tony murmured, eyes focused on the screen. Tony turned to Loki. “Was that– Was that you? Did you just invisiblify us out of being detected?”

Loki blinked. “Not intentionally.”

“Huh. Not showing up on any kind of scanners is a new one. That could… That could come in pretty handy. Am I gonna have to send the Tesseract thank you cards when this is over?” And then Tony half-jokingly commented, "The prospect of you weaponizing that thing is terrifying."

"You say that as if it is not something I have already done."

"Yeah, there's a difference between what you just did and how you could just splice someone in half if you felt like it.” Tony pulled a face. “I think that'd be too much gore for me."

"I never thought of you as the squeamish type."

"Probably because I'm not." Tony leant back and placed his feet on the control panel. "Gotta draw the line somewhere."

Yes, while we're on that topic of conversation, Loki thought, narrowing his eyes Tony's shoes that were only a matter of millimetres away from accidentally activating the switches. But Tony had his hands behind his head and had closed his eyes – not to sleep but to relax – and Loki did not feel strongly enough about the matter to disturb the temporary peace.

The shadows underneath Tony's eyes were not as prominent as they had been during the time they were residing in Stark Tower and Tony had forsaken the majority of his sleeping hours but the shadows were still visible. If it hadn't been for Loki waking so often during the night, he wouldn't have known that Tony did the same thing. Tony did not breathe particularly loudly in his sleep, but once he was in a deep sleep there was an audible slow even rhythm that Loki found he was able to use to synchronise his own breathing pattern to trick his body into believing he was approaching sleep. Sometimes Loki would wake up, sometimes due to jolting out of an unpleasant dream, other times for no discernable reason other than him not being talented at remaining asleep, and he would have no audible breathing to match his to. That was how he would know when Tony was not asleep either.

Tony's eyes opened and he brought himself to his feet, giving Loki a quick pat on the shoulder. "Anyway, can't get too comfy. Stuff to do, remember?"

Loki wondered if Tony was in the habit of patting every person he knew in such a fashion after a certain level of familiarity and wasn't sure whether he should have considered it to be an insult. The gesture did not appear as if it was intended to be a mocking one, although it was arguably one that presumed too much with its over-familiarity, but Loki found he held no real resentment over it.

Loki was not opposed to the prospect of conducting more work anyway.
In truth, their sessions in the workshop had gone from interesting to utterly fascinating.

It seemed each time he presumed he knew how to command the Tesseract, the Tesseract would prove him wrong – sometimes by revealing that he had more control over it than he thought, sometimes by granting him more power than he knew what to do with, and other times with its inconsistency in how it allowed him to wield it, how differently it would respond when he directed its power.

The Tesseract was not the only thing full of consistent surprises – Tony was the other thing. How quickly Tony's mind worked, how rapidly it made connections and sparked new theories and vast multitudes of ways to apply those theories, was something that, if Loki was being entirely honest, made it a great shame that Tony's mind was only mortal.

Loki hadn't given much consideration to that before. Whenever he thought of Tony's mortality, it had been with regards to the inherent inferiority of his species, of how they came and went like mayflies. Earlier on his opinion on the matter had mostly been informed by how it made Tony a liability in terms of how much easier it would be to end his life. The thought that if they survived this then Tony's life would come to a natural close within a mere handful of decades anyway was an odd one; Tony seemed too vivid, too layered in character for it to happen so imminently.

Loki didn't know why the thought of Tony’s mortality had been crossing his mind as of late. Perhaps it was due to how morbid it was, how Tony’s fight for survival could only result in him living for a short number of decades longer at the very most. It shouldn't have mattered. On the grand off-chance that they would succeed, they would go their separate ways and he'd never see Tony again after returning him to Midgard.

The recent developments in the workshop had only made that prospect feel all the more real. After reaching a standstill with trying to push some of the Tesseract’s power through Tony in order to fuse the power of the two Infinity Stones, they had elected to both focus on applying the stone they wielded to a particular object instead, with hopes of expanding their range if they had success. Calling it a true success would have been a stretch, but the connectivity had certainly altered. Loki no longer had to push and attempt to guide the power through a barrier and Tony no longer had to attempt to detect and open himself up to powers he did not fully comprehend.

Their main issue had been synchronising the stones to apply their powers at the exact same moment. If Tony was slightly earlier than Loki, then the object would begin to reverse in age and then would be teleported rather than travelling through time. If Loki acted a fraction of a second earlier than Tony then the object would be teleported without its age having been altered.

But sometimes, just sometimes, they had a connection. There were moments when the Time Gem and the Tesseract touched, those moments sparse and fleeting but becoming more frequent. In those moments, trying to control the power was less like pushing waves and more like trying to spark flint and hoping something would catch fire. There was enough that they could both feel it, were utterly certain of its existence, and then it would be gone again before they could sustain it. The thrill of it left a residue of static and adrenaline that did not cease when they left the workshop.

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The next time Loki journeyed through the kitchenette, he did a double take.

He was diligent enough to be certain that he had not neglected his duties, regardless of how his mind was occupied with thoughts of the gems. And it was for that reason he was so perplexed by the sight of not one but two of the rats in the kitchen.
Splinter – he had grown used to their names now, regardless of how ridiculous the names Tony had given them were – was the most easily identifiable, the only one of the six rats having a fur type that was more reminiscent of the coarseness of a bear’s coat, and she was licking away at the tap, her paws clutching at the metal as her tongue poked at the building drops of water. And a rat he suspected was Jingles, given the impressive scale of her ambitions whenever food entered as a factor, had somehow made it as far as one of the uppermost cupboards that had been left slightly ajar and was helping herself to strands of uncooked spaghetti, crunching away in noisy contentment.

The only thing that made their feat all the more impressive was how they had managed to break into the kitchen despite the kitchen being sealed by two sliding metal doors.

His first thought was that they had somehow manoeuvred their way in through the vents, but the possibility of them having somehow clung to him without him noticing, though not particularly likely, was not entirely implausible either. Especially when taking into consideration how they had proven themselves capable of climbing to his shoulders from ground level if they so desired, performing a technique not all that dissimilar to a large cat digging its claws into a tree trunk and inching their way higher.

But even so, Loki was certain he hadn't been distracted enough not to have noticed two small furry creatures piercing through his clothing with their claws. Maybe it was more likely they had managed to follow him through the door before it slid shut.

Loki had found that they did that sometimes, quietly scampering after him wherever he went while they were let out of the cage to exercise until they inevitably got distracted by something else. Given their tendency to neglect the possibility that they might be trodden on, Loki had subsequently been having to give more thought to his footing.

But he had been certain he had closed their cage, so certain.

Loki held out a hand for Splinter, who stepped onto it willingly enough. Jingles rejected his offer and Loki suspected her recent discovery of what must have seemed like an entire palace worth of food was a contributing factor.

Only by the time he was able to return them to their cage, and after they had managed to snatch far more spaghetti than they deserved, was he able to observe that the cage doors had been closed the entirety of the time.

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"Magically portalling rats," was the first thing Tony had suggested as an explanation.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Us inadvertently granting rats magical powers after experimentation gone awry sounds precisely like the sort of ridiculous thing that only occurs in the Midgardian stories you relay."

"Exactly. But does that make us the bad guys of the story?"

"Tony – if you happen to be on the same side as I am, that does not bode well for any sort of moral high ground."

"Even if we're saving the universe?"

Loki allowed a pause. "Yes."
"In that case, I think we're not doing so bad."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Still alive and kicking. And technically, we're space-pirates. Who are inventing time travel on the side. So, yeah. We're not doing bad at all."

"Surely, piracy would definitely be an argument against having anything resembling moral high ground."

"Not when we're stealing a ship to defeat the bad guy."

"Technically speaking, the purpose of stealing the ship was to see if we have an ally and if we can discover what happened on Midgard."

"Yeah – so we can defeat the bad guy."

"The means are indirect."

"Still counts, Lokes."

"Lokes," Loki repeated flatly.

Tony grinned. "You hate it."

The name, Loki borderline despised. But the routine, the idle, aimless bickering, Loki did not. It was a familiar thing to slip into, one that cleared his mind like the most disruptive kind of meditation. "Did I overestimate you in thinking you were more astute than that?"

"I'm flattered, Lokes."

Loki did not dignify that with a response.

"You know what I think happens whenever you get called Lokes? You go into the same kind of sudden rage Marty McFly does whenever someone calls him chicken."

"Wonderful. I am delighted to be roped into yet another one of your references to something I do not understand."

"With all these time travel shenanigans going on, I guess that makes me Doc."

"At least I have the courtesy to spare you from the same fate. How would you enjoy it if I told you that you are more loquacious than Bragi the Bard?"

Tony ignored him. "I might look like I've got a few years on you, but you've got centuries on me, I'm guessing. I've changed my mind. If either of us is the old man..."

"I am beginning to feel as if you consider my input in this conversation redundant."

"What was that? I couldn't hear you over the sound of your grumbling." There was a pause and then Tony concluded, "Out of the two of us, you're definitely the old man."

"Despite outward appearances, it would seem."

"Now that... was insulting. And a cheap shot. Not all of us have a genetically hereditary babyface."
"Pardon?"

"You don't even have to shave. And I'd know – I share a bathroom with you. I guess that's probably an advantage of the whole half-Jotun thing."

Loki blinked again, wondering if he had misunderstood. "Half?"

"Er – you're not half-Jotun? I just kinda assumed you were since you're not as uh... giantish as the rest of them. And there's the thing with how you've actually got hair and none of the others do so..."

Loki didn't know how to respond to that; it wasn't something he had reason to consider before.

Tony stroked his jaw in thought and then stared at his hand as if it was foreign to him. "You know what's weird? I've not shaved in days. And look at that" – Tony turned his head to one side and pointed to his cheek – "there's not even a trace of stubble."

Loki found himself relieved to not have to consider the questions Tony had raised of his ancestry any further. "I can't say I am particularly familiar with your shaving routines."

"Trust me," Tony said, "it's a lot of upkeep. Er... usually, anyway. As in I can't get away with forgetting about my beard without it getting straggly."

"Are you complaining because your facial hair isn't out of order?"

"No, I'm just... weirded out. Am I sick? Do I look sick?"

"No." If anything Tony appeared healthier than he had been weeks ago.

"Right. So – what is it then? This isn't just me suddenly getting old and everything slowing down, this is..." Tony trailed off, the same look that appeared in his eyes when he had an idea becoming visible.

"What?"

"Maybe it's not a coincidence this is happening when I'm doing so much work with the Time Gem." Tony sat up straighter. "Think about it," Tony continued, speaking faster and faster. "We've been pausing time, slowing time, reversing time, playing around with it constantly. That's got to leave some residue Time Gem gunk flying around. Or maybe because I'm the one wielding it, it's been going through my system and throwing off my body's perception of time. Maybe it's not even that at all – maybe when I started trying to pause time, I actually managed it. Maybe I just paused the growth of my body instead and–"

"I think you might be getting a little ahead of yourself."

Tony shrugged. "Could be. But that'd be the secret to immortality, wouldn't it? To get your hands on something that'd stop your body ageing. No wonder we found it locked under a safeguard."

"Forgive me for being the voice of reason, but I don't think you not being as bedraggled as you would expect is a definitive indicator of you gaining immortality."

“Hey, it’d explain why the Time Gem was in the middle of a labyrinth. If whoever did it was trying to channel any age-pausing powers by putting it in the core of the planet so it could reach everyone who lived there, then maybe it’s...”
The idea was enough to make Loki pause, to give him reason to consider for half a second that perhaps Tony was right and there had been a long forgotten civilisation that used to inhabit Niflheim. Then Loki realised another option, one that seemed like less of a leap. "Because you've been so busy in the workshop you misremembered when you last shaved?"

"That’s the boring option. You know what else might be an option? This being some side effect of space travel. Like jetlag, only with the literal effects of time slowing down because we're travelling so fast."

"Goodnight, Tony."

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They had decided to begin on a small scale and since they already had a container within the device Tony had made for reversing volumes of air backwards in time, it made sense to continue using it. The only difference to their last experiment was that rather than them both focusing on a singular object, it was the volume they focused on.

"Do I need to count us in?"

"I doubt that will be necessary."

Tony gave a small nod. "Right."

Loki nodded in return and Tony caught his eye.

Now.

And there it was, there was that spark, the buildup of static in the air, the precarious act of balance, the thick electricity in the air.

Loki could feel it, could actually feel it, how the Tesseract’s energy clicked with the Time Gem’s. The hold they had was less tenuous than before, more concrete, further intensified than it had ever been.

This was more than a spark: this was a spark beginning to take hold.

Somewhere in his veins, Loki knew this would be the closest he’d get to feeling the flow of the Time Gem, how it called out to the Tesseract and how they reached for one another.

Their power felt as if it was multiplying by the second, the single spark growing into taller and taller flames.

There was enough energy in the room to make his skin prickle, and his nerve endings were so alive with all the raw potential of it that it was all he could do but revel in it. The power was building and building, Loki could feel it, could feel it surging and the flames licking higher and higher, the flames that could engulf them or allow them to dance through them and remain unscathed.

Something was about to happen, something huge, they were on the brink of it, about to jump or fall.

Tony's awed grin mirrored his own, his eyes reflecting the amber and blue hues of the gems.

It was only in this state that Loki could get a true grasp for how the tendrils of the Time Gem were arranged rather than just an impression, could feel how they radiated from its core through to
Tony’s mind that channelled the energy outwards through his veins and then through the circuits within the container. The Tesseract’s tendrils and the Time Gem’s were intertwined, like vines of different species that grew not in parallel but in tangles, so that they were constantly overlapping and crisscrossing and were growing in tandem.

If it was something visible it would have hurt to look at it.

The completeness of it and how perfectly unified they were was all-encompassing. Loki could no longer distinguish one from the other, could no longer tear the Tesseract back without uprooting something. And then he realised that himself and Tony were intertwined within it all too, the tendrils branching like webs of flames around them.

Tony caught Loki’s gaze and then Loki couldn’t distinguish anything from anything, from Tony’s hold of a gem to his, from the coursing adrenaline to the singing of magic, from the unity of the gems to the unity of–

And then Loki internally cursed.

He almost dropped the Tesseract and the magic was severed.

Loki took a step backwards he did not recall making a conscious decision to take, his mind reeling with the aftermath of it all.

He didn't have the time or the capacity for this. Not now, not under these circumstances and certainly not with a mortal of all people.

It was a while before he capable of forming thoughts again.

"Huh," Tony uttered. "Never lasted that long before."

Loki had to press down on the panic in order to speak, had to force it out of the base of his throat. "We'll..." Loki broke off, his mouth full of dryness. "We'll have to try again later."

And how we dreaded that. Dreaded that it couldn't be delayed, that he couldn't just ignore what had just happened, that he had no option but to subject himself to it again, not if he wanted to save himself and Thor.

"Got somewhere you need to be?"

“I’m… I’m going for a shower.”

Why was it that the shower had recently become his first choice of a means of escape?

It was as the water poured over his head, as it soaked into his hair and temples and ran down his spine, that he found himself resting his forehead against a tile.

Was this mission not difficult enough already? Was this quest to rid the universe of Thanos for good not hard enough without having to add being unable to distinguish between the relationship of the gems and his relationship to Tony?

Loki didn't have the time for this. Or the energy. Even, he suspected, the stability that most people – ordinary people – had.

And it was pathetic. Incredibly pathetic.

Tony was human. Mortal. Loki was not.
It must have been a result of Tony being the first person he had met in a long time who he might have called a friend and something inside of him must have latched on without him realising, something he had not been aware of until it had caused a reaction like that. What exactly that had been, Loki could not have said. It had been something to do with the energy in the air, the raw potential, how perfectly united--

How utterly ridiculous the words sounded, even inside of his own head, like some sort of elaborate fantasy. Worse than the songs of bards and worse than the exaggeration people such as the likes of Fandral might have used to gain favour with the subject of their desires.

This wasn’t Loki.

This had to be because of the gems, it all must have been because of the gems.

Loki took a ragged breath.

Yes. The gems. It had to be that.

He didn’t want to think about what else it could have been. Because if it wasn’t because of the gems, it would have had to be some sort of sudden onset of… whatever it was. Loki didn’t want to call it feelings. Affliction. It would have been an affliction. A hopeless, senseless affliction.

He’d been perfectly happy – well, as perfectly happy as he could be considering the circumstances – up until now and then he had to go and ruin it with this underlying doubt, didn't he? He and Tony could have merrily gone on their way to either destroy Thanos or die trying and they could have continued simply enjoying each other’s company while they had to endure it and then once it was all over they could either remain dead or dearly depart, never to see each other again. And that would have been fine, if a little strange.

Sometimes, Loki was amazed at how spectacularly talented he was at making life more difficult for himself. Sometimes, he had to wonder whether anybody else could have invented this, could have made any worse decisions than he had done.

He couldn’t get rid of the uncertainty, the terror of the possibility of the gems only enhancing something rather than being the root cause of it festering away.

Maybe if it wasn't because of Thanos and if it wasn't because of Tony's mortality and because Tony just happened to be the only person Loki had achieved some sort of amiability with in centuries, then Loki wouldn't quite have despised the concept of it quite so much. It wasn't as if there was anything repulsive about Tony, it wasn't as if they didn’t enjoy each other’s company or couldn’t speak freely to one another, and it wasn’t as if, even from an objective standpoint, Tony wasn't pleasant to look at.

Loki wasn't equipped for this – no: he wouldn’t have been equipped for this if this was happening.

Most people seemed to go about their lives experiencing countless fleeting flights of fancy, but such proclivities had been incredibly few and far between throughout Loki’s lifetime. Maybe, he thought, if he had acted upon more of them like other people seemed to, he would have gained some immunity and the possibility of this sudden onset would have been no cause for alarm, just something that could be swept underneath a rug.

There were other bits and pieces within his memory that were giving him more causes for concern, bits that he should not even have been considering but could not stop himself. How the thought of having Tony’s company suddenly ripped out from under him, of having suddenly lost his contact
with someone whose company he might genuinely enjoy, was one that had not brought him any pleasure. Mostly, he had considered the possibility of it as disjointing but he was rapidly finding that he did not wish to analyse that any further.

And there was how little being close to him – sleeping next to Tony, the ship making Tony bump into him, when he had held Tony’s wrist to try to transfer power through him – hadn't bothered him once the strangeness of it had worn off.

But in spite of all that – despite all of that – there were other explanations, simpler ones. One being that perhaps, without him realising, they were friends. Circumstantial friends. That was slightly different to a true friendship, but, he supposed, weren’t all friendships circumstantial? Maybe if he’d had more friendships, he wouldn’t have found himself in this predicament. Maybe if he’d had more friendships, he wouldn’t have had to think twice about distinguishing between regard for a well-suited companion and anything else.

The worst part of it all, Loki decided, the most pathetic part of it all, was how the mere thought of it had sent him hiding away inside of a bathroom.

Still. At least Tony didn't appear to be aware of it.

That was a thought that made Loki's spine stiffen. The only thing worse than himself being aware of it would be Tony being aware of it. No. Loki would have to do better than that.

Tony couldn't be allowed to know that the thought of it had so much as crossed Loki’s mind. Loki wasn't sure he could survive that particular humiliation.

At least being the god of lies had to be good for something. But most likely, his worry was all for nought. That connection he had felt, the raw static and the sheer force of it, had not been present at any other time. Rationally, that meant it must have been the gems and the gems alone. And if it wasn’t… If it wasn’t, he'd have to squash it down, think nothing of it, and make himself feel nothing but numbness if he had to.

Once Loki was dry, the situation, though still dire, was not quite as dire as it had initially seemed.

All evidence pointed to magic rather than anything else, and in the unlikely event that it wasn’t, then surely it would pass.

And even if it had been what he feared, it would have been a result of the length of time he'd gone without… How long had it been? Decades, centuries, they had all blurred together before his fall. Loki could not say for sure. And since then he'd been far too preoccupied and had more important priorities to even have the time to so much as think along those lines of thought. And being cooped up on a ship so small would only have aggravated the situation, Loki reasoned. He supposed that finding someone he had a regard for that was not entirely platonic would have been, statistically speaking, bound to happen between him and someone else every few centuries or so. He’d have been overdue.

But those lines of thought were hardly conducive for gathering the courage to exit the bathroom. As he had realised – multiple times by now – he could not avoid Tony indefinitely.

The only way to put an end to his racing thoughts would be to reach a definitive conclusion, and to do that he’d need to–

He’d need to face Tony.

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The door slid open and there was Tony, sat in his seat, only the back of his head visible. Tony turned to face him and Loki braced himself.

The relief of seeing Tony – just Tony – was so sweet it was almost palpable because there was nothing out of place, nothing that shouldn’t have been there, no strange sensations caused by the eye contact, nothing in the air between them.

He’d been right: it had all been the Infinity Stones.

Loki moved with a new lightness as he made his way over to his chair and Tony smirked.

“Enjoyed yourself?” Tony asked.

“Pardon?”

“Well, you were in there a while and you’re practically skipping now. We’ve been out here for ages, I’m just putting two and two together.”

And there was an altogether different humiliation. “What?”

Tony shrugged. “Alright, alright, if I knew you’d be that touchy about it I wouldn’t comment on it. Well, actually, I probably would because your reaction is funny as hell.”

“I didn’t– I wasn’t–”

“What? Why not? I wouldn’t be ashamed to admit it.”

Somehow, the thought of Tony touching himself in a space they shared not happening to fill him with desire was not something Loki had ever anticipated being grateful for.

“Wonderful,” Loki said dryly and the normalcy of it all – the impending mission, resuming their quest, Tony’s teasing – washed over him.

At last, he could breathe again.

Tony reached forward to pat Loki’s shoulder and Loki was delighted to note that there was no undercurrent, no spark, nothing out of the ordinary. “It's good you've finally started seeing the benefits of showering, buddy. Maybe I won't have to see my own reflection in your hair sometime soon.”

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Loki stirred from sleep and attempted to fall back under only to realise that Tony must have been awake too.

“I’ve been thinking...” Tony began. Neither of them usually acknowledged when they knew the other was awake so Loki assumed whatever Tony was about to say might have had some importance. “If we have one version of the universe running that’s in present time and another version that's the past, do you think we could accidentally crash the universe trying to run two universes – well, technically, one universe and one microcosm – at once? Because, yeah, the coffee mug thing worked a while back. But that’s just one object and we didn’t meddle with it. What if the universe’s hard drive just... doesn't have the processing power?”

Loki turned over, pressing the side of his face against the leather of his chair. “I don’t know what you are saying.”
“I’m saying it sounds like the kind of thing that could – I’m not saying it would, just that we don't know if it could – break the universe. You know, effectively trying to run two universes at once. Chances are we'd safer upping the scale from New York to the size of the universe anyway.”

That woke Loki up. “And how exactly do you plan to do that?”

“We've got the Space Gem, can’t we–”

“If I had fully mastered the Tesseract then maybe I’d be able to expand its reach that far. However–”

“I’ve got it.”

“Pardon?”

“I said I’ve got it. Alright – you can’t make the Tesseract cover the whole universe. But you know what else you can do? Portals.”

“Portals.”

“Yeah, portals.” Loki could hear the excitement in Tony’s voice. “On Earth, there’s a theory that if you go through a wormhole – which is basically a portal – you’ll end up travelling back in time because of how general relativity in space works.”

Loki puzzled over the words, not being able to help thinking of his fall, of how when he had returned so little time had seemed to have passed for Thor and yet Loki could have sworn years and years had passed while he had been initiated. He hadn’t considered that there might have been more to it – he had passed it off as a result of the pain and exhaustion and constant unease. “I don’t–”

“I’ll explain. See, time is a dimension. The Space Gem is the gem that means you get to play around with dimensions because you’re basically manipulating three-dimensional space, right? But that’s just the third dimension. The Tesseract is literally the namesake for a four-dimensional cube, the fourth dimension being space-time. And since you can create portals in the third dimension, I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able to create portals in the fourth. Maybe to the fourth? That’s where I think the Time Gem comes in. I think that’d be the key to unlocking the element of time instead of just space. But you know how there’ve been all these instances of us combining the gems and it almost working but then not? I think this would be a better idea. Why bother trying to synchronise our focus on one single area or volume, when we could just create a door? Why try expanding the reach of the gems to cover the whole universe when we could just open a door through to a version of the universe in the past?”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying we make a portal through time.” Tony allowed a second for that to sink in. “I’d be in charge of how far back or forward but your job would be making the hatch. Essentially.”

“Tony,” Loki breathed.

“I know, I know. I’m a genius.”

“Don’t make me wish I had something to throw at you.”

***
Long after Tony had resumed sleep, Loki remained awake.

The simplicity of Tony’s idea, how effective it might be, how he should have thought of a similar idea himself, was what had initially occupied his thoughts.

And then there was the resurgence of the internal debate he’d been having in the shower that he thought he'd put to rest. He had put it to rest. That thing he’d felt – that had definitely been because of the gems.

Only, for an unknown reason, his mind insisted on going over each of the details again and again as if it was searching for any errors, for any counter-arguments. He had found none. Time and time again, he found none. It didn’t matter how many times he reanalysed it, there was nothing new, no new insight he found, no evidence he had missed. He was sure of it.

Until the act of obsessively thinking along those lines of thought itself had produced a counter-argument, that was. Because why when he had so happily concluded that everything must have been a result of the gems could he still not quite put the idea to rest?
Days had passed. According to the map, they had crossed the halfway point between where they had started and Knowhere a matter days ago without having noticed it.

That should have been good news. It was good news. What was not good news, however, was how Loki could not stop thinking about how one way or another this would all be over soon. Himself and Tony. Not just travelling through space and cohabitating inside their minuscule ship but everything: their nightly conversations, the experiments they worked together on, the sense of comradery, fighting on the same side, having someone who could do more than merely keep up with him. That would all change.

They’d either be dead or would go their separate ways. Loki knew this. He had known for a while. Only now, after what had happened with the gems, it was not merely odd – it was something he was actively opposed to.

And the gems…

Well, he had found using them brought him a certain amount of apprehension as of late. The last time the gems had accomplished something it had been equal parts a disaster as it had been a success. Because now the seeds of doubt had been sown, the idea had taken root and he could not for the life of him weed it out. And the idea of it was dangerous, a distraction that served no cause.

Loki absolutely blamed the gems. If he had not been able to detect how intertwined the two of the Infinity Stones had become then none of this would have happened. He would have been as safe inside of his own mind as he could have been, none of this uncertainty or lingering doubts plaguing him.

At least Tony hadn’t appeared to have noticed any differences.

Loki had been careful to continue behaving in exactly the same way as he normally would, to push any unwanted thoughts away and keep a neutral mask in place. Half the time, he was so obsessed with maintaining normality that he was certain his behaviour must have become the exact opposite as a result. But if it had been odd, Tony made no comment on it. Tony was his usual blasé self.

How Loki envied him. To be that free of any misgivings, to be at that much ease, to not have to be constantly analysing his every action.

Spending more time inside the workshop had only further intensified his scrutiny.

Tony was in the process of constructing a device that – in theory – the gems could utilise to create portals through time itself. He had compiled all of their relevant findings into one design and had tailored it in an attempt to meet all the requirements they needed and resolve all the problems and limitations they had discovered along the way.

They had just about enough metal left that they did not have to melt down the invention that allowed Tony to reverse an object’s age.

Loki had not been able to contribute much to designing the invention. Tony had become the expert in how the Infinity Stones could be hybridised with technology, and then all Loki had to do was
leave him to it, occasionally becoming of use when Tony needed to test something involving the Tesseract.

That was another thing Loki hadn't quite anticipated: how useless he had become.

Tony was the one creating the very thing that would allow them to travel through time, Tony was the one who made it so they did not have to manually fly the ship, and Tony was the one who had seen to it that the ship retained its functionality.

And Loki's recent uselessness wasn't just to do with his recent revelation – well, calling it a revelation wasn't entirely accurate. A qualm would have been more accurate. No, he had become more of a spare part before then.

But, Loki thought, perhaps it would all change when they reached Knowhere. The map indicated they were approximately less than a week's journey away.

Inventing and dabbling with technology and the craft of metalwork was hardly his area of expertise but politicking and using his silver tongue and knack for persuasion was. Or it had been, once. It wasn't that many years since they had been. Skills like that could not have simply have been lost.

No, Loki decided, that skillset had to come in useful. Especially when Tony could be so impulsive. Loki just needed patience. And besides, his input with the Tesseract was critical and a central part of the device Tony was creating. If they were only able to use the Time Gem, they would have no way of travelling back in time themselves without having to reverse the state of their minds too.

The only slight issue with both the Tesseract and the Time Gem being so critical was that because Tony was the one designing the device, the gems being able to be integrated inside it became essential. And in order for the Tesseract to cooperate with the technology, Loki would have to understand how the technology worked.

And that was yet another thing in which he lagged behind Tony in.

Tony had resorted to giving him lessons in the basics of Midgardian physics, with a particular focus on circuits and electricity. Loki did not necessarily have to understand it to the depth that Tony did; he only needed to understand enough to be able to direct the flow of the Tesseract's energy to where it should be at the correct time.

Tony did not have to consciously do such a thing. He had made the signature of the Time Gem compatible with all of the different components and materials he used as far back as when they had been residing in Stark Tower, the results meaning that he could simply press an on or off switch to control the gem's power instead of commanding it with his thoughts.

The lessons Loki received were sparing, given that the only time in which they were squeezed in was in the moments when Tony had exhausted himself of the designing and the creating of his newest piece.

"Alright," Tony said, handing Loki the instrument. It was black and solid, a vaguely triangular shape with the thinnest end pointing away from them. "Prototype version of the portal gun only. I've rooted the Time Gem so it'll go here" – he pointed to the circular slot that was moulded to fit the imprint of the gem and its container – "and I really hope that hole won't look so much like a cup holder by the time it's finished. The Tesseract will sit in this square on the other side. I fixed the issue with synching up the gems with this thing here" – he gave the trigger underneath the body a little squeeze – "because what'll happen is this: you'll activate the Tesseract, I'll pull the trigger, and the energy will be released from both gems simultaneously so there's no way they
won’t be synching up. So. Basically, I push this, you open up a portal that gets merged with the Time Stone’s energy and then we uh... Well actually, we don’t go through. Not yet. We check for stability first and sort out a whole list of other things that could go wrong." Tony looked down, his mouth quirked in a half–smile that was more self–deprecating than it was sad or amused. "Jarvis would be proud."

"I’m proud of you, boss," Friday voiced.

The difference was so minute it was barely noticeable, but there was a slight tightening in Tony’s jaw.

“Better than nothing.” Tony placed the Time Stone in its slot. “So,” Tony said, raising the device and squinting through the sight at the far side, his finger poised on the trigger. “Ready to open up a portal through time?”

Loki brought out the Tesseract as his answer, having to override the tension in his muscles as he placed the Tesseract inside its slot. They’d have to connect the gems again and if it was anything like the previous time... If it was anything like the previous time it’d be equally as much of an experience filled with sublimity as it would be a catastrophe. Maybe this time he wouldn't be quite so fortunate and even someone with as little experience of detecting magical energies as Tony was might notice the phenomenon. At the most, Loki suspected that at some fundamental level Tony had been able to detect the gems feeling closer than they had been, but the absolute unity and how unique it was and the sheer scope of it might have remained unnoted. Or so Loki hoped anyway.

It would have been beyond ridiculous to risk their own lives, the life of Thor, of the people who Tony cared about, all because there was a slight chance that this time Tony might notice something.

And even if Tony did notice anything then he was unlikely to have the same doubts Loki did. It wasn’t as if he’d have no reason to question whether it was simply all because of the gems.

Tony lifted up the device and braced his finger against the trigger.

All it took was a glance from Tony and then Loki forced himself to remove all the unsought for thoughts from his mind to allow the Tesseract to flow regardless of his inhibitions. He channelled it through the maze of wires, following the map in his mind’s eye. There were twists and turns, separate elements the energy needed to pass through and activate along the way until it reached the barrier.

Tony tapped another mechanism and then it was as if the barrier, the walls of the damn, broke, allowing the Tesseract’s energy to gush forward into a new well where it merged with the waters of the Time Gem.

Only then could Loki give a sigh of relief. This was nothing like it had been, yet this was the same raw connection. The device, Loki realised, was containing it for them, acting as a shell.

"Moment of truth," Tony muttered. Then he pulled the trigger.

There was a spluttering and brilliant blues and oranges sparked from the tip of the portal gun. It was like a bubble of air trying to exit, only its edges were swirling and morphing, the colours rich and lucid. It bulged from the centre, as if it was having to drag itself out of the gun’s shaft and then–
“It shouldn’t– It shouldn’t be taking this long.”

Loki held up a hand, requesting that Tony would wait just a moment longer.

The thing coming out of the tip was crackling like a fire going out. Its flickers and flares had grown fewer and they barely flew out more than a few millimetres from their starting point. Then they died, collapsing in on themselves and vanishing.

Tony turned the tip of the gun and inspected the end of it as if expecting to see a blockage, but Loki intercepted before he managed to level it with his eyes.

"Of all the ill-advised things to do, turning a device like this to point at your skull shortly after activating it has to be the absolute most ridiculous and ludicrous thing I have witnessed you do."

Tony did not appear to be taking him seriously. "Alright, alright. My bad. Can I–" He held out a hand. "Can I have that thing back now? There's got to be some kind of fault somewhere."

Loki hoped that fault wasn’t him. He had been so certain he hadn’t inadvertently been holding back the power. Then he looked to his hands and saw that he was still holding the gun.

"I mean, we definitely made something," Tony mused, taking the gun back for himself. "Looked like it could’ve been the start of a portal. Maybe it just didn’t have enough juice to finish. No. That can’t be it – we've got two Infinity Stones – how much more juice could it need? Maybe there’s too much juice in there. That’s… Actually, that’s probably the problem. Alright, mystery solved. I’m gonna take this thing apart. Reroute, rewire, do whatever I have to do. There’s–" Tony broke off to sniff the end of the gun. "Yup, something’s definitely gone bust in there. Not one of the gems. Probably some wiring or a circuit board. Nothing I can’t replace with something stronger. Won't take long. Nothing more than another day, max."

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The faint hum of electricity filled the cabin. Loki could just about make out the profile of Tony’s face in the darkness as Tony stared up at the ceiling.

The day’s work had left them as exhausted as they were restless until all there was left to do was to lie in wait for sleep to come.

“You know,” Tony said, “it's actually starting to feel kind of real now.”

"It is a strange feeling."

"Yeah," Tony said. The silence following that sentence was not as comfortable as their silences usually were. Tony scratched his arm and in the quiet, the sound of the fabric rustling was all Loki could hear. “It is.”

***

"Loki!"

Loki jumped in his seat, startled into waking. "What is it?"

"You have to see this." Tony was standing in the doorway, practically vibrating with excitement.

Ah. So it wasn’t a matter of life and death then. Loki hadn’t even realised Tony had left the cabin, he must have slept through it. "Is it about the device?"
Tony beckoned for him to follow him into the workshop.

Loki prized himself from the leather of the chair. “It is complete?”

“It might be.”

That served as an effective motivator.

***

“Allow me to present to you…” Tony announced, holding his arms out wide. “Our completed time travel portal gun.” The only other time Loki had seen Tony beam like that was when he had learned that Midgard had somehow remained untouched by Thanos. But this was different, this was more than relief, more than wonder. This was pride. Tony bowed and as he straightened he said by way of an introduction, “It’s shit.”

Loki blinked, the spell broken. “I beg your pardon?”

"I said it's shit."

That was what Loki thought Tony had said.

"I thought it was supposed to work."

Tony laughed but the laughter wasn't mocking. Loki could not for the life of him figure out why Tony was so delighted to present him with an ineffectual device or why Tony found the situation so amusing.

Maybe Tony had been cooped up a little too long. Maybe this was his mind’s way of coping with the reality of something he had worked so hard on failing.

"It works," Tony confirmed.

"It does? Then why--"


Loki stared in disbelief. "You didn't."

"Wait a second – I make a time machine that actually works and instead of, you know, celebrating with me, you get hung up on the name. How’s that for priorities?"

"In my defence, something so... unprecedented... is surely worthy of a better title. Perhaps something with more impressive connotations."

"I think it's part of its charm."

"Charm? You think a name like that has charm?"

"Yeah. It’s like a fond insult, you know? Like Jingles being a little shit when she nibbled holes through my best Zeppelin shirt. And no one expects me to bring a time machine when I tell them I'm gonna bring my shit."

"Why do I have the sinking feeling that making jokes like that is part of the sole reason why you
"decided upon that acronym?"

"Probably because you know me by this point. Anyway – what are we waiting for? We made a fucking time machine!"

It still didn't feel real. The device was in Tony's hands, sealed, encased, solid, tangible, and it still didn't feel as it was real, as if the task of being able to travel through time was still as entirely hypothetical as it had been before its birth.

"What… What happens now?"

"Right now? I bask in the glory of managing to outdo myself. Some people wonder if it's possible for my ego to get any bigger and I'm here to prove it is." Tony made a move as if to spin the device in his hands and then thought better of it. "We'll have to test it."

"So you don’t know for a certainty whether it works?"

"It'll work. I fixed everything. Made meticulous adjustments. You wouldn’t believe how meticulous, all because of accommodating for that powerhouse." Tony did not have to name the Tesseract for his meaning to be implicit. “All that’s left is to prove it works.” Tony met his eyes. “You in?”

Loki already had the Tesseract to hand and he fixed it into its slot.

“Here goes.” Tony pulled the trigger. This time there was no resistance between the portal and its destination and the opening shot out and came to a stop a few feet ahead of them. Its edges pulsed with bright blue light – the Tesseract’s light – and a thin film of amber was stretched over the hole, glistening like a membrane. And through the hole – they could see right through it, right through to the other side of the workshop.

“Am I seeing things?” Tony blurted out.

It took Loki a moment to realise he had spoken, he had been so entranced by the portal in front of him.

“It’s real,” Loki confirmed, still not being able to quite believe it.

“Only one way to test whether it works.” Tony took a step forward. Loki felt himself move. Oh. He had stopped him, one hand around his wrist. “Not me,” Tony said. “One of them.” He nodded at the cage.

One of the last things Loki would have predicted was feeling the injustice of it, the thing bordering cruelty occurring when Tony reached for Jingles.

Jingles was more than willing to exit the cage, her nose twitching in the air and being so delighted by the prospect of someone picking her up who normally had little interest in doing so that she almost caused him to drop her. “You never know,” Tony told her, “you might save the universe.” Tony turned to Loki. “You got this thing set to portal just to right where we are?”

Loki nodded.

“Well, in that case…” Tony placed Jingles on the worktop and fed her a treat. “There’s more where that came from.” Tony took the lid off the box and then, making sure she saw precisely what he was doing, he threw a handful into the portal. “Fetch.”
And then there was nothing Loki could do but watch as Jingles vanished into the portal.

“Is she—”

“I sent her to the future. Thought that’d be safer what with trying to avoid paradoxes and everything – that’s a thing to test another day. She should be returning in... twenty seconds.”

Loki turned his gaze to the portal, waiting for her to make her appearance.

“Keep the count, Friday,” Tony instructed.

“Fifteen seconds,” Friday intoned.

From the periphery of his vision, Loki could see Tony jittering with anticipation.

“Ten seconds.”

“Why the hell did I pick twenty seconds? Why didn't I just go for five and spare the long wait?”

“Five.”

There was the audible sound of Tony closing his mouth and cutting himself off from whatever he had been about to say next.

“Four.”

Even if it hadn’t been for it marking the success of the portal gun, Loki would have hoped for Jingles’s return. Why couldn’t they have just tested it by throwing an object through the portal instead? Why did they have to start off with a live animal? Tony had even gone as far as to throw treats through the portal, they could have just waited to see what would happen and–

“Three.”

Loki supposed it had been done now and all his new foresight amounted to nothing of use.

“Two.”

Loki braced himself.

“One.”

And there she was. Her eyes still shiny, her nose still twitching, her hand-like paws grasping at her well deserved treat. She had returned. And more to the point – the portal gun actually worked.

Tony depowered the gun and the portal disappeared. “That was…” He trailed off, searching for the appropriate word. “... Something.”

Loki remained staring at the spot where the portal had been. He had no better words himself. “I’m not certain that quite covers it.”

“Hey – I’m not certain anything covers it.”

Tony placed the portal gun on the worktop and its clink was a surreal reminder that it was real.

“We did it,” Tony breathed. “We actually—” Tony abruptly broke into laughter. “We’ve invented a fucking time machine . No – better. We made a portal gun that shoots holes in time. That’s…”
That's insane. Even by my standards."

“Even by *my* standards.”

Happy crinkles formed around Tony’s eyes.

"Well,” Tony said with a grin. “Only one thing for it, isn’t there? So. I was thinking – if anything's a call for celebrating, it's this. We've still got more of the Taradaxian wine left over. I think. And I’m calling it a day in the workshop. Testing can wait until tomorrow.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. "I thought you weren't so keen on the wine."

"Hey – wine isn't a drink I'd choose but that doesn't mean I won't drink it. I figured it'd be stupid to teleport to the other side of the universe just to grab some scotch so wine will do."

"How altruistic of you."

Tony gave a bow. "I'm an altruist, through and through."

"Is that so?"

"Maybe. Ask anyone from my planet and you'll get an answer that'll land on either side of the two extremes."

"Whereas if you were to inquire about *my* altruism on Asgard, the answer would definitely only fall on one side of the two extremes."

"Well,” Tony said, “to be fair… Nah. I’m kidding. House rules: we’re celebrating. That’s it, actually. Those are the only rules we’re having.”

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"So," Tony said, taking a sip from his glass, "how's it feel?"

"How does what feel?"

"The Norns being right."

Loki drew his features in mock astonishment. "The Norns being right? Why, Tony, I never thought I'd hear those words leave your mouth."

"I meant right about me. Kind of."

What – that Tony was the person in the universe who Loki had the maximum chances of being able to cooperate with and actually succeed with for a reason? That something about Tony and his rationale, how quickly he could adapt and acclimatise made him uniquely compatible?

*Have I heard myself?*

This is ridden with sentiment, this is–

"Because I actually managed to make a time machine," Tony finished. "Well, we managed."

Ah. Nothing quite as along the lines of compatibility that Loki’s thoughts had strayed to. Was this better? Yes. Of course it was. It had to be.
Loki lifted up his glass in a wordless toast and Tony clinked his glass against his.

How ridiculous it was that even now, now that they'd done the impossible – creating a device that could send them through time, a device that had the potential to save not only themselves but also ensure that Thor and all of the Midgardians remained alive and would give them a fighting chance of beating Thanos – that he was in no mood for celebrations.

His dread of space had been one thing but this was another. Space, unless he happened to be forced into having to travel through it, could be avoided with relative ease. Even while he was on the ship, sometimes he could convince himself there was nothing outside of the walls apart from a solid landscape. This thing on the other hand, these... He would not call them feelings – he would not. These were doubts. This was a distraction, a result of being deprived of decent company, something inside of him latching on after he realised their time together was so finite.

"You're quiet," Tony observed.

"That is hardly out of the norm."

"Quiet for you," Tony amended.

"Am I?" Loki forced his expression into an impassive one, as if he was only asking out of idle curiosity.

“Maybe this is why it’s never a party with just two people. Fuck it – let’s make a new tradition. Drinking game?"

"Our supply of alcohol isn’t limitless."

"All the more reason to drink copious amounts in a short period of time. How about it?"

Loki glanced between his glass and Tony's face, saw how eager Tony was for him to agree, how his only other option was brooding in his own misery.

“I’ll hear you.”

"So, er – a game of lies? That sounds like something you'd be good at. That came out a lot more passive-aggressively than I meant."

Sometimes, in the face of backwards compliments, Loki would have prefered nothing to have seen said at all. But this time was not one of them, this was little more than a harmless blunder. Although... No. Loki would not waste his time thinking of that.

"What does the game involve?"

"Oh. It's pretty straight-forward. It's kind of hard thinking of a decent drinking game when there's only two of us. But here are the rules: I tell you something about myself. I could be lying, I could be telling the truth. It's your job to guess. You guess right, I drink. You guess wrong, you drink."

"For a game of lies, it sounds as if a large portion of its basic mechanics rely on honesty."

Tony let out a single laugh. "Yup. It’s a flaw."

"Very well then, let's have it."

Tony looked pleasantly surprised. "Alright. My game – I'll start. Hmm, let me think. Got one. I'm being nice and starting off tame. Here goes: one time I broke my ankle playing ping pong."
"True."

"You can ask further questions. That's kinda the point of the game."

"None needed," Loki asserted. "It’s true."

"You just... Ugh." Tony threw his hands up. "Fine, fine." He reached for his drink. "Wait a second – how are we doing portions? Because one drink to me is like what – ten percent of a drink to you?"

"You may be overestimating my alcohol tolerance somewhat."

"Based on Thor–"

"Thor is Asgardian. I am not." And then because he became aware of his tone having grown slightly less than friendly, Loki added, "And besides, even if I was Asgardian then Thor's constitution would still beat my own."

"So the real question is how tolerant are Jotuns to alcohol."

Somehow, the image of a congregation of Jotuns merrily drinking together and singing songs was nothing short of bizarre.

"One drink to you may be the equivalent of around four drinks to me. I assume your body is more used to the intake of alcohol than the average Midgardian."

"Well, you’re not wrong. Alright, so one finger–width for me to drink as forfeit, and four for you. How’s that sound?"

“How will I know when I have won?”

“I don't know how you’re supposed to figure out who wins. I'm not sure anyone can win. But put it this way – if I pass out, you’ve won. But that’s not gonna happen because we don’t have enough wine for that. So – no winners. Only losers fessing up to stupid things we did.”

“You have strange ideas of fun activities.”

“Hey – you can’t say it won’t be fun without trying it. Tell you what – once you get to the bottom of your bottle and if you’re still bored, you can claim a victory."

“Very well then.”

"Deal. But you’re underestimating this game. It’s more fun than it sounds. This could go on all night. Your funeral."

"Was a disappointment," Loki said, completing the end of Tony's sentence. "Is that the truth or a lie?"

"You're exactly the kind of person who'd give yourself an invite to your own funeral. But I think you'd enjoy it a bit too much. Lie."

Loki motioned for Tony to take a drink.

"Shit. Really?" Tony took his sip. "What was so disappointing about it? The flowers or the music?"

"Neither," Loki said. "As my body was not found, I never received one."
"So... Technically your funeral wasn't a disappointment. It can't be a disappointment if it never happened. That's— That's cheating. Double forfeit. Drink up."

Loki made a show of rolling his eyes before obliging. His glass was mostly empty while Tony's had only gone down by the width of a finger.

"Your turn," Loki prompted.

"Oh yeah. I've crashed three Ferraris all on the same kind of tree."

*Plausible,* Loki thought. "What kind of tree?"

"I don't know – they were just generic looking trees. Not pines or oaks. Uh – like skinny oak trees. What? I'm not a botanist. Trees are everywhere. And I'm pretty sure they hate me."

"I should think so after crashing – what was it? – *three* cars into them."

"Some trees are just out to get you. It's a conspiracy."

"Hm. And why did you keep crashing?"

"I wasn't drunk, honest. I don't drive drunk. Why do think I employed Happy? He's a driver and bodyguard all rolled into one."

"And the answer to the question is...?"

"I was reversing."

"Three times."

"Hey – going back is harder than going forward. And parallel parking is the worst."

"Hm."

"So – what do you think?"

"You've proven yourself more than adept at handling machinery. I believe it's a lie."

"Drink up." Tony's grin radiated smugness.

"What?"

"You heard. And for the record, I was kinda distracted. Which was *not* my fault. All of those times, it wasn't my fault. Anyone else would crash too."

And from there, the competition began. After that incident, Loki had grown wise to how Tony deliberately made himself look and sound as if he was an incompetent liar regardless of whether or not he was telling a lie. It was an irritatingly effective tactic.

Loki was not quite as good at the game as he had assumed he would be with that tactic in play, not when his own method was to make everything sound as plausible as possible to exercise his skills in deception.

Tony had the easier job, Loki decided. That was the only reason why he wasn't winning by a landslide.
He'd had enough of the wine that it was no longer slightly bitter in his mouth and the more he drank, the more he enjoyed it.

Their evening and Loki's subsequent mood had improved drastically since Tony suggested playing the game, and what an excellent diversion it had become.

Suddenly, it was just a part of the game for Loki to be scrutinising Tony's features for small giveaways and the slightest of movements or gestures, for him to absorb each detail. Not doing so would have looked all the more suspicious, but in this environment it was expected of him and along the way he had learned strange and obscure facts about Tony that he doubted many others could have known about. It wasn’t as if Loki had been oblivious to how Tony being Tony could cause great inconveniences to others. But now he truly knew. He knew the precise number of chandeliers Tony was solely responsible for breaking. He knew that Tony had once accidentally bought an entire kennel’s worth of racing dogs. He knew how Tony had once been responsible for getting another man arrested because one of his robots had deposited a stolen canoe in his apartment.

More often than not, Loki's own stories had been lies. Tony's youth definitely seemed to have been more misspent than his own youth, and more of Loki's stories involved spells or deals gone awry rather than drinking or general recklessness.

Tony had managed to source a few more bottles than Loki was aware there had been stashed away in some place in the kitchenette that Tony was very secretive about revealing. Loki wondered how long the wine had been there, whether it had belonged to the two Taradaxians he had teleported away or whether it was a lost relic of some Taradaxians who worked on the ship before those workers. It mattered not; it was theirs now.

As the evening had worn on the stories had become slightly more risqué.

“I once convinced Volstagg that he accidentally ate a child,” Loki said.

Tony burst into laughter. “One question: how?”

“It was our first trip to Vanaheim, before Hogun joined us. Volstagg was more ignorant of the Vanir than we were, and well…” Loki could feel it, how Tony was hanging on to his every word.

“Go on.”

“There was a feast.”

“Okay, okay. I’m picturing it,” Tony said, gesticulating with his hands. “A big generic Viking kind of feast.”

“And the Vanir had lots of meats we were not familiar with.”

“So you did what? Just pointed at the one that looked most like a kid?”

“Oh, no,” Loki said, “I did better than that. See, I knew how fond Volstagg was of children. I waited until I was absolutely certain that he had taken to one of them.”

Tony leant forward, eyes alight with curiosity and his need to know. “And then what?”

“I waited until shortly before the feast began. The children, as is the Vanir custom, eat in a separate hall to adults during the major feats. But,” Loki said, his lips twisting upwards, “I knew Volstagg was not aware of this tradition. Only after he had tucked into the carcass and was loudly
proclaiming how delicate it was to the child’s parents seated at our table did I quietly mention in his ear how inconsiderate he was being to the family of the deceased."

Tony’s eyes were round, his mouth slightly open. “What happened after that?”

“It was the only time I have ever witnessed Volstagg experience nausea.”

“True. It’s got to be true. I want it to be true so it has to be true. That’s how it works, right?”

Loki was content enough to lose that round. The gratification from Tony’s response had been enough to compensate for the loss.

Over the course of the evening, Tony’s stories had grown more and more ridiculous. Tony had insisted that he’d once fought an army of mechanised rabbits – a lie – that he’d been extinguished far more times than he’d been set on fire – the truth – and that he’d once been propositioned by both the bride, the groom, and the maid of honour until their wedding had been disrupted by frogs raining down from the sky. According to Tony, that one had also been true.

"One time," Tony said, "a reporter caught me having a one night stand with another guy. The only reason he didn't out me was because I persuaded him to join in."

Loki blinked. "... True?"

"No further questions?"

Loki shifted in his seat. "None needed."

"None of your usual interrogation?"

"No. I believe you are telling the truth."

Maybe if Loki hadn't had four times as much as Tony had to drink as his forfeit, he would have been in a better position to discern whether or not Tony was teasing him about his lack of enquiring about more details.

"Alright, you got me." Tony drained the last of his glass and promptly refilled it.

Loki’s turn.

"When myself and Thor were children, I played a trick in which–"

"Oh, come on."

"What?"

"I reveal my sexploits and you just... tell another prank story. Not that your prank stories aren’t good, it just doesn’t seem like a fair trade. It’s like if I lent you money and you decided to pay me back the equivalent of what I lent you in kale."

"As I recall, there was nothing in the game rules against it."

Tony raised his jaw. "It's a social rule. It's manners. I thought you were all about manners."

"You mean apart from when I use my knives."

"Goes without saying."
Loki eyed Tony. "Correct. Anyway, as I was saying, I--"

Tony's eyes were filled with mischief. "Nice try, Reindeer Games. What – you thought I wouldn't notice?"

Loki unleashed a weary sigh. "Is discussing various sexual exploits an inevitable part of drinking? I appear to one of the few people in existence who doesn't believe it's an essential requirement."

"Loki," he said with a wide grin that was closer to a leer than a smile, one Loki instinctively knew he'd regret causing. "Don't tell me you're a prude."

"Because I don't happen to find stories revolving around sex to be inherently entertaining?"

Tony violently pointed a finger at him and the motion caused his chair to swivel, knocking his knee against Loki's. "You don't get to pull intellectual superiority over me on this one, not when I'm the one who's just designed a working time machine."

Loki did not immediately pull away from the contact. He could barely feel it through his knee, that faint tickle of warmth, and now that he had consumed enough wine to be more honest with himself, some part of him enjoyed how Tony was not repulsed by him, how Tony did no flinch away when he came into unintentional contact with him.

"Then what does that make me?"

"I've told you," Tony said with a shrug, the movement causing his leg to move away again, "it makes you a prude."

On a whim, Loki announced, "I'm a prude: the truth or a lie."

Tony's smirk grew wider. "Well, this is gonna be easy." He swivelled the liquid in his glass for a moment. "100% truth." He leant closer and patted Loki's shoulder, right where it joined his neck and Loki suddenly became very aware of the scent of his deodorant. "I'm proud of you for finally admitting it."

"Drink," Loki said.

"'S'cuse you?"

And just to prove a point, Loki elaborated, "My first partner and I were caught after a worker at the stables walked in on us in the middle of the act. It took centuries for me to view hay in the same way again."

Tony’s eyebrows rose. “Right… And that proves you're not a prude because...?"

"The story spread and I was teased dreadfully once the shock of it wore off. I paid for it far more severely than he did. After then I might have become more... private, perhaps. But there is very little that could make me blush." Loki supposed his statement might have in some roundabout way supported his claim that to name him prudish was a lie. Was this cheating? Yes, Loki realised, though not in a way that truly mattered. While he might have admitted to being slightly prudish on occasion, it was not something he would grant Tony the satisfaction of hearing him concede to being. And Tony had somehow managed to wheedle out a story he considered more exciting due to its slightly indecent nature anyway. But Loki didn't think he'd mind; Tony, even as he drank, somehow still had the smug air of victory.

"Called it," Tony muttered.
"I’m sorry?"

"Knew you weren't straight."

"Did you now," Loki said pointedly. Mostly to avoid any further pursuit of that topic of conversation. He couldn't make sense of it, whether it was something best left avoided or whether he should allow the strangely pleasant churning nerves in his stomach to continue.

So long as Tony remained oblivious, how terrible could allowing the sensation to continue be? If they were going to exist, would it not be the more rational thing to do to enjoy something so pleasantly distracting rather than denying himself?

This wasn't how he had anticipated their evening going. There was something different about this, something that reminded him of his youth and private conversations inside of mead halls. Except this was better. There was no boisterous singing or competition and he didn't have to pretend to be interested in something he was not.

Tony's eyes met his over the rim of his glass. "Could you be any more Thor's opposite in every way possible?"

"While it is rare for Thor to take a man as a lover, it has been known to happen on occasion."

Tony's eyes bugged. "What?"

Loki found himself smirking. "The truth or a lie."

"Lie. It's got to be, right? Thor is the most quintessential guy there is and--" Tony broke off. "Hey -- it's supposed to be my turn. And I never got to find out whether you were lying about the--"

"Very well, then, continue."

"No. I wanna know. Wait – do I want to know? Yeah. I'm having a hard time imagining it. I'm gonna have to ask. Out of morbid fascination. But seriously – Thor? Maybe Thor being an alien threw me off. Different culture, different vibes. Maybe. At a stretch." Tony shook his head and brought his hand to his jaw, his feet making his chair swivel back and forth as he thought. Their knees brushed again, coming into the barest bit of contact with each pivot. "It's so ridiculous – and I can’t believe I'm saying this -- that I'm leaning towards true. But maybe that's exactly what you want me to think. So lie. I'm going with lie."

Loki paused, allowing the suspense to build.

"Well?" Tony demanded. "What was it? Come on, don't leave me hanging here."

Loki nodded at Tony’s drink.

"You're shitting me," Tony groaned.

"I assure you, I am doing no such thing."

Tony poured the remainder of the glass in his mouth in one go. "Just when you think you know a guy..." Tony remained motionless, wordlessly staring at the empty glass.

"Have I actually succeeded in rendering you speechless?"

"You know, I think this is the closest anyone's ever got."
"I'll take that as a victory."

Tony's knee had still not moved away. Tony appeared to remain oblivious to it. Loki was very careful not to move, not to do anything that could accidentally direct attention to it. This was the closest he was going to get and wouldn't it make more sense to savour it while it lasted? While they were both still alive and while they were both still together, this – the talking, the conversing, the casual contact – was enough.

Maybe this wasn’t so terrible. Maybe it could be a pleasant distraction from the more serious matters at hand. Maybe this could be harmless, something to keep his mind occupied before they would begin meddling in more serious matters – The Collector, time travel, tracking down more Infinity Stones before Thanos would get to them. Maybe he could handle this. It wasn’t so different than before, only now he had become more aware of it. They could sit, they could talk, they could have an enjoyable time. And what if it if Loki was savouring it? Surely it would be worse if he neglected to and then regretted it once it was all over. It didn’t mean anything else had to happen. He certainly wouldn’t have acted upon it, nothing good could have possibly come out of that.

The people whose company he could enjoy to the same extent were very limited. Maybe, just maybe, there was a slight possibility that this wouldn’t be so catastrophic. After all, if they survived this, he would go back to being alone. Either that or forever pursued by those who would want to imprison him.

Maybe so much as entertaining the idea wouldn’t be so disastrous. He was good at hiding things, he knew that. Tony would never have to know. It wasn’t as if Loki was going to start pining. There was a difference between pining and allowing himself to enjoy evenings like this, evenings in which he could allow himself to forget their current reality. Loki wouldn’t think about how it would be once it was over. At least this way, he’d have gotten something in the meantime.

Tony moved to pour himself another half of a glass full and with it, the contact disappeared.

Loki’s leg felt oddly cold.

Tony held the bottle over Loki’s glass as a question and Loki nodded his consent. There wasn’t much left in the bottle anyway. He didn’t see what difference it would make.

Tony took a long sip and unleashed a sigh, leaning back in his chair. “It’s just not the same as a decent whiskey.”

“Unsurprisingly, I am not feeling particularly sympathetic.”

Tony nestled further into his pillow. “You wouldn’t be the first person I’d call if I wanted sympathy.”

“I should hope not.”

Tony’s eyes might have been closed but he was definitely awake, reacting with an amused twitch. “This doesn’t count as you winning, you know.”

“What?”

“I’m not passing out. I’m deciding to go to sleep. There’s a difference.” Tony pulled a face. “Yeesh – I must be getting old.”

“Technically speaking, I am far far older than you.”
“Mm. Doesn’t really count though. I mean, if you were human you’d be in the equivalent of what – in your thirties?”

“I don’t know.”

The wine had done something to make Tony look more relaxed than he usually did lying back like that. Maybe it was the angle, how Tony had sunk more into the leather, how he spared no second thought for how he appeared in that moment.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tony mumbled.

Doesn’t it? Loki wondered.

The silence had become too still, the air too full of unsaid words. Loki closed his eyes and tried to ignore it, tried to join Tony in sleep from the chair next to his.

Tony’s voice broke through the silence. “Loki?”

“Yes?”

There was something in that silence, something that gave it weight.

"I was thinking…” Tony began. Loki dropped his idle hope of sleep and propped himself up on his elbows. Tony was no longer lying with his eyes closed. “About when this is over,” Tony continued. “If we’re… If we’re still alive by the end of it. We could– We could use it. The time travel, I mean. We could do more with it. There’s so much we could do, so many things we could stop happening and– I– I could save my mom.” Tony’s eyes were desperate, Loki could see that even in the darkness. “You could save yours.”

Loki’s stomach tightened. "I thought the terms of our bargain specified you wouldn’t allow me to have anything to do with the Time Gem once this is over."

"So – what? We just throw what's essentially a time machine away? Sounds like a massive waste to me."

"And you're not... concerned I may try to cajole you into something... less than moral."

"A bit,” Tony admitted but his voice was teasing. Tony rolled over to face him. "I've seen you at your worst, Loki. At your worst, you can unleash hell – no doubt about it. But I've said it before: I don't trust people who don't have a dark side, who I don't know what they're capable of. But I know what your worst is. And I have a feeling your best is going to be a hell of a lot better than your worst."

"Most people's best is," Loki said, mostly so Tony wouldn't hear the struggle in the spaces between his words, how the thought of being cut off like a weight tied to the end of a rope might not have been quite as doomed to fall and hit the ground as he had initially thought.

And Frigga – his mother. There was a very distinct possibility he wouldn't have to try to earn his way back into Valhalla to see her again, to hear her voice. Frigga could be alive again. The possibility made his breath catch in his throat.

Tony could have continued with their already agreed upon bargain, could have only saved his own mother if not for the machine needing both the Tesseract and the Time Gem.

Loki had never been so glad of that. Maybe now, each success wouldn't feel as if it was another
step towards their inevitable parting of ways.

"We've still got a way to go. With the testing and meddling with time, I mean. But I thought... I thought you might want to hear. About your mom."

"Tony," Loki said, and all pretences of indifference were dropped, the consequences forgotten. He struggled for the adequate words, for a sentence to fully convey it all. Instead, all he said was, "You were right." He swallowed. "Completely."

Chapter End Notes

Eek - I think this is the longest chapter yet. And also the closest I've got to venturing into fluff territory which stresses me out far more than writing angst or action does.
Knowhere had gone from seeing almost impossibly far, a journey crossing hundreds of thousands of miles, to somewhere they could feasibly arrive at in the next handful of coming days. Perhaps in even less time than that.

Now the time machine was complete – and Loki was not going to refer to it as the name Tony had given it, it deserved far better than *that* – the next phase was testing of the alteration of time.

What Loki had not expected was how rapidly their approach had gone from to hands-on practicality to the entirely theoretical. According to Tony, they needed to use exceedingly complicated theoretical mathematics in order to attempt to determine whether or not causing some kind of paradox would have a consequence as disastrous as ending the universe. Tony was mostly certain that it wouldn’t, but with the entirety of existence potentially at risk, they had thought it better to be completely sure.

Loki’s input had gone from being of use to when he was utilising the Tesseract to practically nothing at all once their direction had taken a tangent to theoretical mathematics. It was the first time he had witnessed Tony working in silence; no music, no talking, and no speaking aloud to himself.

It seemed that this was requiring even more of Tony’s concentration than even creating the portal gun had done.

At first, Loki had registered his interest. Asgardian mathematics, he’d had a knack for, but advanced Midgardian mathematics was something he knew very little of. He’d thought that making a request would have been the logical thing to do, something that Tony would be keen to explain and elaborate on as he worked. Tony did not usually have any objections and was often happy to explain his process. Only when Loki asked, the answers he received barely consisted of more than a few words at a time, and they did little in the way of clarifying any details.

So after a few attempts, Loki gave up.

Maybe he had been naive to come to the conclusion that Tony’s behaviour was a result of the paradoxes making such high demands of his attention. Maybe it wasn’t that at all. Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence that this had occurred the day after their night of drunken chatter. Maybe this meant that Tony *knew*.

And after arriving at *that* conclusion, Loki found himself excelling in finding ways to occupy himself outside of the workshop. He’d scribble ideas for tracking Infinity Stones on paper in the cabin, make elaborate meals in the kitchen, and converse with Friday to gain access to her wealth of knowledge.

But what could have possibly given him away? He’d been so careful, so careful except for—

*Ah.* There was the certain matter of the other night with him not moving his knee away from Tony’s. That alone could have been enough to...

But he’d been so sure Tony hadn’t so much as noticed the contact, that it was of no consequence to him. And what if he’d been right? What if it *had* been of no consequence to Tony, so much so that he’d barely registered it, and then it wasn’t until the effects of the wine wore off that Tony pieced two and two together. Loki was not the sort to allow many people to touch him. What if Tony had
misconstrued Loki’s stories as some sort of misguided attempt to impress him? What if Tony thought that their laughter, their jokes, had somehow been misinterpreted inside of Loki’s mind as an attempt a flirtation?

Now Tony’s recent standoffishness had began to make a great deal more sense.

No wonder Tony was keeping him at arm’s length and was reluctant to speak to him.

But what was Loki supposed to say? That he only behaved that way because he thought he might have feelings but wasn’t entirely certain? Even inside of Loki’s own mind, that sounded feeble. Maybe his excuses were feeble.

This could destroy him. The humiliation of it. How Tony had been reduced to treating him like some sort of unwanted puppy who needed training to leave him well alone. How it was sabotaging their combined laboratory work and festering away at the remainder of the time they spent – well, used to spend – quietly enjoying each other’s companionship. And it was all for nothing. At least when Thor had dallied with a mortal, he had been spared the sting of rejection. Of course Jane would have wanted Thor. It was inevitable; Thor was everything Loki was not. Thor was somebody who noble people, good people desired the company of.

Loki was not the sort of person good people – people who played at being heroes – desired the company of.

He supposed it only made sense that the portal gun had come at such a heavy price: the price was that now Tony knew. And Tony wanted as little to do with him as possible. Of course he did. That only made sense.

How wrong Loki had been to assume that once the time machine had been completed, they would have more time to idly converse than ever – well, until they got around to the time travelling part, that was. Perhaps he had even began looking forward to it. He supposed he must have, given his disappointment when he was denied it.

Loki was able to entertain himself well enough with Friday, or with the rats, or futilely trying to plot out their route of action for every potential outcome once they reached Knowhere.

If Tony wanted him invisible, then it was ironic that Loki was one of the few people who could remain invisible. It was for this reason that Loki was surprised when Tony entered the cabin with the appearance of having been looking for him.

Tony’s stature was different. He was more tired, haggard. His shoulders held a weary slump and for a change, Tony looked his mortal age.

Loki sincerely hoped they were not about to have a talk.

Loki waited for Tony to say something – anything.

Tony all but fell into his seat, the movement clumsy and tinged with defeat.

Well, Loki was certainly not going to risk being the first one to speak, not when he was hoping that his suspicions would somehow prove themselves false.

Tony’s fingers rubbed his forehead and he cradled his head in his hands, elbows on the control panel.

By that point Loki had grown sick of waiting.
"Can I help you with something?" Loki asked, then cursed himself for how it sounded; a combination of too abrupt and overly defensive.

"I was kind of hoping you could, actually."

That was foreboding.

"Do tell."

"See, I…" Tony hesitated and Loki braced himself for the worst. Then Tony plunged ahead. "I need a distraction." That was not something Loki had anticipated but before he could fully process it, Tony continued. "This problem, all this trying to figure out how time works – which, can I add, not even Einstein did properly so it's not as easy as it sounds – is I don't get a break. I think about it when I eat, in the shower. Even when I'm not in the lab, it's always in the back of my mind. Hell, I'll even think about it in my sleep."

Loki wondered what Tony could have possibly meant by a distraction.

"What exactly…"

"I need a break. Just an hour or two. Just some time when I'm not constantly thinking about something that makes my head hurt. You game?"

"Erm–"

"How about chess? Do you guys have chess on Asgard?" Upon seeing Loki's blank look, Tony concluded, "Guess not." Tony grew more animated, gesticulating with his hands as he talked. "I think you'll like it. It's not the most intuitive game to learn but you'll get the hang of it pretty quickly – you're a smart cookie."

Loki couldn't help but wonder whether that was truly everything or whether he just wanted to believe it was the calculations alone that were the root cause of Tony's recent aloofness.

"Very well," Loki agreed but the intonation made it sound more like a question than an agreement.

"It's a brainy game. Like a big puzzle with loads of intricate pieces and patterns."

"While that does pique my interest, is that the ideal game to play if you wish to take a break?"

"It's me," Tony said. "Sometimes the only way I can make myself take a break from thinking is by forcing myself to think of something else. Excessively. So…"

Loki gave a nod. "And how is this game played, exactly?"

"It's a board game but a chess set is another thing that's not worth returning back to Earth for. But hey – magic user in the house – this is your moment."

"You may have to be a little more descriptive than telling me that the game requires a board, Tony."

Tony waved a hand as if to communicate the lack of importance in the matter. "The board's got squares on it."

"Again, you'll have to–"

"Chequered squares."
While Tony was attempting to describe exactly what the attributes of the board and pieces were, Loki conjured small illusions to hover above his hands. Then when the game was set, Tony began attempting to explain the rules.

Chess, as it turned out, had quite a lot of them. And it had taken some getting used to their fingers going through the pieces as they played.

The first few games Loki lost by a landslide. It was over so quickly that it was shameful and even Tony seemed slightly embarrassed on his behalf. But not so long afterwards, Loki began to get the hang of it.

His favourite piece by far was the knight. It wasn't restricted like the other pieces, not when it could merely jump over other pieces. Loki found its ability to threaten to take two – sometimes more, if he was lucky and planned accordingly – pieces at a time particularly satisfying. His first victory had involved getting Tony in check with his knight and threatening his queen at the same time. Tony had sworn with more vigour than usual when that had happened. Sworn, and then muttered something about teaching Loki too well and how now he was going to stop holding back.

Still, Loki could not help but wonder how much of his enjoyment of the game was rooted in the play of the game and how much was due to the relief that Tony might not have been avoiding him at all.

The following day followed the same cycle: Tony in the lab, Loki plotting and preparing for their impending meeting, then a game of his logic versus Tony’s logic.

Loki took his time planning his moves, rarely moving a piece without having planned the next few steps ahead. But Tony's strategy was far more spontaneous and unpredictable and it threw Loki's plans off and forced him into constantly having to adapt. Tony's spontaneity caused him to overlook certain pieces Loki had placed in position long ago, resulting in a loss of his more important pieces, but it also allowed him to take Loki by surprise and catch him off-guard. One time Tony had decided on a whim to chase Loki's knight around the makeshift board after claiming the knight had it coming, resulting in what turned out to be a strategically advantageous placement for Tony's pieces. Another time Loki had been only a couple of moves away from checkmate when Tony decided to castle, ruining his entire formation. Another time Tony had placed all his might into his pawns, receiving a pair of queens as his two pieces reached the opposite side of the board. Loki's favourite wins had involved the time he utilised his row of pawns into what was essentially a giant barrage pointing straight into Tony's king, the time he had tricked Tony into having to defensively block the movement of his king with his own pieces, allowing Loki to get him into checkmate with nothing but a bishop, and the time he tricked Tony into taking his queen which then allowed him to make his winning move.

Both of them realised early on that they much preferred the elaborate games in comparison to the stalemate games that ended up with equal slaughter on both sides.

All in all, it was a satisfyingly even match. Even enough that it tempted Loki to sway the odds in his favour by trying to play Tony rather than the game. Tony was a logician in part, but he did not possess quite the same intuition for reading people as Loki did.

Loki made a study of Tony, catalogued what each twitch of a facial muscle meant, what each furrow and eyebrow movement and blink meant. But despite his examination, Tony still remained too unpredictable. Sometimes a disheartened glance at a taken piece would prove to have little to do with the game and more to do with an unshared fleeting thought. Sometimes he’d frown due to
an irritation on his skin rather than in response to a move Loki had made.

General trends were easy to identify but trying to unroot the primary cause of the expression was something else entirely.

It would be less frustrating to just give the idea up.

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"Real talk," Tony announced and Loki froze, finding himself once again struck with the fear that Tony had noticed both the looks he had been giving him and the looks he hadn't been giving him. Looking to observe his competitor was nothing that could be read into but outside the context of a game was another matter because then he could be caught. In the end, Loki had to settle for a compromise that fulfilled no criteria, one that involved entire conversations where he looked anywhere but at Tony and others where he forced direct eye contact for the sake of trying to create something resembling a regular amount of eye contact. Of course as a result, neither of the two appeared to be natural. Tony had given him odd glances from time to time and was developing the habit of returning his gaze until Loki averted his own, but if he had picked up on any strangeness he had neglected to comment on it.

"We're only what, a few millimetres on the map away from Knowhere now. So hotshot, what's the plan?"

Loki had long since learned not to read too much into Tony's strange names for him, as well as the names of any other objects that happened to have been christened by him. "With The Collector involved, we must play on the side of caution. It is more imperative now more than ever that he does not know we have the device with us."

"You call it the device. I call it SHIT. But yeah – what you said."

"I think it would be wise to not let The Collector know of our possession of two Infinity Stones – let alone the portal gun. We don’t know he is capable of and what his motives are yet."

Tony nodded. "Seems smart. At least until we know if we can trust the guy. What? I don't wanna judge too much based on a name. Although let's face it, he sounds like a major creep. A real Ed Gein type."

"And there's also the problem with him possessing the Aether – assuming he still has it."

"He'd be doing a piss-poor job of collecting if he lost it."

"My concern was more for if he's able to use the Reality Stone to take our gems for himself or if he’s able to turn them against us somehow."

"I never look forward to conference meetings but this one I'm particularly beginning to dread."

"Tony?"

"Mm?"

"It might... It might be an idea for you not to attend this one."

"Why's that? Scared I'll put my foot in it?"

"Not exactly. Well, only moderately. No – my main concern is that if something goes wrong, if
he's able to overpower us somehow, then he'd have both of our Infinity Stones rather than just one."

"Wouldn't us both going in make the odds of him getting the stones lower in the first place though?"

"Not necessarily," Loki countered. "I would be able to teleport away the instant something felt amiss. You, on the other hand, could cause certain... complications." Why did he have to leave that pause there? Why?

"You mean you might not be able to get to me on time."

"Precisely."

"So you wanna go in alone."

"I believe that's the best course of action. I can deal with The Collector and meanwhile you can continue your research. I believe you said you were close to a definitive conclusion?"

Tony’s eyes flickered downwards and his mouth tightened a fraction. "Yup." Then it was forgotten – forgotten or pushed aside. "But I'll offer you better than more research: I'll give you backup. How about that? You go in and I'll keep my ears open while I'm working so if shit goes down, I can come in and blast something" – Tony eyed the device that contained the reverse–beam on the shelf – "or do something more exciting."

"We'd need a line of communication so I could warn you if joining me would only make matters worse."

"Done," Tony agreed. "I've got earpieces stashed away somewhere."

"Then we have a plan."

"Or a vague outline, at least. Er – what’s your plan for talking to him, exactly? Because--"

“My plan will be considerably more tactful than my assault on Midgard, if that’s what you’re asking. Believe it or otherwise, I have a talent for diplomacy.” Loki considered his words. “Or I used to, at least.”

“... Great.”

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The second time they discovered the rats – three this time rather than two – had somehow entered the kitchen it was met only with vague exasperation.

"You know,” Tony said, “it only took a few minutes of me being around these guys that I realised why the name for a group of rats is a mischief."

"I could not think of a more appropriate name if I tried." Loki liked that: a mischief. It was different to an act of mischief or being the god of mischief. It was an inherent trait to the collective group, something they all possessed in a charming fashion rather than a corrupt one.

"Boss," Friday's voice called.

"Yup?"

"You should arrive at your destination in less than an hour."
Less than an hour? Surely, it would not be that simple. Surely there would inevitably be something that happened to damn their plans at the last minute.

"Tony?" Loki asked. If they were only less than an hour away from Knowhere then surely it would be reasonable to ask.

"Yep?"

"Do you think it's time to open the window coverings again?"

"Hmm." Tony pretended to think. "You know what? You might be right."

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Tony's expression was nothing in comparison to what it had been when they'd first ventured into space, but it was still far from peace.

As it turned out, it had been a good idea to allow themselves to see outside of the windows again. Entering Knowhere was not as simple as landing on a planet. There was a metal structure surrounding it, its form consisting of hundreds of thousands of shards that formed the framework for its skeleton. In the centre of the sphere there was a gap, a tunnel free of the shards that was more than large enough to allow their ship to pass through.

Tony pulled a lever just out of Loki's reach and the ship's flight slowed.

They were close enough that they could see inside and the city was a wash of neon lights and purple haze.

"For a place called Knowhere, it sure seems like a lot of people know where to find it," Tony commented.

"I don’t like the exterior structure.” Not when it would effectively pen them inside once they had entered the tunnel.

"You won’t know this but way back I had this idea of having a shield around the Earth. Which, yeah, didn’t work out. But something like this isn’t what I had in mind.” Tony pulled a face. “If I saw something like this back then it might’ve been enough to make me change my mind.”

Their pace had lowered enough to let them enter through the tunnel.

The streets below were chaos. There were aliens and creatures and beasts of all forms ambling through the streets. There were queues of ships in the skies and buildings that towered tall enough to risk being scraped by them.

They flew lower to try to find somewhere to park, ending up meandering in circles and having other ships blare loud angry sounds at them as they did so.

At long last, the ship touched the ground. They had located a place at the edge of the city, by the walls of metal that if Loki squinted enough at, he was sure there were tiny things moving on it.

Tony got to his feet.

There was a glance between them, one that seemed to have significance but Loki could not for the life of him say the reason why or what either of them were trying to convey.

“You sure you’ll be fine going on your own?”
"Yes."

"Right. If you need backup, you know where I’ll be: in the workshop. I guess someone’s got to guard our ship, right?" Tony raised a finger to his ear as a reminder. "Don't forget to stay in touch."

Loki nodded and made his way towards the centrefold where the exit was.

"I mean it," Tony called after him. "You can't escape having to talk to me that easily."

Loki released a huff of amusement and then the doors slid open and his humour subsided. "We shall see," Loki murmured.

"Hey." Tony was closer than Loki had anticipated; he'd heard movement but hadn't registered that it had been the sound of Tony making his way towards him. "I've got your back."

Loki faltered.

His first instinct was to reach for a response, for a sharp jibe about sentimentally or how he wasn’t one to operate as a part of a team, how if anything it was what was ahead of him rather than behind him that needed watching, but he was so taken aback that his mind wasn't coherent enough to formulate an answer.

Despite the increasing frequency of people surprising him and causing his thoughts to fumble like that, there were still very few people capable of eliciting such a response.

Maybe, just maybe, it would be for the best if he did not reply in contempt.

Loki gave a nod which was with all things considered quite a gracious one in his opinion. Then he was out of the door.

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The streets were bustling. There was nowhere he could walk without running into contact with bizarre looking beings of all different sizes and the sheer amount of noise was almost enough to counter the joy of finally being able to leave the ship, of finally being able to breathe new air and use his legs.

The loudest sounds were from the traffic in the sky, quickly followed by the general chatter of the city’s people and the music that blared from bars.

The shape of the buildings were made as if to match the crescents and sharp angles of the metal that surrounded Knowhere. It was as Loki was observing this that a particular building caught his eye.

The building was at the centrefold, the columns and towers in its architecture and large size distinguishing it from the rest. There were signs pointing in its direction but Loki could not decipher the inscriptions. He supposed he had no better way of locating the museum without having to wonder the city and inspect its buildings anyway.

He knew as soon as he got to it that he had been correct. It seemed that even across the universe, all museums somehow retained the same ambience. What a shame it was that he had still been far too optimistic about the place. It was only as he stepped inside that the details became clear: the museum was in ruins.

The exterior had remained relatively intact but the core of it, its inner walls and insides, were
anything but. There were empty frames where glass had once been, strange stains on the floors and marks on the walls, and an assemblage of empty cages and display cabinets. The place looked as if it had suffered a brutal attack or rampage or—

Thanos.

And then a second later: the Aether.

Loki blinked out of sight.

The air was eerily still and if he strained his hearing, he could detect someone moving from further within the museum, the quiet tapping of shoes echoing off the stone floor.

Then Loki was able to breathe again. That was not Thanos. That could not have been Thanos. And even if Thanos had visited, even if for whatever reason this was the place where Thanos had vanished to, he would have no reason to remain here, not if he had already retrieved the Reality Stone.

Surely he had already been dealt a bad enough hand that he couldn’t be that unfortunate.

It was with caution that Loki edged forward.

He had no way of knowing what had happened to this place but here and there were signs of life, signs that some effort had been made to restore what it had once been. And there was a plentiful amount of evidence to suggest it had been something much grander than it was now. The sheer size of it was enough to imply its previous grandeur, but there were also countless spaces that lived as testimonials to spaces where exhibitions should have been and marks and scuffs in the walls and floor that indicated there must have been much more on display. Even the frames of the cabinets themselves held clues, given how marked by time some of them appeared. There were newer ones too, ones that must have been replacements.

As Loki ventured further inside the museum he found brightly glowing insects inhabited one of the tanks, a pulsating purple ooze that squirted out foreign symbols was in another, and encased within glass walls was an ivy structure Loki could have sworn flicked its tail at him. And there, stood at the centre of it all, was a man. His hair was a shocking white and an eyepiece was pressed close to his eyes as he examined an object in his hands.

Loki moved closer and even though the movement was silent, the Collector looked up with a sharp gaze.

Loki dropped the illusion and revealed the palms of his hands to show that he meant no harm.

The Collector appeared neither alarmed nor irked, and he cocked his head to one side.

“It seems,” The Collector said, his voice filled with a strange slow lulling quality, “that I have a visitor.” The courtesies did not quite match his eyes. The look of cold appraisal rendered his greeting perfunctory. The Collector stepped closer. “Has the word not spread yet? My museum is nothing like it was.”

Loki had long ago learned that one of the keys to deceit came with utilising honesty.

“I’m afraid word must not have spread far enough for it to reach my ears.”

“Yes, well. This used to be the greatest collection of fauna, relics, and species of all manner in the galaxy. Did you know that?” His words were said with perfect civility but there was a hard look in
the set of his eyes.

Loki wondered how literal he was being.

“I hope you will forgive my intrusion.”

The Collector’s lips curled upwards and he beckoned him closer with one finger. Loki complied but had little choice in the matter.

“It is no intrusion at all,” The Collector replied. There it was again, that icy courtesy. “I suppose you would like a tour of the museum after travelling so far to get here.” His mouth tightened. “Even if it is a tour of ruins.”

The offer made Loki hesitate. If he denied it, The Collector would know he had ulterior motives and they would move on to his real purpose before he had gleaned enough of The Collector’s character to ascertain whether he should broach the topic of the Infinity Stones or not. He would have agreed, had the offer felt as if it was laced with something, as if The Collector would be equally as displeased if he accepted or declined it.

Fortunately, The Collector cut in before Loki had to respond, the stony cordiality morphing into something slightly other than what it had been, like there was something behind the surface of his skin and his skin was only a barrier to conceal what lay beneath it. “I am surprised.” The works were spoken crisply, each letter punctuated and pronounced with calculated enunciation. “Word has spread far in the years since it happened.” The Collector glanced at Loki and the thing behind his skin, that thinly veiled curiosity, began to make its way to the surface. “How far away were you?”

Even if Loki had known how far exactly they had travelled, he still would have hesitated to share that information, to let this man know where he came from, where his home was. Even if Loki had known where his home was himself.

“Far away enough that word did not reach my ears.”

The Collector raised an eyebrow at that, then, as if it was a perfectly socially acceptable thing to do, raised his glasses to his eyes and examined Loki through them, pleasantries forgotten. “Ah,” he said, lowering the glasses again. “You have come far, haven’t you?”

Loki swallowed. “You can see—”

“I can see you’re not Asgardian.”

For the first time, Loki’s ache to deny it was nothing to do with his repulsion and everything to with self-preservation and how his instinct wanted this man to know as little about him as possible.

How was he supposed to find out whether The Collector had been the one behind Thanos’s sudden disappearance if he couldn’t trust the man enough to divulge what species he was?

The Collector took his silence as a confirmation and added conversationally, “I used to have a Frost Giant in my collection, you know.” Loki’s fingernails dug into his palms. “She escaped after the explosion. She wasn’t one of my more exciting exhibits – far too stoic for that – but I enjoyed watching her.” The Collector’s eyes were a cold icy blue; looking into them was like facing a blizzard. “But don’t worry.” The Collector granted him a gracious smile. “I am not seeking a replacement at the moment.” He gestured for Loki to take a seat and took the chair on the opposite side of the desk, resting his chin on the backs of his fingers. “So. What brings you to my museum?”
“I came to–”

“I doubt you only came as an idle tourist. It would have been a long journey without the Allfather’s aid.” He tilted his head to the side once more, examining him closely. It was the detached way he did it that made Loki feel like he was being dissected, like every word he said and every movement of the muscles in his face only provided the man with more information to add to his arsenal.

But the mention of the Allfather had gotten Loki’s attention and he’d sat up straighter after hearing the name.

The Collector, Loki sensed, was not a man easily fooled. Perhaps it would be easier to be more forthright with the truth. Or if not the truth, then something close to it. It would, after all, be foolish to reveal what he had within his possession and his intentions at this point.

“I wanted to speak with you.”

“Oh? And why would I have any interest speaking with you? I am rebuilding my collection – the collection I spent of thousands of years perfecting and curating, all for it to be–” The Collector steadied himself and attempted a pleasant smile.

“I am well acquainted with the Allfather,” Loki said.

“How Loki wished he had been able to disguise his flinch better. His face had remained still but he could feel that The Collector had known somehow, that he could see the things that stirred in his mind as clearly as if there was a window in his forehead.

“But,” The Collector added abruptly, “I suppose you are no ordinary Frost Giant, are you?” Before Loki could determine what he meant by that, The Collector continued. “And that makes you something of a novelty.”

The words caused Loki to wonder if it would have been better to be consumed by Mimir inside his well or whether it would be better to have been captured and kept as an exhibit in the Collector’s museum for the rest of his life. He was aware, far too aware, that one wrong move, one miscalculated action, and it could all go as badly as had it had done on Vanaheim Or worse.

“I am Odin’s son.” The words weren’t spoken with ease, the technicalities of him simultaneously being both a son of Odin and decisively *not* a son of Odin causing friction inside of his throat.

Upon hearing it, The Collector’s eyes sparkled with fascination. “Oh, so this is what was become of you.” The notion of The Collector somehow having known of his existence, presumably from the word of Odin himself, was not a pleasant one. “Well, you do get more and more interesting, don’t you? So tell me: did Odin’s ploy work?”

*Ploy?* What was that supposed to mean? Odin’s plot to use Loki as a bargaining chip? Odin’s plan to send the Aether to The Collector instead of having it on Asgard? Or something else altogether?

“Don’t play coy with me, I know what price Odin was prepared to pay. I know what myself and Odin traded.”

*Traded?* Loki thought. But what could Odin possibly-
The Aether. Odin was unlikely to give such a powerful object away without getting something in return. But what could Odin possibly have received in return for the Aether?

“I trust that the gem—”

The Collector waved a hand. “Odin can keep the Tesseract for now, it was, after all, the deal we made.”

*The Tesseract.* That wasn't-

The Tesseract came to Asgard far earlier than the Aether had. *Centuries* earlier.

*The deal we made...* That was what The Collector had said.

And then Loki realised: a deal. A trade. With the Tesseract. The only thing that could be of an equal value to an Infinity stone was another Infinity Stone. He’d been wrong about the Aether. And the only other stone Odin used to have within his possession had been the Mind Stone. Did that mean Odin traded the Mind Stone for the Tesseract? But why? And more importantly, how had The Collector lost the Mind Stone? He must have lost it at some stage, lost it or traded it for something else, for Thanos and The Other to have acquired the Sceptre. Could it be that Odin used the Sceptre for something more than erasing Asgard’s memory of Hela then? He must have kept it for longer than that, surely. He might not have used it often afterwards but Loki doubted he would have had it in him to destroy such a weapon or give it away without gaining something from it.

Maybe, just maybe, that was how it tied in with Loki. Maybe that was why no one thought it odd, how he had been born of a queen who had shown no signs of pregnancy, why no one questioned why he resembled neither one of his parents.

“I was referring to the Aether, not the Mind Stone.”

The Collector’s lack of a response confirmed Loki’s theory. “The Aether is safe. It won’t let anyone touch it.” He frowned. “It won’t even let me touch it. The issue with trying to persuade something that manipulates reality is that it, well… it manipulates reality. It can hide itself, make itself untouchable, make it so anybody who tries to touch it beyond its will becomes intangible.”

So the Aether was masterless. The Collector hadn’t been able to wield the Aether even the slightest amount. Thanos’s disappearance was probably in no way related to him.

All this way they’d travelled. All this way for nothing. The Aether was safe, The Collector had no recent dealings with Thanos. There was no sense in remaining here.

“I will relay the message to my father.”

“I’m sure that can’t be all Odin sent you for.”

Loki internally cursed. His business was done. He even knew the previous location of the Mind Stone, maybe if himself and Tony were able to travel back then they could prevent the Sceptre from being handed to himself. But something – instinct, perhaps – warned him that The Collector was not someone to cross.

Then Loki told the most barefaced lie he had told in years: “No,” he agreed. “Odin wanted me to speak with you.”

“Why did it take so long for you to arrive? Why couldn’t Odin send you with his dark energy?”
“My father has been left weakened from sending Sif and the Warriors Three to your museum.” That, and being left stranded on Niflheim. Loki supposed Odin must have been returned to Asgard by now and did not find the thought of it a pleasant one. “He wishes to avert the onset of the Odinssleep for as long as he can.”

“Odin’s trades have always been sweet.” With something startlingly close to repugnance, Loki thought of the Jotun imprisoned for the rest of its days inside of one of The Collector’s exhibits. “But I have little in the way of return lately.” The Collector’s eyes were distant, his voice having a strange almost dreamlike lilt. “Luck has not been on my side. Would you believe that I have had not one but two Infinity Stones stolen from me?”

Two? Loki thought it must have just been the Mind Stone that The Collector had lost, but now it transpired that there must have been another. The Collector had said himself that the Aether allowed no one else to touch it. And he couldn't have been counting the Tesseract as something that was stolen from him, it had been clear in his tone of voice when he had spoken of exchanging it.

But which stone had it been? Perhaps if Loki was not to reveal his true intentions but still manage to gain more out of his visit, it would make the journey to the museum worthwhile.

“I have not been sent here to trade.”

“Then it’s another war he wants. Which realm this time?”

“The opposite, actually.”

The Collector’s gaze suddenly grew sharp, his eyes reminiscent of some kind of bird of prey. “So the day has come when he faces a rebellion so great that–”

“It’s no rebellion,” Loki explained. “It’s an invasion. The perpetrator is not from within the Nine Realms.”

“And who, I wonder, could possibly make Odin nervous. The only time I have witnessed him act hastily was when he met his beloved wife.”

And there was another comment Loki did not know what to make of.

“A man called Thanos.”

His head tilted to one side. “That name sounds familiar. Why does that name sound familiar. Aha!” The Collector snapped his fingers. “Thanos was the reason why the Orb was taken from me.”

The Orb? It must have contained one of the remaining Infinity Stones but which one, Loki could not say.

“Odin has sent me to retrieve it.”

The Collector raised an eyebrow at hearing this. “And yet I did not deign to inform Odin that I possessed the Orb.”

Caught in the lie. Loki could have sworn. Instead, he grimaced and amended himself. “Odin knows Thanos seeks to master all six of the Infinity Stones. He has been following the threads that Thanos has left in the years past, threads that led to you.”

“Myself and Thanos never met,” The Collector commented, as if remarking on something as
mundane as the weather. “Regrettably.” Loki’s skin began to crawl. What sort of being would knowingly want to face Thanos when not even armed with an Infinity Stone they could wield? Perhaps, Loki thought, one that could be useful if not to ally themselves with then at least to utilise. “But,” he added, “I’m afraid I don’t understand why Odin thinks you’ll have a better chance of finding the Orb than me.”

Of course the answer Loki could not disclose was because they had a time machine. If only Loki could find out when it had been stolen, that would be all the information he’d need to intervene, to knock the Orb from Thanos’s path.

“I have a very specific skill set.” Loki demonstrated by tearing through illusions placed over himself, each one changing as fast as flicking through the pages of a book. “And I was raised to bring about peace.” Those had been Odin’s words. Loki thought it would not be wise to mention how some had named him the god of lies.

“Why would I help you?” The question was not rhetorical, nor was it spoken with hostility. It was just a question that required an answer, a logical line of reasoning to explain himself.

“Odin would rather you have the Orb than Thanos. If I succeed, you would have it returned to you.”

“Only if you don’t take it for yourself.”

Sometimes, Loki wanted to hit himself. He knew he’d never wield whichever Infinity Stone was inside of the Orb but he had no way of convincing The Collector of that without giving away the fact that between himself and Tony, they already possessed two of them.

“My home is threatened. I would be risking the lives of all Asgardians and more, I would be committing treason by disobeying the Allfather, I would be—”

“Able to sell the Orb for a very handsome sum of units.”

“I have no purpose for units. My home is within the Nine Realms and—” That was a lie. He’d had no home for a long time now.

“You’re a Frost Giant,” The Collector said, “adopted into Asgard. I doubt that would feel very homely. The Orb could grant you all the freedom you desire.”

“I doubt any assertions about my character made by me could convince you.”

“Am I being rude? I’ve been stolen from too many times before. First the Sceptre, then by one of my own slaves. Although I must admit, I doubt stealing was her intention. Not when she knew no ordinary beings could touch an uncased Infinity Stone, especially when it came to the Power Stone.”

Ah. So that was what was within the Orb. The Power Stone. Excitement began to grow within him, the thought that if he did this correctly, if by some miracle he could persuade The Collector, then everything the Power Stone had granted Thanos could be snatched from his hands. And then it also occurred to him that the woman touching the Power Stone must have been the reason for his museum being in such disarray.

“I understand.” Loki thought desperately, seeking something he could offer him as an assurance of his intent.

“Do you?” There was a pause. “Good. Any reasonable man would have his suspicions when an
“Offer appears to track down something of great value with no payment.”

“Keeping the Orb from Thanos’s hands is enough of a reward as it is.” But Loki could hear his own voice far too clearly, how it all sounded far too good of an offer to be believable, how nauseatingly altruistic it all seemed. “Odin also requests that when Thanos invades, you will assist him defending Asgard.” And that was something Loki would love to hold him to, some use of him Loki could make without having to risk keeping the man’s company.

The Collector pursed his lips in thought. “It has been a long time since I... Oh, very well. I will agree to that clause if I agree at all.”

Loki blinked. His shock must have been apparent because then The Collector commented, “But if you betray me, I will make you realise why Thanos is no foe I fear.”

Loki inclined his head, his mouth only a little dry. “That is perfectly reasonable.”

It was The Collector’s turn to give a double-take. "Who are you?"

"I am Loki.” Loki raised his chin. "And I play the long game."

The Collector eyed him like he was appraising a finely crafted sword. "I'm beginning to see why Odin sent you."

"As far as I am able to see it,” Loki said, "if you tell me what I need to know about the Orb, there are three possible outcomes. The first is that if I fail to retrieve it you will lose nothing. The second is that if I retrieve it and take it for myself, you would remain in the same situation you are in now and you would lose nothing. And the third is that I bring it back to you and you gain everything.”

"Has anyone ever told you," the Collector said, "that you are very persuasive."
“So,” Tony said when Loki entered the workshop. “The Collector: friend or foe?”

Loki suppressed a grin. “Neither.”

“Did he have anything to do with–”

“No. Thanos was not his doing, nor was the restoration of your people and Thor.” He did not bother repressing his smile any longer. “Besides, he can’t wield the Aether any more than I can wield the Time Gem.”

Tony stiffened. It only lasted half a heartbeat but he had turned rigid, his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palms. Then Tony recovered himself. “So what did you find out, Nancy Drew?”

“The Collector has had his eyes set upon the Infinity Stones for a while now.”

“I guess that figures.” Tony tossed a screwdriver up in the air and caught it. “Gotta catch ‘em all.”

“Actually, in this case it turned out to be useful so long as he does not get wind of the fact that we currently have two of them.” Loki waited for Tony to ask any further questions but Loki’s own enthusiasm did not appear to be catching quite as much as he’d expected. Still, he must have been biased. This was a victory he had won for them and Tony did not yet know how much more of an advantage they were at now. “Not so long ago, The Collector had the Power Stone within his possession.”

Tony blinked. It was not the response Loki had hoped for. Loki had hoped for something more somehow, some spark of eager interest or a demand for him to reveal more.

When it was clear Tony was not going to say anything, Loki added, “It was stolen from him.”

Tony tossed the screwdriver up in the air again, his eyes not leaving it.

“So that’s how Thanos eventually ended up with it.”

“It certainly seems so,” Loki agreed. “But there’s more.”

Tony’s smile did not quite match his eyes. “I can tell this is gonna be good.”

It was enough to make Loki falter for a second before pushing it aside. This was the first – the only – bit of positive news he had brought them in… How long exactly had it been, again?

Perhaps he was reading too much into it. Yes. That must have been it. It wasn't as if it was an uncommon occurrence as of late.

“I persuaded The Collector to tell me when the theft occurred and where.”

And there was still nothing. If anything, Tony appeared more resigned than ever although Loki could not say for the life of him what he was so resigned to. Maybe Tony had misunderstood something, maybe Loki hadn’t explained it properly.

“So all we’d have to do is rob the robber, right? Go back in time and thieve from the thief and suddenly – boom – Thanos no longer has the Power Stone.”
So Tony had understood perfectly.

“Precisely,” Loki said but any satisfaction had long since been cut short by the by the flickering of Tony’s expression.

Perhaps if he waited then Tony would explain himself. That’s what Loki would have prefered if their situations were reversed. Or at least having the option to explain himself without actually doing so would have been a more accurate description of his preference.

He could only stand watching Tony occupy himself with the screwdriver for so long before the endless cycle of throwing and catching grew tiresome. The rats were far less taxing to watch, three members of the mischief sleeping using one another as pillows and a further two members playing at wrestling on the ground level of the cage. Then he counted again. That wasn’t right. There were five rats inside of the cage. There should have been–

“Loki?” Tony’s voice was small. Tony’s voice being small was never a good sign.

“Where’s Jingles?”

Tony stared back like an animal caught in a trap. The rise and fall of Tony’s chest was visible from across the other side of the room. His mouth opened and then closed again. “I have to tell you something.”

It was Loki’s turn to stiffen as he waited.

“It’s just… We know what we have to do now, don’t we?”

Loki came to a stop, allowing enough time to pass so he could be certain he had heard Tony correctly. “No. I don’t think I do.”

“We– We have to go after the Power Stone ourselves.” Tony kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. “But there’s always got to be a catch somewhere, hasn’t there?”

A catch.

Loki couldn’t understand why, couldn’t understand what could possibly have upset Tony this much, couldn’t understand what he was still missing.

He took a step towards Tony, moving closer with caution, not knowing what to say, what he could possibly do to make it better. “Tony…?”

Tony’s hands suddenly wrenched free of his flesh, the screwdriver flying from his palm to the floor. The look in his eyes was worse than Loki had feared; it was one of defeat. “So we’ve done it.” His voice was flat. “We’ve figured out everything we need. We’ve got the portal gun and we know how to take the gem that makes Thanos the most powerful. Easy, right? All sorted. Seems like we’re on a lucky break.” Tony let out a snort. “But it’s never that simple, is it? Not for us.”

Loki could taste the danger of the question, the dread of the anticipation of what came with whatever Tony was going to reveal. “What–”

“Don’t sweat it, we can still save everyone.” Tony forced a smile, a vile terrible thing. “Just a shame about the whole not coming back after part of the clause.”

Not coming back… But how? Why? Why would Tony–
“Look,” Tony managed. “I didn’t– I didn’t want you in the lab just because I needed to concentrate. I wanted to be sure. I wanted to be sure I was right and it wasn’t until you left that I managed to reach a final conclusion. And– I’ve tested it again and again and I just don't see how... Do you have any idea how much I want to be wrong? How much I need to be wrong? Because every time – every single fucking time I made a paradox, whatever caused it just… disappeared.”
He flinched. "Like the universe just blipped them out of existence."

Loki could not conjure thoughts, let alone words. And Tony was his opposite, speaking so quickly it was almost impossible to keep up.

"Based on everything I’ve done, all the experiments and all the math, all time happens at once so when you change something in the past everything else gets immediately updated – like with the experiment we did with the rats, remember?” Tony did not wait for a confirmation. “So if you make a paradox, you’re doing something that means once the universe is updated, you’d never be in the position to make the paradox in the first place. So the universe doesn't know what to do with you. It's like a computer detecting a problem it doesn't know how to deal with so it just presses the delete button on you and carries on. Which is bad news for us because when we travel back in time, the exact moment we kill Thanos we'll be gone. Because the future would be automatically updated, the battle would’ve never happened, you’d never have grabbed me, and we'd have no reason to team up to go after the Time Gem in the first place. Which means we'd never figure out time travel and neither of us would’ve travelled back in time at all. But because us killing Thanos would be the catalyst, he'd still be dead because there’d be no paradox without him – so, yay, there’s the good news.” Tony shook his head. “I’m trying to look at the glass half full here.”

Loki's mouth was dry. “... What?”

Tony couldn’t meet his eyes. “If we save everyone, the paradox will mean we won’t exist anymore.”

"Why–" The obstruction in Loki's throat cut him off. "Why are you telling me this?"

Tony’s eyes met his. "I thought you deserved to know."

"You think I deserve this? You think I deserve to spend my last days knowing that everything we worked for will only result in our demise? That the best possible outcome is that we won’t exist anymore? That it makes no matter what my intentions are – the Norns, fate, the universe, whatever it is that you want to call it – its continued survival is contingent upon our suffering. That others recklessly thrust themselves into hedonistic heroism and yet despite how careful I am and how much the core of myself repels it, my second act of it will be my last? Is that what you think I deserve to know? Truly?"

"That’s not– That’s not what I meant. I don’t…” Tony shook his head. “I don’t think you deserve this. Why would I think you deserve this, after everything you’ve done?” Maybe because of everything he’d done Tony would think he’d deserve this. "No. I just… I just thought you deserved the right to make the choice yourself."

"And you couldn't have fooled me into following you to our doom despite the lives of almost everyone you know depending on it? Oh, how noble of you. How truly idiotic you must be to let your sentiment put the lives of all within the universe at stake. One of Midgard’s Mightiest Warriors indeed. And if I refused – if I destroyed your technology and moved the Time Gem across to the other side of the universe, further out than even I have travelled, what would you do then? Would you curse my name, regret that it was all lost because you placed your misinformed beliefs over all their lives?"
Tony's voice dropped in volume to barely above a whisper. "You wouldn't let Thor die again."

"Wouldn't I?" Loki's laughter was wet. "The prospect grows more and more tempting."

Something about Tony’s gaze made him feel ill.

"No," Tony said, "you wouldn't. But the thing is– The thing is you don’t need to. As long as you activate the Tesseract, I could... I could go alone. You'd still be alive, you'd just be the version of you that would exist after whichever point in the past Thanos dies."

"And if I asked you to only end Thanos after I fell, would you?" The question had slipped out without Loki's consent.

"If I did what?"

"Forget what I said." Loki shook his head. "It matters little. The Norns were rather specific in that it has to be the two of us. And Hela was rather specific in that I must be the one to end Thanos, else she will not allow me to be reunited with my mother. I should hardly be surprised that the life granted back to me would be so fleeting. Cruel ironies are something of a recurring theme."

Tony steadied himself against a table. “I always--” He took a breath and started again. I always thought someone would kill me eventually. I’ve got a loud mouth and a huge fortune and a habit of pissing off a lot of people. But the thought of just... suddenly not existing anymore is so...” Tony fumbled for the right word. “... Quiet.”

Several heartbeats went by.

“I thought one of my betrayals would eventually be the end of me,” Loki admitted. “Not loyalty.” His face contorted around the word as if it was sour. “Never loyalty twice over.”

Tony had no response to that, nothing more than a stutter in his breathing.

The hum of the ship’s machinery suddenly seemed very very loud.

Tony was having to lean more heavily on the worktop, knuckles white with the force of his grip. He muttered a curse underneath his breath and then he was on the floor, his lungs working in great shudders.

There was a scuffle in the cage and Loki realised the rats would live longer than he would. Loki joined Tony on the floor, sitting with his back pressed against the wall.

Dignity was far from his primary concern.

Loki didn’t know how to fix Tony’s breathing, how to reassure him that everything would be fine when nothing would be fine, when nothing could be fine.

On it went. On it went until Tony was left with his head between his knees and there was stillness once more.

Tony audibly swallowed. “The more we think about it, the scarier it’s going to get.”

“I’m aware,” Loki said but neither of them were prepared to move. Loki’s vision had long since started blurring with the bitter unfairness of it all but it wasn’t up until then that he noticed. Anger and despair were always conjoined, it seemed.

“Is there anything you want to do before we…?”
“Like what?” Loki wiped the wetness from his face. “Say my last goodbyes and hope the Allfather saves me from my fate of not existing any longer by locking me away?”

“I need to– Shit. I’ve got to leave something. For Pepper. For Rhodey. They’d always–” There was a slight hitch in his voice. “They’d always be waiting for my call.”

“You know I can’t return to Earth without risking the Allfather’s wrath.”

Tony nodded, biting his lip. “Yeah.” He stared determinedly forward. “I know.” Then he cast his eyes downwards. “It’s probably for the best. How easy it’d be to convince ourselves to just leave it one more day. I’m uh… I’m not good with goodbyes. If I had to say goodbye to them in person I don’t– I don’t know if I could still do it. A video’s probably the next best thing, right?” The slightly hysterical edge was back. “That’s what normal people are supposed to do when they know they’re–” Tony broke off but they both knew how that sentence was going to end. “If there’s anything you want to say, you can–”

“There’s nothing I want to say.”

Silence struck once again.

“Then when I’m done, I guess we should… I mean, we’ll be as ready as we’ll ever be.”

“We’ll never be ready.”

"Fucking sucks doesn't it?" Tony exploded. “We made time travel possible and you've come a hell of a long way from trying to enslave us and none of it will save us. Yay, guess what – we save the universe. But only if we delete ourselves from existence.”

"The Norns love their jokes."

"Fuck the Norns. Fuck the Norns for their catch.”

Loki closed his eyes. "If you have any sort of epiphany about how to avoid that..."

“Wish I did, buddy.”

Loki laughed, a hoarse wet defeated noise that stuck in his throat.

"Hey – hey." Tony’s hand made contact with his arm. "Look at me,” Loki did. “You did good. Honestly. You're half the reason – more than half the reason, actually – that everyone’s going to survive this. Well. Everyone else. That's gotta count for something.”

Loki’s mouth pinched together. His body was quietly vibrating. Tony’s hand moved to his wrist to give it a light squeeze and it was only then Loki realised that Tony was shaking too.

“All it counts for is our demise.”

Something cracked. Tony’s grip tightened. His breathing was the loudest sound in the room, the closest sound in the room.

"I don't wanna die either," Tony confessed. The details on his face were unreadable, too blurred for Loki to see clearly. All he could tell was that he was close, close and looking at him with such an urgency it was as if Tony was trying to will a solution out of him.

If only he had one.
"Tony?"

"What?"

“I’m sorry.” The words flew from Loki’s lips. “I’m sorry that you have to. I’m sorry I’m such an awful creature that you were the only other person I was capable of making an alliance with, that you had to be dragged into this. I’m just…” It was as if all his rage and bitterness had been exhaled and he was left with nothing else. “I’m just sorry.”

“You know,” Tony said, and there was a trace of humour in amidst the despair, "maybe if you hadn't invaded my planet we could’ve started being friends a long time ago."

"Perhaps," Loki murmured. "Perhaps so."

“I… I wish it didn’t have to be like this. Really. But it’s a choice between us and the rest of the life in the universe and I know I’m a selfish asshole but even I can't--"

"I know."

"We should just do it. Go back. Right now. No sense delaying it."

Loki didn't say anything. Tony made a move to push himself up and Loki found his other hand gripping at Tony’s arm and Tony stopped, sinking back down.

"You scared?" Tony asked. "Because I'm fucking terrified."

"Tony?" Loki clutched at him more urgently.

"Yeah?"

"I meant it. I am sorry."

Tony knelt in front of him, knees touching his. "So am I. Wish I didn't have to do this to you. I hate that I have to do this to you. You don't – you don't deserve this. I– I actually like the person you've become."

"Maybe I do too." Loki blinked. "A little."

Then Tony’s arms wrapped around him and before Loki could attempt to decipher what Tony was attempting to do, his arms had somehow ended up wrapping back around Tony in return and they were clinging to each other so tightly they couldn't tell whose shakes were whose anymore.

"For what it's worth," Tony murmured when it was over, leaning back to regain eye contact, "you're one of the best allies I've ever had."

Loki swallowed. "As are you," he whispered.

Tony managed to get to his feet and Loki followed suit, somewhat more unsteadily.

"Got any last words or anything before we go?" Tony asked. “Because you won’t get another chance."

"I – I have none. I have nothing."

"Have I mentioned fuck the Norns already? Because I'm saying it again. Fuck the Norns. Seriously. Fuck those guys."
“Maybe it would have been better if Hela had let me die in peace.”

“Fuck her too,” Tony declared. Then he added as an afterthought, “Not for resurrecting you. For getting you – getting us – to do her dirty work for her. And… whatever else she did. I’m sure there’s something.”

“She appeared to be under the impression a shared hatred of Thanos and praising my tricky nature would be enough to win me to her side.” And there was his anger. Anger was easier. “As if I would do this as a favour to her. To anyone.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Congratulations on being your own slippery bastard. I’m proud of you.” Tony pulled out the device, tapping away at various buttons in mid-air. "Let's get this over with." The portal gun was held out for Loki to slot the Tesseract into. “Before we talk ourselves out of it.”

A slippery bastard. And what was it precisely that Hela had told him she’d needed? Ah yes, a trickster. She needed a trickster.

"Tony…"

"Anyone would think you're trying to stall me." But Tony paused regardless.

“No, Tony – I think that might be it!"

“What?”

“My slippery tricky nature."

“Er—"

"That epiphany I requested you have – I retract it. I've had one of my own."

Tony lowered the gun. "I'm all ears."

“It’s tricks,” Loki said with a vicious grin. “The Norns may intend for us to die doing this but I certainly don’t. And tricks are, after all, my favourite weapon of choice.”

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“So wait – let me get this straight: we don’t actually have to witness Thanos killing everyone, we just have to believe we did.”

“That is correct.”

"Sometimes," Tony said, "I think you're a genius."

"It has been time that I started giving a fair contribution to our partnership."

"Right. Like you've been dragging the team down this entire time."

"Besides obtaining the relevant information from The Collector–"

"You're only one of the two people S.H.I.T. needs to operate, it's because of you that we didn't get ran down by a fleet of ships, and you're the one who stole this ship for in the first place." Tony paused. "And that's only within the past handful of weeks."

"Put like that anything could sound halfway convincing."
"What do you want to me to do to convince you? Put a cheerleading outfit on and sing a song and
dance for you? Because the mental image of that alone is punishment enough, let alone the real
thing." Tony allowed a moment to pass. "No, but in all seriousness, I was kind of, I don't know...
resigned to it. I got to the conclusion that if you make a paradox you disappear so I thought we’d
just be doomed. And you – you, my buddy – thought your way around something in a matter of
minutes that I couldn't think of a solution to in the past couple days I spent suspecting we might be
screwed. Maybe part of it’s because I wasn't even thinking about whether we could work around it,
I just... I don't know. I didn't even think there could be a way around it." Tony pressed his lips
together. "Which is pretty stupid, I know."

"A momentary lapse, I'm sure."

"Yeah. Either that or just another cautionary tale about believing the odds are rigged."

Loki toyed with his fingers. "I hope you hadn't been following in my example. That would not be...
wise."

“No. That was entirely on me. I could have– I could’ve got us both killed. Well, erased. Same
difference."

Loki had no way of denying the truth of that, not without having to twist the truth to suit his ends.
Instead he said, "I'm sure we've both almost gotten the other almost killed enough times that this
makes us even."

And there – Tony was almost smiling again, one side of his mouth lifting upwards. He looked to
Loki and then his eyes slid away again, the amusement gone.

"And it wasn't just us I put at risk. Jingles is gone because of me."

"When you say gone..."

"I mean I made a paradox rat. I had to test it on something live. I needed something that’d directly
link her doing something to her travelling back in time. So I trained her to press a button. The
button dispensed a treat inside a box but there was only one treat in the container. I made sure I
couldn’t see any of it, I didn’t want to implicate myself with paradoxes if the worst case scenario
was true. Only after the treat was eaten would the door in the box open and there’d be a tunnel
from the box to the portal. You know, the portal that we kept open so I could scan and run tests on
it? Anyway, she ate the treat and would’ve got sent back a couple hours before either of us were in
the workshop. And because she knew pressing the button would give her a treat, she wouldn’t have
been able to resist pressing it again. Which, yeah, would mean she couldn’t have eaten the treat
that would’ve led to her going through the portal the first time because there was only one treat.
And she just... never returned. I checked the button after. And it had been pressed twice. And that’s
how I knew for good."

There was a void where the niceties, the empty words of assurance that it was okay, that it was all
fine, were supposed to be said. At least, that was what Loki assumed the void to be. It wasn't as if
he didn’t understand why Tony or had done it or how crucial it was to their cause, but to assure
Tony that her having been erased from existence was nothing short of perfectly fine would not
have been the entire truth.

A creature with such ambition and cunning deserved better than what she got.

"We shouldn't remain here," Loki said abruptly. "Not while The Collector is so near."
"Where should we go then?"

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"Earth first or go four years back to the museum to get the Power Stone? Are there any other paradoxes we might accidentally cause? Right. Should probably not do that. But Earth first would be a good idea. I think."

"Midgard would make the most sense. In order to progress, we need to be able to deal with Thanos without it causing further paradox related complications. Once we override the event we remember with the false version of the same event, we will be able to alter our history with Thanos."

"So it's like we're just rewinding the tape and recording a parallel version of what happened over the original. Except that the parallel version is actually just an illusion – your upgraded illusions are gonna come in really handy by the way – and it only needs to fool the people watching – i.e. us – so we can do whatever the hell we like to Thanos."

"Ah, good," Loki said, "so that means that the first time we witnessed Thanos's attack, it was real. I would have hated to have caused myself unnecessary suffering."

"Yeah. But also no. This is where it gets complicated. Because if we just sit here and do nothing – we'd still remember the attack, right? So an actual attack definitely happened. Thanos genuinely killed pretty much everyone. But the moment we do the once-over is the moment when what we remember becomes the fake version."

"Because of time automatically updating itself and it all happening at once?"

Eyebrows raised like that meant that Tony was impressed. "You've been listening." Tony began to pace, making a route back and forth between the tables. "But here's the part where it gets even more convoluted: while we're doing the fake version, Thanos might both be there and not be there at the same time. Because he was definitely there originally. Actually, forget originally. If time isn't linear, originally doesn’t really exist and screw trying to find out what happened first when it’s all happening at the same time. Anyway, if we actually manage to defeat him at some point before the battle happens then he also won't be there anymore. So, yeah. It's uh... complicated. I don’t have all the answers yet. And I don’t wanna think too hard about Schrodinger's Thanos."

"Then I suppose it is for the best that I appear to be able to shield us from any form of detection if we wish to avoid confronting him so early on."

"Definitely." There was more life in Tony than there had been in days, more enthusiasm and energy even in the way he took his steps. "I don't think that's just a coincidence. That might even be the reason we’ll be able to go back to the battle with Thanos being in the same place as us – sort of – without him instantly trying to smite us or something."

"An intriguing theory."

"Yeah." Tony paused to scratch his beard. "But I'm thinking about this whole not causing any more paradoxes thing. We're gonna have to be careful. Really careful. I mean, our lives literally depend on it."

"Our lives have depended on a lot of things but having to be careful isn't a new one."

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They worked on the assumption that they'd be altering the course of the Power Stone which meant
they'd be travelling four years into the past at a minimum to catch the thieves. And then they’d need all the information they could recall for Loki to be able to create a convincing illusion of the battle. And that task, the scale of it and how momentous it was and how he'd have to relive the battle for the third time was not a thought he wanted to linger on.

Tony had started first. He’d spoken of how sudden Thanos’s attack had been, how unprepared his planet had been. How it had been reported that there was a moving object observed in the stars and how Midgard had assumed it was some kind of string of meteorites or asteroids and it was for that reason that no weapons were fired until it was too late.

Tony talked of how Thor had appeared with Vision, being the bearer of the news that Thanos was invading and that he was seeking the Mind Stone. There had been arguments with the council, talks of whether they should try to prize the stone out and destroy it themselves, whether they should destroy Vision, or whether they should arrange for Vision to hide on another realm. In the end, there was no time for a resolution to be made.

There was no singular team that was assembled; there were those closest by who were able to fight, there were small teams of powered individuals unknown to the public, and there were the only soldiers and armies that could have been sent to New York with such little notice.

The Avengers never assembled. The former members were integrated within the larger mixture, all carrying out different tasks and duties and were kept so preoccupied they weren’t forced to interact.

Tony had seen the Captain. The last thing he'd said after returning his shield to him was that it was on a temporary basis only and only because the world might have been ending. Tony didn't want not giving the soldier back the weapon he used to defend people on his conscience when so many lives were at stake.

They'd been fighting the Chitauri tirelessly. There were no wormholes this time, no way for them to attack the fleet with their nuclear weaponry without damaging their own planet in return. So the people of Midgard fought where they could. They fought on the ground, they fought in the air, they fought from behind the monitors of remotely controlled weapons and from inside machines larger than they were. And it was still not enough.

There were too many of the Chitauri.

They just kept on coming.

Then Thanos came and everything was so much worse.

Tony had barely gotten a glimpse of him. He'd been so occupied by fighting both on the ground and in the air and never remaining in one place for too long that he had barely seen Thanos or what he was capable of.

That had made Tony overconfident.

He'd been so sure that if the leader of the Chitauri was taken down, the rest would have been easy.

In the end, it hadn't even been Thanos who had caused Tony to be lying unconscious when Loki had found him.

"I thought I was doing fine," Tony narrated. “Everyone else wasn't but I was practically untouched.” He’d spoken of the bodies he’d seen already, of the injuries and the faces he knew. “Then when I was trying to take off one of the Chitauri soldiers grabbed my foot and I ended up slamming face first into asphalt. Or at least I assumed it was one of those guys at the time."
Loki made a careful mental note. "So that means that we need to simulate something damaging you and your armour somehow."

"If we get dibs on punching past-me in the face, I'm calling it."

And then it was Loki's turn.

He didn’t want to have to explain, to have to speak of his fall, but to put both Tony’s life and his own life at risk would have been beyond reckless.

A compromise then. He’d have to compromise.

"We can't travel further than six years into the past."

Tony gave him an odd look. "Um. Care to share with the class?"

Loki would certainly rather not have had to.

"There were things I... There were things I witnessed Thanos do in that timespan that we cannot fake."

Tony stiffened. "Wait a second – you... So you did know him."

And that was why Loki would have prefered to have avoided the entire topic of conversation.

"Well, I hardly went of my way to introduce myself to him--"

"Six years ago," Tony said. "That was just before--"

"Yes," Loki interrupted, "I know exactly when six years ago was."

"Does that mean--"

"No, Tony, before you get your hopes up, my will was still my own."

"If any of us were in the same room as the Sceptre for too long, it messed with our heads, amped up our emotions. You might not have been a puppet, but it'd still be an influence on--"

"And after I dropped it?" Loki asked. "When it could no longer reach me and I still decided to continue executing my plan?"

Tony was quiet.

"What?" Loki asked. "No further vouches for my innocence?"

"I never said you're innocent."

Oh. Of course not. Loki didn't know why he would have thought anything differently. Why would Tony need to believe he was innocent? It wasn’t as if spending time with him was causing Tony any moral distress. The only reason it would have done would be if--

"All I'm saying is you're not as guilty as you want everyone to believe."

"Why would I--" Loki shook his head. "Are you done?"

"One more thing. From your trial. You got life, didn't you? Didn't the Sceptre ever come up as part of your defence? Or what happened with Thanos before--"
"You know nothing about what happened with Thanos before–"

Tony held up his hands. "I don't. But I know something about what it's like to be caught between a rock and a hard place. What it's like to have your worst enemies demand you do stuff for them that'll get people killed and you have to choose between saving them and making sure you stay alive."

"Is this the part where we realise we're not so dissimilar after all? Is this the part where we bond over our shared tragic past?" Loki could feel himself slipping. He leant closer. "Because this is where we are different. This is where the mirror between us fractures. Because despite your chances being stacked against you, you chose to fight back. You chose to turn yourself into a weapon against them at whatever personal risk it brought you." Loki held his head up to look Tony squarely in the eyes. "And I didn't."

"Then what exactly have you been doing for the past few months, huh? Tell me that."

Loki stilled.

"Guess you can't argue with that," Tony concluded. "And as for what splits the mirror between us – I'll tell you what it is. I actually talk through stuff. I don't do a great job of it and I don't always pick the right people and the right time to do it and it doesn't always even happen at all. But at least some of the time I'm actually capable of doing it."

"You presume to--"

"What? Talk down a god? I thought we had this argument already. I'm a lowly mortal and you're an immortal god and it's funny how that doesn't stop us speaking to each other however the hell we like. You don't wanna talk about it? Fine. Just fucking say so. Don't start snapping at me and giving me death-eyes just because you can't stand to admit that something actually got to you." Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and then let his hand fall. "And it’s not just now. You’ve been acting weird all week. Just-- Just fucking work with me here. I'm not-- I'm not saying you have to spill all the gory details. We just need enough so we don't accidentally end up killing ourselves."

Somehow the silence that followed was almost as terrible as it had been when they’d both thought they’d die. “Alright, class dismissed. Let’s take five.”

The worst part about being petty was that Loki was completely aware of precisely how petty he was being.

He could have just stated the bare minimum facts – that they could not touch Thanos before or during his initiation process – but of course he had to go and do... that.

There was only so much vulnerability Loki could stand. He’d already received – no, not just received, even returned – one hug out of desperation, and that was when he thought they’d die and if Tony looked at him with anything close to pity--

It had been a long day.

He should have made his amends by now.

They could have exacted their plans by this point if he could just pull himself together and--

And what?

That was the difficult part. Knowing what he was supposed to do, let alone how he was supposed to do it.
After opening the doors to the cabin, Loki gave a light clearing of his throat to indicate his presence.

Tony's cursory look was not entirely welcoming but neither was it hostile.

"There are certain things I don't want to" – or can't, he privately added – "discuss."

"Yeah. I managed to figure that one out for myself."

Loki pressed his lips together. "I should have... minded my tone."

"You think this is just about you being a dick? Which you were, by the way."

"I–"

"No. This is about you trying to squash everything down until it blows up in your face. Again. As a strategy, it's not great. Speaking from experience. But whatever – you do you. I'm not gonna try to make you fit someone else's mold of what you should be." Tony's face grew harder. "But when it starts putting other people's lives at stake – and not just their's but your own life too – that’s when I start to get pissed."

Loki went rigid.

There was no anger, no malicious desire, nothing but blurry confusion.

He wondered whether he should take a seat.

"What are you still standing there for? We've got work to do. We're starting over. So. Let's try again. What do we need to stick in place so we don't accidentally erase ourselves from existence?" Tony's face softened. "In as much or as little detail as you want."

Loki found his seat. "Can I... Can I show you instead?"

"Show me? What exactly–"

Loki conjured a timeline that sat in the air between them. It had all the key points on it, an approximation of when he had first encountered Thanos, when he had left, when he had died.

"Oh." Tony reached out as if to touch it with his hands. "Yeah. This works."

The information on the timeline was little beyond the bare minimum, an indication of the dates and a brief few keywords to summarise the events.

"What's that say?" Tony’s finger pointed towards the centre of the timeline.

"Valhalla," Loki answered. And now he came to think of it...

"Got it."

"And – what's that mean? Oh. Never mind. The Norns. So that's when they–"

"Made their appearance at the last possible second to tell me what I needed to do, yes."

"And then you teleported right into the battle, found me lying on the ground and– Well. We know the rest."
Loki swallowed. He’d done it. He’d done what he had to. Maybe he wouldn’t be the death of them both after all. That was something, at least.

“Wait a second,” Tony said. “I can’t believe I just missed that. You got blasted with lightning in the battle? And I thought I’d have it bad having to knock myself out.” Tony guffawed. “Does this mean we get to take Thor out for a playdate?”

Some of Loki’s previous bleak mood had begun to lift. “I dread to imagine how that conversation would play out.”

“You mean when you ask Thor to Mjolnir you or when you ask him to travel back in time with us so he can Mjolnir you?”

“Both.” Loki leant back in his chair. Tony had started using his feet to pivot his chair again, rotating from side to side.

“I can’t wait to hear that talk.”

“What a shame it is that speaking to Thor is no longer feasible.”

“What? Why not?”

“I’m sure the Allfather’s wards will be in place now he has returned. I can’t chance teleporting into the castle without risking being trapped there even if I desired to.”

“Shame.” Tony’s hands went behind his head.

“Does that mean I need to build something so you can zap yourself?”

Loki let out a sigh. “Probably.”

That got a chuckle from Tony. “Awesome. I’m gonna need to start taking notes before we go back in time. Notes on everything: a checklist of all the stuff that’d cause paradoxes, stuff we need to resolve, stuff I need to build…”

“Speaking of things that might need resolving…” Loki began. “I’m not entirely certain whether or not we – well, I – need to act.”

“Fill me in.”

Creating the timeline for Tony had caused a question to rise in Loki’s mind.

"Valhalla is not Hela's domain – her domain is Helheim. If my soul was in Helheim then I could understand her knowing of my whereabouts. I suppose the question I am asking is this: how did Hela know where I would be at that precise moment in time?"

“Yes. I think another conversation with Hela might be necessary.”
Chapter 40

The day had taken its toll – it had been a long day – and exhaustion had set in. And yet, despite his body’s weariness, Loki’s mind was as alert as it ever was.

Tony was already asleep, having spent the last few hours of the day attempting to build an electrocution device that could mimic Thor’s lightning. There was something about how Tony slept, how he had curled up to one side, that drew Loki’s eyes to the exposed patch of material next to him on the chair.

If it hadn’t been for how he had felt Tony’s arms wrapped around him, felt the rise and fall of his breathing and the warmth of his skin against him, Loki was certain he could have been asleep by now.

How frustrating it was to know for a certainty that it had happened and yet he couldn’t recall any of it in vivid detail. At the time, he’d had other concerns: primarily, dying.

Perhaps he should have paid it more attention, committed it to memory for future use. Maybe if he was about to die again he’d get another chance. Not that he wanted to die again – because he most assuredly did not and being held like that would not be anywhere close enough to compensate for it.

Careful, he’d have to be careful. Tony had already noticed his behaviour was odd, that was no illusion of Loki’s imagination. Any wistful glances or lingering touches and there might be enough evidence for Tony to draw certain conclusions. Certain correct conclusions.

And then there had been how Tony had expressed how he’d been one of the best allies he’d ever had and somehow that was not quite enough. That should have been enough. More than enough. Maybe he even trumped Thor as an ally and that was something. And afterwards, when Tony told him that he liked him – what was that supposed to mean, exactly? That Tony would merely prefer it if he stayed alive rather than stopped existing? That Tony thought he was entertaining? That Tony found him preferable to his previous teammates? That Tony actually enjoyed his company?

Maybe Tony liked Loki similarly to how Loki liked meats in sweet sauces: enjoyable while it lasted but not enough to spare it much thought in the meantime.

No, Loki reminded himself, he was being ridiculous. He was over analysing every word like some sort of fawning adolescent.

Tony had said he’d liked the person Loki had become and maybe that was all there was too it: a statement of fact. The opinion of a Midgardian having such an effect on him was beyond ridiculous but this was no average Midgardian. This was no average person at all.

This was Tony.

Tony who had fallen asleep after another long discussion of their plans. Tony whose silhouette of his face he could make out in the darkness every night. Tony who after nights of restless sleep finally lay there soundly.

And maybe, just maybe, beating Thanos didn't mean he'd have to give Tony up. It had even been Tony's idea that they'd use the portal gun to return and save both of their mothers and–

Oh.
Loki stiffened.

Because they couldn't. Not without an extremely clever deception. Not without having to trick themselves and those who witnessed everything that both of their mothers had died. Not without somehow having to keep their mothers hidden from their past-selves and the rest of those who knew them for years.

And, well... Loki's mother had been in Valhalla. He'd not just seen her – he'd felt her. He'd felt her arms around him, the tickle of her hair against his cheek, her hands against his face. He didn’t see how he could have possibly faked that.

Frigga's chances were looking worse than their own chances against Thanos. At least with Thanos, there was some evidence to suggest that something had changed, that something had averted the deaths of the people of Midgard and Thor. But Frigga... There was nothing to suggest they could have faked Frigga's death, that they could have kept up the pretence of the trick for years rather than just for a few hours, that they could’ve somehow tricked Malekith and his cursed creature into feeling her solidness as they fought her...

It didn't seem to bode particularly well for Tony's mother either.

Maybe the scheme would have been too elaborate to save both their mothers. Maybe if all they wanted to change was the battle that lasted a few hours before they left the planet behind for months then they could have done it, but to factor in the complex weaving of years and years of charades...

Maybe it was out of the question.

Or maybe Loki just needed to think harder. This was what he did, after all. He schemed and he tricked and he was good at it.

Perhaps it would be best not to mention his realisation to Tony unless he brought up the topic of conversation himself. After all, Tony had not mentioned to him the possibility of paradoxes destroying them until he had reached a definitive conclusion, so following suit was not a betrayal. Certainly not.

Surely, if anything, instigating needless worry and doubt would be something he'd be thanked for less.

***

"200 kilovolts," Tony announced, waving the impromptu Tesseract-infused electric blaster in the air. "I figured it's enough to start with. Since we don't want to do any lasting damage."

"Is that the usual charge for lightning?"

"Bit less. Er – do you think you'll notice the difference?"

"I'm not usually in the habit of being struck by lightning," Loki replied dryly. "And that was – or so I believed – the first time I had been on the receiving end of a strike of Thor's lightning. Or Thanos utilising the Power Stone to replicate Thor’s powers, as the case was."

Tony nodded. "Good. That means we can get away with less volts."

Loki came to a stop. Was that Tony going out of his way to make sure he wouldn't be hurt any more than necessary? That was... No, Loki didn’t know what to make of that.
"It still needs to hurt. It needs to be able to be enough to paralyze me for a few seconds." He could still remember it, how the electricity had stormed through him, how it had held him in place, rendering him unable to so much as move.

"Right. Yeah. So – what can bring a god to their knees?"

Loki blinked. Then his mouth lost its sudden dryness. "It'd have to be a significant amount of power. If it's any less than what it was then it could change the entire outcome of the battle."

Tony nodded. "Okay. I don't think you'll like what I'm gonna say next."

Loki let out a sigh. "I have a sinking feeling I already know what it's going to involve."

"Hey." Tony shrugged. "You're probably right."

And that was how Loki found himself standing in the workshop ready to receive a blast of electricity straight to his back.

The anticipation was the worst part. The waiting. Knowing what was coming. Having to turn his back on Tony and stand there with nothing to do but prepare himself for the impact.

Maybe it wouldn’t be quite as bad if only he could see, but the lightning had struck from behind and they’d need to replicate it with precision and reliability.

The second worst part was that after it was over, after Tony had removed his goggles and walked over to examine him, that Loki knew he'd have to endure it all over again. Because it still wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even close to enough.

Tony’s fingers touched his shoulders, turned him around so he could search for evidence of damage.

He was less than a foot away, close enough that Loki would have been able to count his eyelashes if he dared.

“How can that much of a blast only make your hair go a bit static?” Tony had wanted to know, waving his hand a short distance above Loki’s head, the movement causing a tickling sensation to traverse across Loki’s scalp.

But the truth was that the blast had hurt, if only not enough to cause him to cry out in pain or flinch, but Loki saw little point in revealing that.

“So,” Tony continued, retracting his hand and stepping back. “Where’s that sit on the pain scale?”

“Pain scale?”

“Yeah. If you had to pick a number between one and ten. One is being poked and ten is dying.”

“... Four.”

“And where’d the strike from the battle sit?”

Loki gave it a moment of thought. “Seven or eight. I’m not certain.”

“Hmm.” Tony’s mouth formed a hard line. "Maybe we should space out your electric shocks. I know you're a god and all but I don't think that amount of shocks in such a short period of time is good for anyone. And since– Well, since you get the bad end of the deal what with having to
receive all these practice blasts, you might as well get a little bonus. The Tony Stark package." Loki stared in incomprehension. "I'm saying," Tony explained, "that you can do the honour of knocking past-me the hell out. I've retracted my dibs. Unless you want to shoot lightning at past-you, that is. I just guessed it'll be you who has to figure out how much force to use to damage the suit significantly but not me too much so it might make more sense for you to take care of past-me and me to go after past-you."

The prospect of harnessing lightning to blast at his past-self was undeniably tempting. Tempting and yet surreally absurd at the same time.

"Very well," Loki agreed. "Although it would be unwise to stray too far from one another during the battle."

***

The second blast had measured a five and a half on the scale, and the third blast a six and a half. After the third hit, Loki found himself sprawled on the floor before he pushed himself up again.

Tony was already there, having rushed to–

Well, whatever it was that Tony had intended to do, Loki could not say.

Loki was only a little unsteady on his feet, the thud of adrenaline in his ears and his skin and muscles throbbing in the aftermath of the blasts.

Tony’s hands touched the underside of his elbows as if to help him stand despite him already having done the difficult part.

"Not enough," Loki managed to utter.

And there – was that concern in Tony’s eyes? That was… oddly touching.

“Nuh-uh. I think you’ve had enough.”

“IT wasn’t even a seven.”

“I’m calling it, you need a few hours at least to heal or else–” Tony broke off and looked away before righting himself. “Well, if you don’t, our results will be skewed. Battle-you didn’t already come deep fried.”

“But–” Loki hadn’t even desired to protest that much, maybe he just wanted to see what would happen if he pushed, how far Tony would go to–

“Nah. Now it’s my turn.” Tony glanced around them. “We’re going to need a bigger space if you’re gonna start throwing suits around…” Tony’s eyes widened before he hit himself on the head. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before but we don’t… We don’t actually have to stay in this tiny ship anymore. We can go back to the tower, sleep in actual beds. We’re not gonna have to travel through space again until we fetch the Power Stone so why the hell not?”

***

If Loki had registered how large Stark Tower was before, it was nothing compared to now. He could walk from one side of a room to another without almost touching the sides of the walls if he stretched out his arms. There was space for furniture, for decorations, space for objects that were
only there for the sake of entertainment. And the sheer number of rooms, a number so large a lift was required because there were so many floors, was astounding.

It was at this revelation that Loki decided they had definitely been travelling in their ship for too long. He used to be a prince, he was supposed to be more than well acquainted with structures such as these and something as simple as daylight shouldn’t have been anything to marvel at.

The arrival of their ship landing from a yet another portal in the sky probably would cause another public commotion, but inside of the tower it was easy to remain oblivious to it.

Everything was exactly how they had left it; all the furniture, all the belongings untouched, left unmarked and unaltered by the scope of their journey.

“Welcome home, Boss.”

“Hey, Friday.” Tony greeted. Tony turned to Loki. “Priorities: coffee. I need a decent coffee. Then we can get on with whatever else.”

***

Loki had little reason to visit the training room inside the tower before. When he entered, he was greeted with the sight of a line of plastic human-sized dolls he assumed he would be practising on. Not that Loki thought he’d need much practice, but there was only a small margin for error between damaging of one Tony’s suits and breaking them. And there was even less of a small error margin where Tony’s body itself was concerned considering that he needed to be unconscious but with no lasting damage.

Balancing was delicate work.

And so delicate were Midgardians that it would be even less of a good idea to practice what he’d have to do during the battle with Tony inside of one of his suits.

Strictly speaking, it was not in any way necessary for Tony to witness him practising but Loki supposed Tony had little else to do in the meantime.

“I even got you a slab of sidewalk to practice on,” Tony said.

“Well,” Loki replied, “I suppose that is one variable kept under control, at least.”

“Yup. And we’ve got a shitload of dummies you can work with. Friday’ll be able to determine how badly hurt they’d get and apply the same algorithms to the suit. What – do you know how much my suits cost to make? And anyway, each one’s different so it’d be pointless to test the other ones out. Each one’s kind of a one-time limited deal so there’d be no repeats using the same suit after it gets beat up.” Tony paused. “Well, not without me having to repair them every time. Anyway.” He waved a hand. “Smash away. But, you know, preferably without killing too many dummies. That wouldn’t be reassuring. Or if you really have to the urge to go for it, I’d prefer you kill the dummies instead of me when it comes to it. Uh– As I was saying: smash away.”

“I wasn’t exactly waiting for your permission.”

***

The fourth time Loki was hit with the electric blaster he felt nothing. Then the pain came all at once like sudden fire coursing through his veins, rooting him in place so he couldn’t even cry out in agony.
The next thing Loki was aware of was staring up at the ceiling.

It couldn’t have been that long that had passed, only a few seconds.

And then there was a voice, hands that pulled underneath his shoulders and tried to force him to sit up.

Loki didn’t have the strength to lift up his own weight. There was something sturdy he could lean back against, something that was solid and warm.

"Loki?"

Loki thought he should probably respond. He tried to find his voice.

"Loki?"

"Mfft," Loki managed.

"If you tell me it's gotta be any voltage higher than this, I'm gonna have no choice but to assume you're a masochist with a serious electrocution kink."

Oh. That warm thing he was leaning against was Tony.

Of course it was Tony. Who else could it have been? No one else would have dared to suggest such a thing.

He should probably move.

"... Ow."

He didn’t want to move

"Yeah, I figured that would’ve hurt."

Loki squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again, as if hoping it would cause the residues of the shock to vanish.

Tony pulled him up further and Loki was able to cooperate slightly more this time.


Loki’s tongue felt clumsy, as if it did not want to obey. "Def... Definitely enough," he managed.

And then his head cleared – he hadn’t realised his head hadn’t been clear up until he noticed the difference – and afterwards when the worst of the pain was over and there was nothing stopping him from getting up, nothing except–

There was the small matter of Tony.

Tony who was knelt directly behind him. Tony whose arms were hooked underneath his. Tony whose body was pressed right against his back in order to keep him upright.

Maybe… Maybe he could delay moving. Just for a few seconds. A few seconds couldn’t hurt.

It’d give him just a short while longer to fully allow himself to feel it, to commit to memory, to appreciate everything he couldn’t when Tony had hugged him before. The pain was gone and he
had no distractions this time. No excuses.

He could smell Tony’s deodorant again and feel the exact pressure of Tony’s hands through his clothing.

Right. That had… That had probably been a few seconds. He should have moved by now.

He really should have moved by now.

Especially now that Tony had confirmed he’d noticed a change in Loki’s behaviour. To act like this, to bask in whatever this embrace was, would be detrimental to everything he’d worked so hard to hide.

Somehow it was far easier to accept this show of kindness when he didn’t truly need it, to allow himself to be believed weaker than he actually was when it gave him an advantage.

“How much?” Tony asked. His voice was right by Loki’s ear, the warmth of his breath touching his skin.

Loki faltered for the briefest of instances. “Enough.”

Tony retracted his arms. “Good. No more testing.”

Loki’s back was left feeling very cold without Tony there.

Using the floor as leverage, he began to push himself up. Then Tony was in front of him, one hand extended. Loki glanced at it, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of accepting his hand to pull himself up, but before he could make up his mind Tony looked at him as if he remembered who he was, how proud he was, and retracted his offer.

Sometimes Loki thought it was as if everything that defined himself came back to bite him eventually.

***

Tony was jittery that night, far more jittery than usual. He’d been unable to sit still after he’d shown Loki his own version of the battle on Midgard using the same technology he had used for Loki to prove the legitimacy of his own memories of the battle.

The room allowed for pacing far better than any spaces in the ship had and Tony moved as if he intended to take full advantage of it.

"So," Tony announced, "the checklist. In order of everything we need to remain in place: you die, Hela brings you back to life, Odin becomes the Odinsicle, Thor fetches Vision for you, you get a visit from the Norns, then the battle happens... In the meantime, I get a visit from Thor and Vision, then proceed to get knocked the fuck out mid-way through battle. Oh and I guess my past-self still has to ask Steve to return the shield because it turns out – or turned out – I'll need some of that vibranium to make some of the components of SHIT."

"I believe," Loki said, "that covers everything. Still."

"Hey – can't blame me for being thorough. Which is a joke because historically, it's not exactly my thing. But since I'd prefer to carry on existing..."

Loki gave a nod. "That is preferable." And he meant it. For both of their sakes. It wasn't until after
the agreement had left his mouth he realised that his wording could be interpreted to mean he meant just Tony.

Tony's eyes flickered to him for a second and the corners of his lips raised before he looked away again. “And the rest of the rules?”

“Yes,” Loki said dryly, “because we both know how much you compulsively need to stick to rules.”

Tony let out a laugh. “In my defence, it’s only because not being a stickler would mean we don’t exist anymore. I guess it’d kind of be like a big cosmological punishment for breaking the rules”

“Anyway,” Loki continued, “there are three major rules we can’t risk breaking. The first is obvious: the illusion of the battle must be as close to our memories of the battle as possible. This creates something like a layer, if you will, that lies over the top of the original battle. Meaning we can alter past events that would affect the outcome of the battle without it affecting the actions of our past-selves. The second rule is that we must remain undetectable. Our past-selves can’t see us–”

“Bad things happen to wizards who meddle with time.”

“–and Thanos, if he’ll be there, can’t be allowed to see us either.” Loki did not fancy having to face Thanos while he still had the Power Stone.

“Ugh. Schrodinger’s Thanos.”

“Which brings us to the third rule,” Loki continued, “which is that we can’t allow ourselves to see if Thanos is truly there.”

“Major bummer.”

“Inconvenient, yes.”

“He’s probably not really there though, right?”

“Evidence would suggest not. But since we don’t know with absolute certainty if we’ll succeed in killing Thanos, we can’t guarantee he won’t be there.”

“Even though everyone came back to life.”

Loki gave a nod. “For all we know, the battle could be averted because something goes wrong and Thanos manages to detect us and pursues us rather than attacking Midgard. There are an infinite number of other possibilities that could explain why–”

“I still think it’s because we’ll win.”

“Yes, but without a one hundred percent guarantee, it would be reckless to risk it.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t bet in our favour.”

Loki supposed it was nice that at least one of them would, not that he was certain if he would have betted against them either after all the progress they had made.

“And besides,” Loki added, “if we did detect the real Thanos during the battle, then we would inadvertently cause ourselves to not be able to kill him before that moment because doing so would cause another paradox.”
“All these paradoxes are enough to give anyone a headache. Lucky you got me.” Tony stopped pacing and took a seat next to Loki on the settee. “And when we’re done with the battle we’ll be able to cross everything else off on our checklist and go back a further few years to nab the Power Stone. Simple. It’s a plan.”

“Ah,” Loki said. “And there is something else I have forgotten. I’ll have to also disguise the illusion from the general public otherwise I suppose we would have heard word about it while we were staying on Midgard.”

“Probably.” Tony let out a yawn. "Is it weird knowing we'll be time travelling tomorrow? Because I find it weird. Feel a kid all packed up and ready to go on holiday. Except this time I'm actually kind of looking forward to it."

"Looking forward to reliving the battle?"

"Er – not so much that part. I just mean the time travel part. The part where we get to use my SHIT. The bit where we could finally stop having Thanos hanging over our heads."

When had been the last time Loki had not had Thanos hanging over his head? He lurked like a shadow, always present but rarely commented on.

Loki sunk back into the seat; it was infinitely more comfortable than the hard leather of the chairs on the ship.

"I'd like that."

"Yeah." There was an audible smile in Tony's voice. "So would I."

***

Loki was the first one to waken, or so he assumed, given that there were no signs of Tony.

Despite how much more comfortable sleeping on a bed was – an actual bed with a mattress and pillows and quilts – something had… not been quite right.

It had been far too quiet.

Sometimes, when he was used to noise, silence was louder.

His morning routine was disturbed slightly by having to venture to the roof to maintain the rat cage. It was jolting to have five instead of six curious sets of eyes watching him, to not be able to give Jingles a small scratch behind the ears as he went about his usual business. Sometimes, on occasion, she'd enjoy it so much her eyes would boggle in and out of their sockets. Fortunately, the information Friday had supplied had already informed him it was a sign of pleasure rather than some sort of strange ailment. After that, it had become rather endearing.

It was stranger still to think that this would be the last time he'd be doing this, the last time he'd be going about his usual chores before they'd be returning – only returning from the past this time. Assuming they'd return at all. He liked to think they had admirable chances now they had a well thought out plan and all of their research standing behind them.

Tony rose earlier than usual, ambling into the kitchen and requesting Loki could store some of his belongings on his behalf. Loki had agreed and then that was it. They'd done everything they could. They'd eaten, they'd taken care of their hygiene, they'd packed, they even had a small screen each that contained the footage of the battle BARF had gathered from both of their memories.
They'd been meticulous, far more prepared than they would have been if they were merely going on an expedition.

They did not require much.

Tony wore his suit and had managed to make both the portal gun and the reverse-beam contractible enough to fit within its storage.

All Loki needed was himself, the Tesseract, and the visuals from BARF to reconstruct the battle.

"You know," Tony mused, "this suit's seen a lot of stuff. Other planets, other worlds. So I figured it might as well time travel too." He patted it. "It's done good."

"Is there anything else we need to do before leaving?"

"No. Don't think so. All that's left is to actually, you know, do it."

"In that case…” Loki waited for Tony to draw out the portal gun.

And there it was, the structure unfolding and expanding outwards as if it had a life of its own.

The Time Gem was already in place, glowing like a miniature sun.

Loki moved closer to click the Tesseract in place. The device was narrow enough that he had to stand close by in order to do it, close enough for any pressing of his arm against Tony’s to be ruled out as entirely incidental.

There. The Tesseract was in.

Tony looked to Loki and then braced himself as he pulled the trigger.

The portal that shot out of it was large enough for both of them, the edges of it shimmering with electric blue light. Inside of it, there was a view of the other side of the tower, tinted with an orange hue.

Tony took a deep breath. There was nothing foreboding about it this time, nothing to suggest it was anything like the unstoppable rapid working of his lungs when they thought they'd have to die. No, this was excitement, anticipation.

"You ready?" Tony asked.

"I'm ready."

And then together they stepped through the portal.

***

Loki had known retaining the illusions would be taxing; they had to be enough to be a convincing landscape, to hide themselves from view, and to ensure that only both himself and Tony would be the only ones who would see it. At least making the original Thanos – should he even be there – undetectable was no extra effort as he would be concealed to their eyes by the illusion of the battle anyway.

But knowing maintaining the illusions would be demanding and feeling it were not one and the same thing.
They could not afford to be distracted anything that could surprise him and cause the illusion to fall, even if only briefly. It was for that reason Loki had to keep himself distant from his initial shock that it had worked – they were standing on Midgard, the city before them, and Friday had spoken the date of the battle months prior.

They had travelled through to the past.

They'd done it.

He’d have to reflect on the surrealness of stepping through time later; he could not allow it to detract from his performance. The moment they had been able to see through the portal clearly, he’d had to put the illusions in place.

All they had to do was follow the script that BARF – and how Loki despised the inelegance of that name – had provided them.

They’d have everything they’d need to deal with Tony’s past-self, all the interactions and movements and what Tony had seen with his own eyes. Everything they’d need to create an exact duplicate copy.

And that was what they did.

They had not needed to travel far to find Tony’s past-self. He was stood in his laboratory, sending his holographic images whizzing from one side of the room to the other.

The other Tony remained next to Loki, watching himself as if in a trance. Tony opened his mouth as if to say something, then remembered himself. It would not do to be overheard by his past-self all for the sake of making a comment about the strangeness of seeing himself in action – at least, that was what Loki had assumed Tony had been about to comment on.

The news reports on the objects in the sky were the easiest to fake; all it had taken was overlaying a television or two in the background. Thor’s arrival had been simple too, his form familiar enough that Loki barely had to concentrate to create a convincing duplicate. Tony had also played his part in using his suit to smash the window Thor arrived through at the exact moment Thor’s duplicate made his entrance.

Loki wondered whether Thor’s true self was underneath the layer of his illusion, whether the synchrony of what had happened was paired with his conjurations was masking his brother, his real brother.

No.

He couldn’t think about that.

If after this they managed to avert the battle, the true Thor wouldn’t be there. And if they didn’t…

Loki couldn’t let himself think about that possibility.

And after that, after the tedium of following the scripts of different threads of conversation, after following Tony’s past-self from room to room and conjuring each person he interacted with, after making the images of the ships in the sky come closer and closer, the battle began.

Every weapon blasted, every creature and human, every fall of a building and mode of vehicle, they all had to be illusions. The only things left that wouldn’t be duplicates would be themselves. At least that was one thing he didn’t have to concentrate on maintaining.
This was Loki’s most elaborate illusion yet, the complexity of it enough for there to already be a layer of sweat sticking to his skin.

He supposed he owed some of this in part to the Tesseract for how it amplified his own magic.

His own illusions rarely had to be anything close to this scale and magnitude and it was questionable whether he could have been capable of maintaining such a thing for such a long period of time without the Tesseract. Even with the Tesseract, the toll was already enough to make his head ache.

Now they were in the midst of the fighting, it was easier for them to talk without being overheard.

“Three twenty-seven,” Tony said. “Almost time for lights out.”

Loki could not allow himself to notice how close Tony’s voice sounded, how he remained almost as close as they had been when they’d activated the portal gun.

If it hadn’t been for BARF, Loki didn’t know how he could have synchronised the illusions with Tony’s past-self so precisely. He’d have the Chitauri leap out, only to have Tony shoot them down, he’d have them make a grab for him only for him to dodge at the last second, he’d have them fire their weapons only for Tony’s flight to make them miss their target by millimetres.

“And I thought,” Tony said, the real Tony, not the past-version of him, “that I was just a good flyer.”

And then the moments were aligning, the moment between Tony fighting the Chitauri and the moment when Tony would be rendered unconscious.

They watched as the previous version of Tony dodged a blast from behind and turned to attack the source of it, leaving his back exposed to them.

“Three twenty-nine,” Tony read out loud. “Now or never.”

And that was when Loki strode forward, seized the past-version of Tony by the ankle, and lifted.

Using such large amounts of magic had left his limbs weak and instead of slamming Tony down to collide with the pavement, Tony fell almost as much he was smashed against it.

The crunch was vaguely nauseating despite Loki not using anything close to full force and yet it was still almost enough to make him feel guilty.

And that was their cue.

Loki’s own past-self would be arriving any second. They needed to get back to Stark Tower in time for his appearance.

They had to run back; he couldn’t risk adding the extra strain of teleporting on top of everything else.

And just when they’d got to the correct floor of the tower, there was the faintest of blue glows growing brighter and brighter before—

And there he was.

Loki’s past-self.
He crouched, panting, the Tesseract clutched in one hand and Gungnir in the other.

Loki had almost forgotten what the pain of using the Tesseract had been like when he’d first been reunited with it.

How quickly his past-self moved, how rapidly he assessed the room in search of Tony, and the changes to his expression when he realised what the sight of the Chitauri meant were entirely unmasked during the time he thought he was alone.

And then Loki watched himself tear off and cast a veil of invisibility over himself before realising they’d have to follow.

Loki’s own recollection of events revealed how many times he’d come so close to contacting something, to almost touching one of the soldiers or the Chitauri or being hit with a weapon or blast of something.

Two times, his foot had only just avoided touching a body on the ground, and there was another time in which he had been so so close to being hit because of a falling story of a building.

It was only now that Loki wondered whether it was all as incidental at it had once seemed.

Tony faltered when he was able to identify a number of bodies on the ground; the hole in Vision’s forehead, the fan of the spider’s hair, the dropped red white and blue shield.

“Illusion,” Loki managed to get out despite having to much so concentration already occupied.

“This is an illusion, Tony.”

Tony was able to continue after that reminder, though he did not seem fit to speak.

Then they turned a corner and there was Thanos. Thanos with an illusion masking the real Thanos or only an image, it made no difference.

Those cold, cold eyes…

It became difficult to breathe. Loki could not discern whether it was because of the effort of the spell or whether it was because of what he knew was about to happen next, because any second now–

And there he was. His brother. Soaring through the skies, thunder crackling above him, Mjolnir raised in one fist.

Loki’s stomach curdled.

He tried to distance himself watching by watching himself as he discovered Tony lying on the ground inside his shell of armour, how his fingers hovered over the face-plate until he was certain Tony was still alive, how he had wrapped Tony’s fist around one of the handles of the Tesseract when–

This was their cue. Tony’s cue. Tony readied the device and fired.

Loki watched himself fall to the floor, the shock of the electricity flowing through him.

It was a long few seconds before he could move, having to stay on the ground and crawl and then–

Loki closed his eyes, unable to stand watching it again, he couldn’t stop it happening again, he’d have to hear it all over again.
Those screams. Those gasps and the dreadful dreadful wheezing noise of Thor’s throat.

He thought he’d heard it for the last time in his nightmares.

Then there was silence.

The sound of someone getting up, the scrape of metal as Loki’s past-self lifted Gungnir.

“Loki.” It was Thanos. Loki had intended to keep his eyes closed but the sound of his voice made them snap wide open. “I see you have finally brought me the Tesseract.”

Distance. He needed distance. He was too wrapped up in this, too caught up for it not to feel real, too caught up to remember they were safe, that even if Thanos was truly there, he wouldn’t be able to detect them as they stood watching themselves.

Loki didn’t know how much longer he could keep maintaining this. All it would take would be one minor slip, one minor slip and then both himself and Tony wouldn’t so much as exist anymore.

No.

Their lives depended on this.

He had to.

He had to.

“And you have arrived just in time to receive your crown,” Thanos continued. “No one can say that I do not honour my bargains. Come forward then, Asgardian, Frost Giant, I do not care what you call yourself. Hand over Tesseract to its rightful master in return for your long-awaited coronation.”

The pressure inside of Loki’s skull was almost enough to make him–

Something touched his elbow.

Through blurred vision, he watched himself stand, something about the set of his jaw connoting determination.

To an outsider, it almost appeared as if he’d had a plan.

“Have no fear. I do not punish those who have been loyal to me. Now… Hand it–”

And there was the Hulk, his roar enough to diminish Thanos’s voice.

Their past-selves disappeared in a flash of blue.

Loki tried to take a step but with his vision spinning as much as it was, it was more of a lurch.

He could barely stay upright he was so–

The something that was touching his arm grabbed it instead.

“Hey. Let’s get out here.”

Tony’s voice.

Loki could not disagree, had no reason to disagree, not when he knew it was imperative they had to leave.
The ground kept looking as if it was tilting towards him, tilting and spinning, tilting and spinning...

Just one last bit of energy. One last push to open another portal. That would be all.

He could do it. He had to do it.

“Loki.” Tony’s voice was more urgent. “We need to get out here – you need to get out of here.”

Loki reached for the Tesseract. His limbs were heavy, sluggish. His fingers fumbled for it so badly Tony had to help him click it in place.

He didn’t want to dwell on how much of his weight Tony was taking. Not again.

Loki closed his eyes.

If he could just shut out all of the noise and all of the distractions, maybe…

It wasn’t just his forehead that was wet anymore; sweat trickled down his face in beads and there was this slightly strangled gasping–

Oh. It was him.

“Loki, can you–”

Loki managed to open his eyes, swaying as he stood. His eyelids were the heaviest thing about him – how did he normally manage to keep them open?

The world wasn’t just spinning anymore, it was filled with black dots growing in size and number.

No. He had to– They had to–

They needed to leave, to leave before they further affected the timeline.

Loki slammed his hand down on the Tesseract and the last thing he felt was a hand pulling him forwards.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

So this got out of hand. Like an extra 4000 words out of hand. There. That's my reason for this chapter being slightly later than usual.

Mouth dry.

Pangs inside his skull.

Sleep.

Just sleep.

***

The pain was not the sharp kind. The pain was more akin to something scraping from the inside outwards, as if slowly grating at the lining of his skin and organs.

It was enough to disturb his sleep but not enough to keep from falling back under.

Nothing hurt; everything ached.

Nothing pulled him back into sleep – this time, it was a decision of his accord.

***

The next sight that greeted him was one of a ceiling.

That should have meant something to him. Something about paying such attention to a ceiling was odd – no, should have been odd – but his mind was too murky to pinpoint precise the reason why.

The confusion stirred him into further wakefulness and he tried to sit up, the soreness in his muscles demonstrating just how fatigued they had become.

He must have been sleeping for a while, he realised.

That wasn't like him.

Neither was this – this disorientation, this lack of clarity.

"Hello, Loki," a voice said.

There was no one in the room.

"Shall I fetch my boss?"

Her boss?

Oh.
Yes.

Tony. Tony was Friday's boss.

Tony. The portal. They'd gone through, hadn't they? They must have done. He probably wouldn't have been lying there if they hadn't managed to.

Lying there for who knew how many hours. He would rather not be witnessed confined to a bedchamber, unable to do anything but rest.

Where exactly was the bed?

Ah. His room. The room that Tony had allocated for him inside the tower.

He must have gotten there somehow; the last thing he remembered he'd been too weak to hold his own weight so he suspected Tony must have been the reason why he was there.

"I'll tell Tony you're awake," Friday decided.

Belatedly, he realised he had failed to give her an answer.

He sat up straighter, ridding his top half of the bedsheets. Tony had slept by his side for weeks on end so it wasn't as if he hadn't witnessed him asleep before. Unconscious due to other reasons, however, felt like a slightly different matter.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty," Tony greeted as he entered the doorway.

Loki wondered whether that was supposed to be a compliment. The words themselves would have suggested so, but Tony had a way of assigning people nicknames that only made sense to Midgardians.

"Where– No – when are we?"

"Back to present day. Good old 2018."

Loki blinked. They'd managed it. Managed to mask reality itself, produce the perfect imitation of it. They had even possibly been in close proximity of Thanos himself and had somehow gotten away unscathed, in spite of everything.

He must really have been in a state. He could recall it now, how he'd fallen into the blackness, how much he'd overexerted himself with the sheer amount of magic and power and focus and–

"So," Tony interrupted his thoughts. "How you feeling?"

Loki searched for an adequate descriptor. "... Alive." That might not have quite covered the combination of both the pleasant surprise and the lingering soreness. "Which is more than I expected, given that the last I can recall is touching the Tesseract and nothing since."

Tony nodded. His hands were behind his back and he remained close to the door, leaning on the frame.

"Yeah, I think opening the portal was the final straw. I mean, you must've been heading that way anyway but that really... pushed it. I guess." Tony scratched his beard, his eyes settling on him again. "But we managed to open a portal back. Somehow. You’ve probably already figured that out."
Loki confirmed it with a nod.

"I uh--" Tony pressed his lips together. "I didn't really know what to do with you. After, I mean. I pulled us through and you just kind of..." Tony trailed off, walking closer. "So I brought you here. Figured hospitals would be a no-go zone. You seemed fine. Well, not fine. Obviously. But you weren't getting any worse. I just thought -- well, hoped -- it'd be a thing you could just sleep off. And I would've brought in a decent doctor to take a look you but hey -- I haven't seen my favourite most discrete doctor in years. And no offence, but we'd really need a discrete doctor. Even if they didn't recognise you, you're still, you know, alien." Tony strode forward so he was stationed next to the window. "I was thinking about attaching you to a drip but what do I know about your biology? Next to nothing. I can't just assume what works on humans would work on you. I could've accidently killed you." Tony caught the look Loki shot him. "Okay, probably not actually killed you. But I could've done something a whole load of not great. So I thought the best option would be to just... leave you to it. You're strong. You heal fast." Loki wasn’t certain whether he should have been flattered or not. "And I had Friday watching over in case you took a turn for the worse. And I--" Tony cut himself off. "I should probably ask you some questions instead of just hearing myself talk. Uh -- is there anything you need? Food? A drink? Some obscure magic ingredient to get you back on your feet?"

Loki wet his lips and felt a crack underneath his tongue. "Water."

"Water," Tony said flatly. "How the hell do you expect me to find something that obscure? Kidding. One water," Tony repeated, his eyes flicking from Loki's face, "coming right up."

***

Tony pressed the glass into his hand and Loki kept his face impassive as their fingertips came into brief contact. Not that their fingertips meeting in such a manner would have caused a significant change in his expression, but he didn’t want Tony reading into anything that would have been purely incidental.

"Thank you," Loki managed before taking a sip. Water had never tasted so sweet. The throbbing behind his eyes wasn't as bad as it had once been but it had yet to completely cease.

Tony eyed the edge of his mattress as if contemplating sitting on it. Loki might have objected due to how it only added to how much it would make it seem as if he was in some sort of infirmary, but he supposed there would be certain advantages.

Apparently that hadn't changed since his recent misfortune.

"By all means," Loki offered.

Tony paused, looked as if he was about to voice doubts about Loki’s decision, then shrugged and sat, the mattress dipping where his weight was.

How frustrating it was that of all times, Tony had chosen this moment to be cautionary, to give him a wide berth. He probably thought Loki might have been feeling fragile.

Loki scowled and took another sip.

Tony cleared his throat. "About the-- About the battle. That was... rough."

Even if Loki’s attention wasn't occupied with rehydrating, he wouldn't have bothered to dispute the statement.
"I suppose it mustn't have been pleasant to see, even if they're illusions, the bodies of your teammates—"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Yes, I meant them. But not just them."

Thanos? Thor? Well, technically Thor was one of Tony's previous teammates so he wasn't entirely certain what Tony was referring to.

"I just--" Tony broke off, toying with a loose thread on his trousers. "I never saw the whole thing. I guessed it'd be pretty bad but I didn't know how bad."

**How bad.**

When they had first travelled to Jotunheim, Tony had known most of his teammates were dead or dying and he had known it was because of Thanos, so he must have been aware of the circumstances of what had happened. If not in any great detail, he still must have had a very good idea.

Unless… Unless he meant he didn’t know how bad it had been for Loki, how he’d had to watch his brother die and how Thanos had treated him as if he’d been intent on fulfilling the terms of their bargain by bringing him the Tesseract.

"Is there something you're trying to get at?"

Tony drew in a breath. "It's just... I think I finally get it now."

Tony knew next to nothing of Loki's time with Thanos, of the true extent of what Thanos was capable of outside the abilities that came with the Power Stone, how deranged and unstoppable he was.

“Now you understand why I wasn’t looking forward to reliving the battle, you mean.”

“Yeah.” Tony shuffled into a more comfortable position. “That.”

Loki’s thoughts were still of Jotunheim – the memories might have faded but they were still ingrained in his mind. Even when Tony's teammates had rejected him, he still had demanded to be taken back to Midgard despite it being a death wish. His desire to not be left alone with his guilt had outweighed his own self-preservation. Loki would have left those who deserted him to die. He wouldn't have–

The futility of his misplaced affection had never been so apparent up until then. That was why Tony Stark was a hero and he was most assuredly not. It was universal across all of the Midgardian stories Tony had told him: the heroes of the story were granted a happy ending and happy endings did not involve being paired with a morally sub-par enemy.

Tony’s eyes met his. "Do you need painkillers or something?"

Loki sat up straighter, shaking his head. “I may not be many things,” he said, the intensity of the words startling even him, “but I swear to you that I will do every single thing in my power to destroy Thanos.”

Tony patted the sheet above his shins.

It was a new experience to find himself resenting bedsheets for not being thinner.
“With you all the way on that one.” There was a pause. “And you don’t need to convince me,” Tony added matter of factly. His hand had not moved from the section of the quilt he had patted. “I already thought we had a fighting chance, remember?”

***

It was only after eating when Loki began to feel much more like his usual self, his stomach no longer sustaining itself on next to nothing.

It wasn't as if he couldn't have risen from his bed; he was certain – more than certain, in fact – that he could have done so with only the slightest amount of dizziness. But since Tony had decided to join him in eating a meal in his room, he'd found himself going off the idea of moving to a more conventional location.

They'd adjusted the pillows so that they could sit on the longest side of the bed with their backs against the wall and their bowls balanced on their laps. The mattress moved ever so slightly whenever one of them raised a fork to their mouths and it was not rare for their elbows to brush as they ate.

"What do you think?" Tony asked, gesticulating with his fork at the pasta.

"Not bad." That was not entirely true. The salmon in with the sauce was, in fact, very good. "Better than not bad," Loki amended.

"Yeah, I can tell. You're actually finishing your bowl."

"I don't criticise your eating habits," Loki retorted but there was no bite to it.

"You mean apart from making comments about my 'dismal' cooking and the resulting amount of takeouts?"

"It has been a long time since I've complained about that. You see, after our travels across the universe, I've since fully grasped the true extent of your culinary prowess. Which is to say that it is not prowess in even the vaguest sense of the word."

Tony nudged Loki’s leg and his bowl came dangerously close to spilling. "You’re not much better."

"I beg to differ."

Tony rolled his eyes, though the corners of his lips were raised as he did so. "I see you're feeling back to your usual self, then."

"It was nothing more than a temporary setback."

"Uh-huh."

"A minor price to pay in return for our– my continued existence.”

Crinkles appeared around Tony’s eyes. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that.”

“It just so happens that–”

“Yeah yeah, you need me so we can finish this thing, I’ve heard it all before.” The smugness in Tony’s smile was far too much. He poked Loki in the arm. “You know what I think? I think you enjoy our cosy little hangouts.” That was slightly too close to the truth for comfort. “Mr Sentiment-
Allergies has a heart after all.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Is that a complaint or just an observation?”

“In your case, that would be both.”

“I might be insufferable but you still let me taser you.”

“To avoid any paradoxes, yes,” Loki said before Tony could get any ideas about the experimentation phase that came with the electric device he had made beforehand.

“Speaking of paradoxes – what’s next on the checklist?”

One that Loki was not looking to, although it was still preferable to the battle. “Hela.”

"Hela..." Tony repeated. "Being the Goddess of Death and all, she doesn't sound like a fun person to be around." Tony lowered his fork. "Speaking of being around her, how exactly--"

"I have an idea," Loki said. Tony leant closer, the movement so slight he mustn’t have been aware of it. "It involves--"

There was a loud crash outside, too loud for it to be caused by any of the usual goings on of Midgard.

The crash was accompanied by a bright flash of light.

One of the bowls fell to the floor as Tony rushed to the window.

The light had still not faded.

“The hell?”

Loki joined him, to which his immediate thought was: Oh no.

He recognised that light, the pattern in the ground.

The Bifrost.

Of course.

How could he have been so stupid?

He should have known – no – he did know. That was the worst part. He'd been so wrapped up in the possibility of finally being able to leave that forsaken ship that he'd forgotten the other reason they'd got inside of it in the first place: to avoid Odin.

Odin would have reclaimed the throne by now. And now that Loki had been idle on Midgard for… How many days had it been?

Actually, Loki was surprised it had taken this long for Heimdall to find him when he'd made no effort to hide himself.

Odin wouldn't have taken to being stranded on Niflheim lightly and Loki could only guess how many Asgardians he would have seen fit to send after him.
"Tony." Loki had already backed away from the window. "We must leave."

"What--"

"The Allfather," was all Loki had time to utter as an explanation before he grabbed Tony’s forearm and teleported them on to the ship that sat on top of the tower.

They had flown through the portal before he could see who Odin had sent to retrieve him, the figures looking barely distinguishable from Midgardians from that high a vantage point. Of course Odin had not seen fit to bother retrieving him himself. Loki did not know why seeing that confirmation bothered him in the slightest.

Then both himself and Tony were back where they had left off, drifting away from Knowhere.

"You know," Tony muttered, "a guy could use a little warning."

"We didn't have time. Don't you see? At best, their intentions would have been to reimprison me."

"Who is they?"

"The Asgardians. Odin– Odin would have sent them after me."

Tony snorted. "Good luck catching you. Gives you a bit of an edge when you can teleport at a moment's notice."

"While I may be able to teleport..." The implied but you are not was implicit.

"Just when I was starting to get used to having legroom."

"And having actual sunlight," Loki added.

"And that. Anything else you want to add to make us feel worse?"

"You started this."

"Um. Who's idea was it to go back to Earth again?"

"Yours."

"Huh. Okay, but who didn't mention something that might've been a tiny bit relevant?"

"Technically speaking," Loki said, "I have mentioned it before, I just... temporarily forgot." Forgot that he would no longer be able to walk the Nine Realms without being sought after, without someone somewhere wanting to bring him to justice, to make him pay for his crimes. Forgot that he was no longer welcome in the pocket of the universe he had once called his home. Forgot that he, above all else, did not have a home, never had a home, nothing more than an illusion of one.

Tony let out a chuckle.

Loki could not see the source of the amusement, except it did not appear that Tony was explicitly laughing at him.

Tony's laughter grew louder.

"Care to fill me in on the mystery?"
"It's just," Tony managed between breaths, "we manage to plan every single tiny thing for time travel and then we completely forget about what happens when we get back to the future. Pun 100% intentional, by the way.

"I suppose that in comparison to Thanos, even the Allfather becomes insignificant."

Tony's laughter grew higher in pitch. "What if we did everything right for the write-over and then your old man jai__led you?"

"That would have been nothing short of a spectacular catastrophe," Loki stated. Were those tears of laughter in Tony's eyes? Loki had to double check; it wasn't a reaction he had anticipated or believed to be an ordinate response. "Though I'm glad to see the thought of me being captured is so amusing to you."

"That's– That's not it. It's just… Why's this kind of thing so typical for us?"

Inexplicably, Loki found the corners of his own mouth twitching.

***

Their brief taste of freedom might have only made the sensation of being trapped inside of a small cage more intense. Before, they had adjusted to there barely being any space to move and how cramped all the utilities had to be, whereas now there was a direct comparison to a far more luxurious option fresh in their minds.

The only advantage to it was that they were back to sleeping in the cabin, and now those conversations, the ones very late at night when neither of them were fully awake or asleep, were a part of the routine again.

Loki had missed them.

It hadn't been for very long that he'd been capable of actively missing them, but that was beside the point.

"Anyway," Tony said after they'd been rummaging through their belongings to determine which of them were already on board the ship, "before we had to make a speedy getaway you were saying something about having an idea."

"Ah, yes. About how to reach Hela."

"I'm all ears."

"Well," Loki said, "I may not know how to access Helheim or where exactly it is, but there is only one other place I know with absolute certainty that Hela can reach."

"Valhalla," Tony breathed.

"Very good."

"I'm capable of listening to the sound of a voice that isn't mine." Tony inclined his head. "Not often. But, you know, on occasion."

"If my memory serves, Hela arrived on foot, which would suggest that either she is able to materialise around certain areas where the dead are or that she simply was able to walk there. I suspect she may have difficulty breaking into the hall of Valhalla itself as she hasn't been granted
it, but she still was able to reach its entrance."

"And you can teleport to wherever you've been before."

"That was my line of thought exactly."

"Huh. That's... actually a lot simpler than I thought it was going to be."

"That's the beauty of it."

"So," Tony said, "when are we going?"

Loki faltered. "That's... something I wanted to discuss, actually. I am the only one of the two of us who has actually died and I am also the only one of the two of us we know whose form Valhalla can accept. Or could accept." Which was... strange. Considering that he had more evidence that Valhalla accepted more Jotuns than it did humans now.

"You wanna solo it, is that it?"

“I fail to see the purpose of us both going. It is only me that Hela has an interest in. Well, that and I don’t know what would happen to you if you attempted to walk amongst the dead without having died yourself.”

“Technically, you don't know what'll happen to you if you try to appear there while not being dead.”

“At least the odds are more in my favour than yours.” Which, he supposed, made a nice change if nothing else. “And this may require somewhat delicate negotiation.” Especially if his suspicions were correct and it was due to himself that Hela was able to find him so promptly after he’d died.

“Are you trying to tell me I’m too crass for that?”

“Your words, not mine.” Loki did not bother masking his amusement. “Though yes, in effect.”

“Fine.”

Loki blinked in surprise. “Fine?”

“I guess it’s the best option we have. I mean, I don’t like it but hey – I don’t have to like it.”

“I don’t particularly like the idea of it either.” Walking into Hela’s domain, being at her mercy. Having to ensure Hela’s impression of him was positive enough for her to bother restoring his life when Kurse stabbed him. And there was the small matter of her being his adoptive sister.

Loki let out a sigh. “Family was always… complicated.”

Tony stared at him. “Uh – family? You never mentioned having the Queen of the Dead as family. What is it? You only see each other at weddings and funerals or something? Coming to think of it, maybe just funerals. That sounds like more her thing.”

“In my defence, I didn’t know myself until not so long ago.”

“Oh.” Tony fidgeted with his hands before laying them flat on his knees. “Guess it figures. Royalty in her title and all that.”

“Hm.”
“Does Thor know?”

“No.”

“Guess it must be a bit awkward to bring up. Hey – guess what? We’ve got a surprise sibling. Who
happens to be the Queen of Hell. Do all Asgardian royalty get prizes like that when they die?
Because you’ve gotta run out of allocated land to give at some point, right? Or maybe this is why
you space-Vikings have so many different death options.”

“It’s not the done convention.” Loki wasn’t even certain how Hela had died.

“How’d you find out that juicy piece of gossip anyway?”

“I wasn’t the only secret of Odin’s. He had—’ Loki started again. “I was searching for evidence of
where Odin sent the Reality Stone, if you remember. I happened to stumble across other evidence.”

“Other Hela-shaped evidence.”

“Yes.”

“When you thinking of holding that heart-warming family reunion?”

“We’ll need to travel back again to a time before I died. Given all the various complications that
come with time travel, I think it would be advantageous to try to open as few portals through time
as possible.”

“I’m down with that.”

“And as we’ll be travelling to intercept the Power Stone being stolen from Knowhere anyway…”

“Might as well kill two birds with one stone, right?”

“Precisely. Four and a bit years should do it.”

***

After even Loki had agreed that another night of rest was unlikely to hurt, they set off.

Tony needed to accompany him, given that if he didn’t then Loki could well end up being stranded
back in time, which he failed to see the appeal of. And given that they had to separate so Loki
could attempt to travel to Valhalla – assuming that he even could get there while not being dead –
it became necessary for Tony to wait for his return sat onboard their ship.

Having little difficulty opening a portal through time large enough for the ship to be able to fly
through had been a surprise, but one that was not unpleasant.

“Alright,” Tony said once they had flown through. “Got your sandwiches? Toothbrush? Slippers?”

Loki shot him a glare but was certain they both could tell it was half-hearted. “I have everything I
need.”

“Even your favourite plushy?”

“You know full well what I mean.”

Tony dropped the act. “Yeah.” He broke eye contact, biting his lip before looking to Loki again.
“Come back, yeah?”

Something warm stirred in Loki’s stomach, the sensation not entirely unpleasant.

“I fully intend to.”

Then Loki disappeared.

***

The grass was just as bright as it had been when he’d died, the sky just as clear. Both of the forests to either side were just as alive as he remembered, the leaves green and the clusters of trees thick.

The cobbled road to Valhalla stretched ahead of him, but that was not his destination. There would be nothing for him there this time, not even Frigga.

Because Frigga was yet to be killed, Frigga was yet to be granted an eternity in Valhalla. And how bittersweet that was, to know that Frigga was still breathing, blissfully ignorant of what lay ahead of her.

There was even a chance, a faint chance, that Frigga might have been talking to him in his cell at the same moment he stood thinking of her. Frigga had been the only one to have so much as attempted to speak to him and he had loved her and resented her for it in equal measures.

And now he came to think of it, he was not certain if he even could have walked inside of Valhalla even if he’d wanted to. Technically speaking, he had already been granted it, although it complicated matters that he was still alive.

Loki turned away from the halls of Valhalla.

There was something about this place that made his heartbeat feel wrong, as if was beating too loudly and attracting too much attention.

He had two paths to choose from, each one leading into a forest on either side of where he stood.

Movement caught his eye. A bird had taken flight in the sky, although exactly where that bird had originated from Loki could not say.

Loki made a move to the right, towards what sounded like a river. A raven sat high up on a tree branch, watching him as he passed.

It did not take long for Loki to locate the source of the noise. The current of the river was pleasant and it caused the water to bubble over the rocks that poked above the surface. Loki followed the river downstream where it began to build more momentum. Between the branches of the trees, he could make out plains of grass and wildflowers wondered whether that was the boundary that crossed to the fields of Folkvangr.

The more he walked, the more convinced he became that his breathing, his heartbeat, his own life force, was very foreign here, something that made him a direct contrast to what should have belonged.

He glanced over his shoulder. Nothing. There was no one there, nothing except for trees and a couple of birds circling behind him.

And then he came to the edge.
He'd been paying so much attention to the sky that he had neglected to pay as much attention as he should have done to the ground. Because where the river met air, there was a sudden abrupt edge with nothing past it, not land, not air, not light or darkness.

He took a step backwards.

The waterfall would have reminded him of the ones he was familiar with that emptied out over the edges of Asgard, only with this one there was not even the expanse of stars ahead of him, just… nothing. Not even colour, not even smell. He’d never seen nothing before, not in its true sense. He’d never been able to imagine it, somewhere without space, somewhere without either the absence or the presence of light.

One of the ravens cawed, the harshness of the sound and the pitch of it startling him from his thoughts.

There was something else that had come to his attention about the waterfall: it wasn’t a waterfall. By all logic, it should have been a waterfall; there was a river flowing off the edge of a plane. And yet the water did not fall. Instead of the water gushing over the edge and raining into nothingness, it simply seemed to vanish. Except that, if Loki strained his hearing hard enough, it sounded as if the river was still flowing.

There was another caw, closer this time.

Loki spared a glance behind him and saw that the pair of birds behind him had doubled in number.

Cautiously, ever so cautiously, Loki peered over the edge.

The edge had another side.

The stream continued to flow on the opposite side, as if it was a reflection of the land above it. But the sight was wrong, the ground being where the sky should have been and the water somehow still flowing despite it being where the sky should have been.

There was a sharp peck on his leg, sharp enough to draw blood. He could feel it running it down his ankle. He lashed out with his leg and the flapping of wings told him the raven had taken flight.

Loki righted himself.

Then he saw that the quadruple had grown. There were more ravens – not just more, but many many more, their unblinking eyes cold and black as they perched on the grass.

He was struck with the suspicion that perhaps his earlier worry of being too alive for this realm was not unfounded.

Several members of the group hopped forward.

Were they advancing on him? No. That would be ridiculous. That would be paranoia.

And yet they still came closer and closer.

Loki brought out his knives; it wasn’t as if there was anyone to witness him being threatened by a flock of undead birds.

Then another pecked his thigh and he slashed at it and then one of them stuck its beak into his calf and then–
Then they all came at him, losing him in a torrent of wings.

Loki had closed his eyes, unable to keep them open any longer and was having to blindly defend himself when something seized both of his arms, something sharp and strong enough that it was no effort, and lifted him off the ground.

His eyes opened of their own accord.

The ravens had gone – no, that was not right. The ravens had morphed.

Because those things digging into his shoulders, he saw, were talons. And above him, sharing his weight, were two creatures as tall as he was, their dark feathered wings beating the air.

And then he was no longer being dragged upwards, he was being taken somewhere, somewhere over the edge of where the waterfall should have been and all of a sudden there was a point when the world changed angles and the ground had righted itself so that it was no longer where the sky should have been.

It was impossible to tell whether the air was stiller and colder here, not while he was still being carried through the air.

It was as if the colour had been drained out of the underside of the realm, the hues of everything – the sky, the trees, even the soil – pale and desaturated.

Loki tried to move his arms but the claws did not relent. His knives were still in his fists but he could not use them, not while he was being held on to like that. Which, regrettably, meant that using the Tesseract was out of the question. Not while he couldn’t hold on to it properly, not while there was a risk of the creatures making it fall from the sky and it being lost to him.

No. He would see where they were taking him, wait until they were least suspecting it and either teleport away or fight if needs must.

Then he saw it: the castle. Its spires twisted in long thin spines and the stone so pale it almost gave the illusion of it reflecting the landscape surrounding it.

It was only after taking in that sight that he began to have an inkling where he was being taken. It was unfortunate that the creatures had not deigned to ask him first before carrying him to meet Hela, but Loki supposed tone squawk could not be more eloquent than another.

***

Loki was dropped in the throne room.

The floor, he found, was just as solid as it had looked.

The walls were bare, with nothing to cover the naked stone. Hela’s figure provided a stark contrast to the interior as she remained seated on her throne, watching impassively as Loki brought himself back up to his feet.

“Huginn,” Hela greeted one of the ravens, “Muninn,” she greeted the other, “I see you have made yourselves useful.”

The ravens bowed so low that their beaks almost scraped against the floor.

“Yes, yes, you can leave now.” Hela turned to Loki. “Hm.” She cocked her head to one side "Is the
imitation supposed to flatter me?” Loki opened his mouth but she continued before he could reply. “I would have thought the Allfather wouldn’t have allowed you to dress in such colours.” She looked pointedly at his clothing. “But then again, I suppose I wouldn’t have thought he’d allow any kind of meeting between us at all.” Her eyes glittered, though with darkness or irony Loki could not say. “Has he sent you to punish me further? To rub it in as much as possible? To show me how better behaved he considers my other siblings.”

Loki took a step forward. It was a measured one, a cautious one. “The Allfather does not know I am here.”

Her eyebrows raised. She let out a startled laugh. “Then why are you here? What could have possibly taken you so long to reunite with your dearly beloved sister who you were more than happy to ignore all while I remained imprisoned for thousands of years?”

Loki swallowed. “I didn’t know you existed.”

Hela sneered, her lip curling. She examined her nails. “How convenient.”

“The Allfather has proven himself very adept at hiding everything he considers to be an inconvenience.”

Hela stilled. Loki considered it to be a success that her anger hadn’t visibly grown.

“That does sound like him,” she admitted.

“Speaking as one of those inconveniences,” Loki said, gesturing to himself.

Hela glanced away from her nails and scrutinised him instead. “I see that Odin has not seen fit to banish you to another plane of existence.”

"That does not mean I am in his good graces. He wants me locked in a cell.”

Her eyebrows rose higher. “Oh? And how exactly do you stand against the mighty Odin?”

“I left him frozen on Niflheim.” There was no need to mention how Odin had since been retrieved. No need to mention how Odin had sent Asgardians after him, presumably the instant Heimdall had spotted him.

Hela unleashed a laugh of delight. “You are full of surprises.” And then she added, almost conversationally, “You know, it hasn’t been up until this moment when I thought I could actually enjoy a visit.” Then her gaze hardened, her voice turning to steel. “Which brings us to why you are visiting in the first place. I assume you want something.” She waited for a response but Loki was caught off-guard by the unanticipated change in her demeanour. “Do you honestly expect me to believe you came all this way, risked walking as a living soul in my domain, simply pay me the courtesy of a visit? To a sister you never met? A sister who has been out of the picture for longer than you have been alive?” She shook her head. “No. Try to convince me of that lie and I will consider that a worse insult than you intruding upon my realm.”

Loki lowered his head, a calculated movement. "It was not my intention to mock."

"Wasn't it?” Hela crossed one leg over the over. "Enlighten me, then. What exactly was your intention?"

Loki had hoped to be less outright with it. "I have a proposition for you."
Her grin held no joy, merely disbelief. “I’ll give you this: you’re not boring, brother.”

Brother. How strange it was to hear it from her lips, almost as if he hadn’t quite believed the evidence until she’d said the word. Adoptive sister indeed.

She leant backwards. “Go on then – see if you can impress me. If you manage, it’ll be a marvellous first impression. If not… Well, I’m sure you’ll be able to use your imagination.”

Loki chose his next sentence very carefully. “We have met before.”

“I think I would have remembered. Do you have any idea how little there is to entertain myself here? How Odin decided to punish me for the crimes he was equally as much as a part of? And how after all that, Odin managed to convince the entirety of the Nine Realms that he was a good king, a fair king, in order to win a new woman to his side, to start a new family, fresh, as if I had never existed.”

“I believe Odin used the Mind Stone to erase any trace of–”

Hela waved a hand, cutting him off without having to utter a word. “Yes. I managed to figure that out for myself. It’s almost as if you believe I’m not able to communicate with the souls I’m left with.” She folded her fingers together. “I assure you, I have not been idle in my exile.”

Loki met her gaze; not challenging it, just meeting it. “Neither have I.”

That seemed to placate her, if only to the extent that it kept her still. “Somehow,” she said, “the terms of my exile seem to outweigh the terms of yours.”

He hesitated, uncertain as to what exactly she knew of his exile. One false move…

“That may be so,” Loki allowed. It would be foolish to claim otherwise, given how she existed in an entirely different dimension rather than merely unable to travel within the Nine Realms without being harassed.

“And yet,” Hela said, her voice dropping by multiple degrees, “your crimes are no worse than my own. My subjects informed me of your attack on Jotunheim, of your attack on Midgard, of how you lured your father to Asgard and slaughtered him before Odin’s sleeping body.” She took a step forward. “Even I did not sink so low as patricide.” Her eyes glittered – this time, Loki was certain it was with glee. Then the glee was replaced with something more viscous. “And yet, what is the punishment you receive? Ah yes, spending the rest of your days in a cell with everything you could ask for to make yourself comfortable.”

Loki opened his mouth then closed it again.

So Hela hadn’t died? Was that what she had just implied? That her residency in Helheim was her punishment, rather than a position she earned herself? And if that was a punishment, it was no stretch of the imagination to deduce who would have given her that sentence.

He could the echo of his own rage, of the injustice he faced when he compared the weight of his crimes against Thor’s and their respective punishments.

Her echo might have been louder than his but it did not diminish it.

“Perhaps I presumed unwisely.” There. It was the best compromise he could make between what he could bring himself to admit and doing what he needed to do to guarantee her cooperation.
“There is no perhaps about it.”

“I… I was not aware that your position here was a punishment.”

"You're letting yourself down. Here I thought you had an excellent start and yet you seem so..." She flicked her fingers, the motion dismissive. "Misinformed." She smiled in a manner that was far too condescending for Loki's liking. "Don’t worry, little brother.” Her mouth had curled around the last word. “The Allfather is very good at hiding the truth, isn't he? Although, I'd heard lying was in your forte too. The irony of it must hurt.”

Not so long ago, that would have been enough to make him forget coherent reason.

“It’s an unpleasant truth,” Loki managed to admit, the neutral tone only sounding slightly forced to his ears.

“Look at that,” she taunted, her tongue pressing behind her teeth as she grinned. “What a show of self-restraint. Whatever you’re after must be important. I have heard tales of what happens when you lose your temper. And – if you don’t mind me saying – can I congratulate you on your sheer efficiency? Just pointing a weapon at a realm and waiting for it to be destroyed takes far less effort than battling, doesn’t it?” She studied him, waiting for a response. Loki did not want to think about it. Refused to think about it. “Oh, have it your way then. Pretend it didn’t happen. It was a good plan. I must admit I regret not thinking of it myself. So clean, so practical. But the Allfather has never taken well to his children becoming more effective than he is. He probably wouldn’t have thanked you for it, would he? I doubt he would have acknowledged your valiant efforts to do your part for Asgard.” She held her head high. “I, on the other hand…” This was wrong. So so wrong. “I can appreciate good work when I see it.”

Loki’s mouth was dry, his tongue – that silver tongue in which he so desperately needed to depend upon – turned to lead in his mouth.

He couldn’t trust himself to speak, managing only a nod instead.

Hela snorted in response. "So if you’re not here to avenge me or free me from my wrongful imprisonment, then why are you here? I’m no queen of yours, not unless you die outside of battle. Why risk coming here?" Hela paused. Then amusement played over her features. "You mentioned your own imprisonment – did the Allfather promise to return your freedom if you slew the terrible monster that reigns Hel? Is that what brings you here?"

"The Allfather had no part in this."

"Oh?" Hela raised her eyebrows delicately. "That's ironic, considering." She gestured between herself and Loki.

"Yes," Loki allowed.

Hela readjusted her position on the throne. "You mentioned a proposition," she prompted.

Loki nodded. "I also mentioned that we have met before, although it has not happened yet."

Hela narrowed her eyes. "I was not aware you possessed The Sight."

Allowing her to make that assumption would be easier than explaining the truth. "From my perspective, the first time that I meet you will happen in a few months."

"Are you planning to trespass again?"
"It, ah... It will not be trespassing that time."

"Oh," Hela said and her voice had grown colder and harder. "So you're going to die. Are you begging for your life? Is that what this is? What makes you think yourself above the rest of all of the souls of the dead here? It can't be because of the blood we share."

Loki did not think it should be the priority to point out that they did not, in fact, share the same blood. "I would offer you a favour in return."

She leant forwards. "This better be good."

"You wish Thanos dead, yes?"

Hela pulled a face. "His existence is... an irritance, yes. His stupidity on the other hand... For somebody who claims to love me so much, he has no idea how things work here. Most of the souls he wishes to gift me end up in Valhalla and the ones sent my way I have little use for."

A moment passed.

"I have the means to kill him."

“Oh, you do, do you? And is that the proposition you want to make? You kill Thanos in return for your own life?” Hela put on a show of mulling it over. "Impressive." She dropped the pretence. "Your audacity, that is. You'd get far more from this deal than I'd get in return. You rid me of a minor nuisance and in return get your entire life returned to you? And the likelihood is that, for your own self-preservation, you would need Thanos dead anyway.” She shook her head. “That doesn’t seem like a fair bargain to me."

"But..." Loki trailed off in confusion. "You agreed to this bargain. Or you will. It's already happened."

"I will, will I? Is that a threat?"

"No – not at all. But it's only as a result of that bargain that I stand before you now."

"Such confidence you have in me," Hela mocked. "Or so you claim. It is an ambitious ploy you play, I'll grant you that. Trying to persuade me to make a decision because according to you, I already have made that decision, Odinson."

"I am no son of Odin's."

"Not in blood, anyway. Although the more time I spend with you, the more I think you should be. All these deceptions, all these elaborate schemes, the scale of your ambition. Really – I'd admire it if I wasn't at the receiving end of it. We must share the same blood after all."

“But I am not--”

“Oh no, that’s where you mistake me. I wasn’t referring to Odin.”

Loki blinked. “Frigga?”

Hela unleashed a bark of laughter. “That woman? The witch who turned my own father against me, against everything he stood for? No. I was not referring to her either.”

Then who exactly--
No. Loki could not afford to think about this anymore.

Loki took a breath to steady himself. "I didn’t come here to trick you."

"What are you the god of, again?"

That was, regrettably, a valid point.

“I would hesitate to believe my own story if I had not lived through it myself."

Hela rolled her eyes. "Go on then. I will hear you, if only for entertainment’s sake. This little visitation is the most exciting thing to happen in this place in centuries."

"I cannot see into the future," Loki said, testing the weight of his words. "I came from it." Hela said nothing so Loki continued, "After I died, you granted me my life and in return I would destroy Thanos."

"You’re no warrior," Hela said slowly. "Why would I choose you?"

"I’m hardly a warrior," Loki replied. "But you’re right: I am a trickster. And clever trickery is going to be the end of Thanos, not brute strength."

"It does make me question how exactly you plan to slay him."

"I have access to… certain objects that allow me to travel through time itself."

"Ah," Hela said. "The Time Gem." Loki had not wished for her to be able to figure that out so quickly, not while he was still at her mercy. "And I suppose you will claim that’s how you travelled back from the future."

"It is. Killing Thanos requires tricking the universe itself.” It was only a slight stretch of the truth. Then Loki added, “It’s something I believe I am uniquely qualified for.”

Hela remained unaffected. “Naturally.”

“IT is also what will allow me to remove the Infinity Stones from Thanos's grasp."

“I suppose that might work."

"It is to travel the same thing."

"But there is one thing..." Hela rose from the throne and descended down the steps until she and Loki were face to face. "The entirety of your plan is contingent on me actually believing you."

Loki’s mouth opened. “I–”

“The story you tell is… ridiculous.” Hela shrugged. "Which is a pity for you. You've managed to make quite an impression. I might even have liked you if you didn’t try to play me for a fool."

“But—"

“I don’t tolerate disrespect. You are in my domain, you comply by my rules. You insult me with what you think you can trick me into believing. How idiotic do you think I am? I might not be able to touch the living myself but that doesn’t mean I don’t have other ways.”

It took concentration to remain stood where he was rather than stepping back. “Of course you
doubt the word of a god of lies. Any intelligent person would. I happen respect that But… What would you say if I told you I can offer you a bargain that does not rely on you having to trust my word?”

“Impress me,” Hela commanded. Her expression suggested he would not get another chance.

“What if I guarantee to end Thanos before I die in a few months time?” Or it would be a matter of months from her perspective, at least. “That way you know he’s already dead by my hand. You would not have to take any risks. By the time I die, you will already know I have succeeded.”

“If you succeed at all,” Hela corrected.

Loki held out his hands. “And if I fail then you need not bother resurrecting me.”

“Now I see why they call you silvertongue.” Hela paused and Loki dared to hope she was actually contemplating it. The fact that he still existed suggested he had not done any irreparable damage yet. “I still don’t like it.”

“Then tell me what I need to amend so we can come to a bargain we are both satisfied with.”

“Very well. I may not have to risk anything by waiting until you have already killed Thanos, but you still gain more from this bargain than I do. If I am to even consider this, I need an objective party. A party who cannot be fooled by clever wording and obscure loopholes. A party who will know if there is a single intent of deception.”

“You mean—”

“Oh, yes.” Hela nodded. “The Norns. If they can see every possible outcome, then they’ll see the importance of them confirming your tale if it’s true. I think I’ll give then a few seconds before I decide they’re not going to make an appearance, although it’s hard to keep track of how much time has passed here. What? They’ve earned being kept on their toes after all the lectures they’ve subjected me to.” She came to stand by his side, her eyes focused on the entrance to the chamber. “Five,” she counted. Her voice was crisp and clear, without a single waver of confidence. “Four.” Loki turned towards where she was staring, wondering what he was supposed to be seeing. “Three.” The space by the door remained empty. “Two.” If their lack of an appearance deterred Hela, she did not show it. “One.”

And there they were, the Three Sisters, appearing just as easily as Loki would have teleported, only they didn’t require an Infinity Stone to do it.

“My brother here has been relaying some very… daring claims,” Hela addressed the Norns. “I’m sure you’ll be able to figure out why I summoned you here. It’s not for the pleasure of your company.”

The Norn stood in the centre stepped forward. “Yes. You’ve made that quite clear.” She paused. “As you continue to do so every time we meet.”

“Do I?” Hela feigned surprise. “I wonder why that might be. Maybe it has something to do with—”

“How much you drone,” one of the Norns spoke over the top of Hela, the words perfectly synchronised in time with Hela as she spoke them.

Hela scowled. “You disappoint—” the Norn spoke again – she must have been Skuld – her words just as well-timed with Hela’s as they had been the first time.
Hela’s scowl deepened. Skuld showed no sign of remorse.

“Has anyone ever accused you of abusing your powers?” Hela asked.

“Many have. Many more will.”

“Don’t think I won’t punish you for your insolence. Here, I am queen.”

“You appear,” a different Norn said, “to have forgotten that we know precisely how low your chances of succeeding are.”

Hela seethed, her fingers curling into fists and her helm materialising, the antlers spreading outwards and growing like branches.

“If I may,” Loki interjected. “Can I suggest we come to the most mutually beneficial agreement possible and resolve this quickly?”

Silence. Four sets of eyes stared at him as if they’d forgotten he was there.

“I don’t remember asking you.”

Wonderful. And now he had displeased Hela. Again.

“It’s ironic you of all people suggesting a quick resolution,” the Norn stood in the middle remarked, “considering your roundabout ways of getting things done. Do you have any idea what you have put the three of us through? Any at all? Your tapestry does not lie flat: your tapestry lies in loops and tangles on the floor at our feet. Your present is your future, your past is your present. Can you even comprehend how difficult that is for us to work with?”

“While we’re on the topic of difficult,” Loki found himself snapping, “you hardly made my task any easier. You could have told everything I needed to know from the beginning and yet you only decided to make your appearance with moments to spare before–”

“Make no mistake: it was a calculated move. We knew exactly how unlikely you would be to act if you were under no such pressure and–”

“Oh,” Loki retorted, “so it’s my fault that you neglected to act with haste.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Hela said. “You can yell at the Norns some more. I’m finding it refreshing to not be the only one doing it.”

Loki had to refrain from telling her that he didn’t need her permission, not when he still needed her favour.

The Norn who had not yet spoken threw up her hands. “We had to work with what we had.”

“Meaning me,” Loki emphasised. “How difficult that must have been for you. I’m sure you’ll understand if my sympathy is limited.”

She – Urd, he assumed, given how she spoke of what had already happened – rolled her eyes. “I doubt you would not feel half as sorry for yourself as you would if you could see as we do how much worse your life could have been.”

“And I’m supposed to be grateful for that, am I? Grateful that I was dealt the hand I was, grateful that no matter what, something could always be worse?”
“Complain about the hand you were dealt all you like, little brother, it has nothing on mine.” Hela wore a mockery of a gracious smile she directed at the Norns. “How wonderful it is to stand before the only three beings in the Nine Realms who have the knowledge to prevent all such hardship and yet don’t. The same three people who could have brought Odin to justice, who could have prevented every wrongful imprisonment and sentence. The same three people who allowed my father to pretend everything we ever accomplished never happened while I remain trapped here.” Hela’s fists tightened some more. “And they call me cruel.”

“We don’t interfere with fate, we merely guide it.”

“You are fate,” Hela retorted.

The remaining Norn, Verdandi, by the process of elimination, held up her hands to signal a temporary truce. “I can see we are making no progress.”

“As we have done umpteen times before,” Urd muttered.

“And as we will repeat multiple times in the future,” Skuld added.

Hela’s glare would have been enough to stop any sane being. “Even I could have told you that.”

Verdandi remained uncowed. “Enough. You want to know if the Liesmith is lying. We want to have our leave without it resulting in the death of billions. Therefore we will give you your answer.”

“Make it quick.”

“Loki is not lying.”

Hela blinked.

“The fate of billions is contingent upon his revival. If you neglect to revive him, your realm will be flooded with more arrivals than you can withstand.”

“Therefore the fate of billions depends on me,” Hela realised out loud with something alarmingly akin to pleasure.

“That it does,” Verdandi agreed, the prospect of it not bringing her any visible pleasure. “I would say I hope you’re not enjoying your new sense of great importance too much, but of course—”

“Yes, yes. You already know.”

“Why do you think it was imperative you remained here?” Urd asked.

“What?” Hela’s voice was flat.

“There aren’t many who would defy death as you would and fewer who would even consider defying the Allfather by bringing back a traitor.”

Hela’s voice dropped to the temperature of ice. “You mean to say you will not let me leave because of him.”

Because of Loki.

Loki could not speak, could not risk speaking. There was nothing he could say that would make this any better, nothing that could negate her rekindled resentment towards him.
He found himself harbouring a newfound resentment for Urd, though he supposed Skuld should have predicted what a negative impact Urd’s words would have had and prevented them before they could reverse any of the progress he might have made with Hela.

Hela moved so quickly that her limbs were a blur, striking the ground with swords that appeared in either hand.

At first it was as if nothing had happened, but then Loki saw them, the shadows creeping closer and closer from the periphery of his vision. Hela’s glare was impossible to tear his gaze from, the sheer amount of hatred locking him in place as the swirling shapes got closer and closer.

*Queen of the Dead,* he reminded himself. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised that she possessed powers over the rest of the dead too. *I cannot touch the living,* Loki recalled her saying the first time he had encountered her, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t summon beings who could.

“Oh, none of that,” Verdandi declared. She gave the slightest of pushes of the air with her hands and then Hela vanished, the shadows disappearing along with her. “I moved her back along her weft,” she said for what Loki assumed to be his benefit. “She’ll remember everything but will have found herself somewhere else.”

The more time he spent around the Norns, the more certain he was of his – as well as Hela’s – animosity towards them being justified. Not that he could quite regret them preventing her from starting to summon souls to attack him.

“She’ll return soon.” Skuld sighed. “We won’t have long.”

The Norns regarded Loki, as if waiting for him to ask questions of them.

“Now that your temper has stilled…” Verdandi prompted.

His opportunity had come. He already knew from what they had told him when he’d encountered them on Asgard that himself and Tony had a chance against Thanos, that they were the most likely team in the universe to defeat him, but they hadn’t told him anything much more specific than that.

“Since we have slightly more time, can I ask what course of action would be best against to take against Thanos?”

Skuld eyed him. “Not without the answer lowering your chances of that course of action succeeding.”

Loki did not wish to dwell too much on that, not when the implication might have been that something would happen he would not choose again if he knew it was going to happen. Some things were better left unknown.

Instead, he opted for a change of topic.

“Is Hela really… my sister?” *Half-sister,* he corrected himself. “Not my adoptive sister?”

“My condolences,” Verdandi replied.

“But how? Is Hela… like me?”

“Jotun, you mean?” Verdandi asked. *Tactless,* Loki thought, *the lot of them.* “No. You do share the same mother though.”
The same mother…

“You actually encountered her not so long ago,” Urd informed him, almost conversationally.

“I did?”

“She did not know who you truly were. You left her with a… less than positive impression of you.”

Loki found some dark humour in that. “That doesn’t narrow it down.”

“I believe you told her something the lines of hoping she’d enjoy your next trick before you disappeared.”

Ah.

And then, ridiculously, his first thought was that Tony had been right. Not about his mother necessarily, but about him being half-Jotun.

He’d have to think more about that later. Or perhaps, the more he thought about it, maybe it would be better to leave that topic well alone.

“Oh,” Skuld added. “Before you accuse us of never helping you again – here. Take this.” She threw a vial at him and it was only out of reflex that he managed to catch it. “You’ll want to use it eventually.”

Loki wasn’t about to refuse the only tangible aid they had ever granted him and so he stored the vial in his pocket dimension.

“And before we go,” Skuld added, “a word of advice. Do what you’re good at.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“With Hela, she means,” Verdandi said.

“And what exactly–”

“Bargain.”

***

Hela burst the doors of her castle.

“Do you have a death wish?” she demanded when she saw Loki was still there.

“I’d say precisely the opposite.” It was her returning him to life he wanted. He still existed – that was good, that meant he still had a chance of changing her mind.

“You dare,” she seethed. “You dare remain here despite you being the reason I remain stuck here.”

“Know that I did not ask for this.”

One sword appeared in each of her hands. “I don’t care what you asked for.”

Loki remained where he was. To back away would have been like signalling to a predator that he was easily defeatable. “Our bargain–”

“You think I’ll agree to save you now? After everything?”
“I know what would make the terms more equal.” Loki kept his voice quiet. Firm but non-threatening.

“Does it involve me skinning you over and over after you die?”

“No.”

Hela began to move towards him, her weapons glinting in the light. “Then I’m not interested.”

He met her eyes. “I can get you out of here.”

Hela faltered, coming to a stop. “What?”

“I can get you out of here through the same means that I got in.”

Ever so slightly, her swords lowered. “How?”

Loki was not feeling particularly inclined to inform her he had the Tesseract on his person, not when there was the distinct possibility of her trying to claim it for herself. She might not be able to harm him while he was still alive but that didn’t mean she couldn't use others or steal it from him herself.

“I hope you understand that if I told you, I’d lose what little advantage I have.”

Slowly, deliberately, Hela placed her weapons down. “What are you proposing?”

“You freedom will be yours,” Loki promised. "But it has to be after."

“After what?”

“After Thanos is dead.”

Her face fell. “Why exactly is that?”

“Because in order to kill Thanos, I will need to be brought back to life. And to do that…”

“I need to still be ruling Hel.”

“Precisely. Once I have returned to the present–”

“When?” she demanded. “When is your present?”

“Four years from now.”

“Four years… Four years is nothing.” She was close now, close enough to make her threat directly into his face, her eyes boring into his. “But if you double-cross me, know that you will face my wrath. One way or another. If you die, I will find a way to make your existence nothing but pure suffering. And if you live, I will find a way to do the same. I will find my way out of here the second Odin’s curse is released and–”

“There will be no need. I believe you.”

Hela stepped backwards, holding her head upwards. "Then we have an agreement?"

"I will be true to my word."

"Fine. We have a bargain." She held out her hand.
"But there is one more thing," Loki added before he shook her hand. "The first time we meet, there is a certain criteria of things that should and should not be mentioned..."
"Hey – welcome back to the land of the living," Tony greeted when Loki reappeared back on the ship, rising from his seat. Tony took a number of steps towards him and then paused to say, “Nice to see you've not become some kind of disembodied spirit.”

"While I can’t disagree with you on that point," Loki replied, “it’s not exactly something I regularly find myself thankful for.”

“Or you could’ve been a poltergeist. You'd be way too good at being a poltergeist." Tony remained stood in the centre of the room, appearing to have forgotten whatever he’d gotten up for.

Loki wondered if it had occurred to Tony that he had forgotten what he had been about to do or whether he had distracted himself too thoroughly to be able to tell. "Should I be flattered?"

Tony shrugged. "Only if your dreams involve scaring the shit out of people if you die."

"If?" Loki repeated.

Tony waved a hand. "You know what I mean. Figure of speech. Your lifespan’s got a few years on mine so...” He backtracked to retrieve the mug he’d left by his seat and took a sip. “How'd the family picnic go?” Tony had inserted more brightness into his voice than usual, though whether it was to detract from the topic of how short Tony’s lifespan was in comparison to his or whether it was to further enhance his usual nonchalant brand of humour was unclear.

“I still exist which suggests that it went about as well as we could have hoped for."

Tony returned his mug and sat on top of the worktop table, the space far clearer now there was no ongoing project that required any designing or engineering work.

"Good," Tony said and Loki had to suppress the urge to grin. Tony patted the space next to him; it was not a command but an offer – an offer Loki took. "So how exactly did you convince the Queen of the Dead to kick your deadness out of you?"

"It ah... It might take some time to tell you."

"I've got all the time in the world." Tony shifted. "Well, not literally, but still. Did she know who you were?"

"She knew precisely who I was and that I shouldn't have been there. It also turns out that we bear a striking resemblance to one another."

"Does rocking the goth look run in your family? Or are you two proving that the goth look doing you favours isn’t hereditary?" Loki thought it slightly ironic that Tony should have mentioned that, given that Tony knew nothing of Hela being related to him by blood. “No wait – Thor,” Tony amended. “Thor with the whole goth-aesthetic thing would just be wrong."

And then because Loki had no doubt Tony would know he was not saying it with complete seriousness, he replied, "How deeply I value and depend upon your insight."
Tony nudged his arm. "Hey – my insight on what fashion would suit Thor is something that should never be underestimated."

Loki had no difficulty continuing the charade. "A matter of great importance, I am sure."

"You're telling me you don't want to live in a world where it isn't?"

Loki’s lips twitched.

"Strike one," Tony congratulated himself.

"Oh? We’re keeping a count of the score now, are we?" Loki returned to his previous faux-seriousness. "How convenient that you only begin keeping a score shortly after you grant yourself a victory."

"I'm glad you're man enough to admit I won."

"Oh, I beg to differ." If he had not been seated by Tony’s side, he would have been leering over him. As the matter was, he had to settle for drawing himself taller and angling his posture ever so slightly. "That is nothing short of preposterous."

Tony remained exactly where he was, observing Loki with the same blank-eyed stare that he might reserve for staring out of a window. Then Tony pointed to himself with a thumb and said, “Being both short and preposterous…”

For the second time, Loki’s mouth twitched.

"Strike two," Tony declared. "And while I'm in the lead," he continued, "we were talking about Hela."

"What specifically about Hela?"

"The whole shebang."

Loki retold the events in bits and pieces, the narrative becoming more convoluted as he recalled the parts both in and out of order. He spoke of how he found Helheim, how Hela was not merely his adoptive sister but also his sister by blood, and of his second meeting with the Norns.

By the time he finished, he couldn’t help the feeling that he had been speaking for far too long, as if the conversation had become a monologue with its only respite being in the form of Tony’s interjections.

"So we've crossed the battle off our list," Tony said. “And now Hela's ticked off too. So next... Next, we've got the fun one."

"You mean the intervention with the Orb?"

Tony clicked his fingers. "That's the one. So... Er... What's the plan? This is probably your area more than mine."

"Yes," Loki said flatly, "because while I was a prince, I often found myself having to strategise heist plots to sustain myself."

"It's funny because your tone of voice implies you're being sarcastic. Except that you've actually told me stories of you growing up and what you got into so I’m not buying it at all."
"Damn." By all intents, his cursing sounded to the ear as sincere.

"Ha. But in all seriousness – we're actually gonna need some kind of plan. I mean, the date's set for the rogue Scooby-gang to arrive at the party tomorrow. Not that we don't have a way to bide ourselves more time or anything."

"I'm sure a night will be sufficient."

"Yeah. How many of them were there?"

"Four of them," Loki replied. "And a tree."

"A tree," Tony repeated.

"You heard correctly."

"Great. Bring on the trifid bandit. Are we gonna need weed killer? An axe? Pruning shears? How the hell do we steal from a tree?" He shook his head "You know, one day I'm gonna stop being surprised by everything insane appearing in my life."

"Shall I take that as a grave insult?"

Tony let out a single laugh. "Okay, okay, you get a point for that. That makes it two–one to me. But don't worry," he added with a mocking grin, "it's about the fun of the game, not the winning."

"The two aren’t mutually exclusive: I can have my fun and win."

"Oh yeah? Prove it."

"You're far too easily distracted to remain in the lead for long."

"Me?"

"We were discussing our plans for tomorrow before you got swept away in your own smugness." Loki tilted his head slightly to one side to give an air of sympathy. "Which I suppose is understandable," he sighed, "given that you so rarely have the opportunity to be ahead of me."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Fine. Two–two."

"I thought as much."

"So going back to the plan."

"What plan? We have yet to generate anything remotely resembling a plan."

"Going back to the plan of planning a plan."

"Are there rules against having negative points? Because surely if any sentence deserves to be penalised, it's that one."

Tony threw up his hands. "Three–two. And now you're making me have to do the responsible thing" – he pulled a face at the word – "and call a time-out."

"What am I doing to you?"

"You're making me have to be the boring adult here. Me. Do you have any idea how--" He broke
off to shake his head. "Right. I'm going off-track again." He pushed himself off the worktop. "Thinking hats on, class."

"Is that what you Midgardians tell your children? That they need to be wearing a specific kind of headgear in order to fully utilise their minds?"

Tony pointed at him. "That's it. Detention."

***

Even after they had finished discussing their plans for the following day – a process that had taken far too little time, which Loki assumed was not a positive thing given that it demonstrated how little information they had to act upon – Tony was in no state to settle down.

If Tony had been anybody else, Loki would have had far more objections.

"Friday?" Tony called. "Tell me you've got access to the Mission Impossible theme."

"Of course, boss."

"That's my girl. Put it in the playlist for tomorrow."

"Playlist, boss?"

"Yeah. The uh... heist playlist."

"Is there anything else you want in your playlist aside from the one song?"

"Probably. Throw some suggestions at me."

"How about some AC/DC?"

"Every playlist should have AC/DC. I don't care if they don't have any spy songs." Tony eyed Loki. "Any requests?"

"I'm not overly familiar with Midgardian music."

Tony shrugged. "Thought you might've picked up a bit on your Earth–vaction days."

"Can I suggest adding Toxic to the list, boss?"

Tony pulled a face. "No. No, you can't. That's... mildly horrifying. I'm not subjecting him to Britney Spears, not while I'm trying to give him a positive impression of music we have back on Earth. Who programmed you?"

"You did." For an artificial intelligence, she sounded incredibly pleased with herself for having generated that response.

"Don't make me send you to the naughty step, Friday."

Friday remained silent.

"She's sulking," Tony commented.

Loki raised his eyes. "I gathered."

"That's the last time I let AIs develop their own tastes in stuff." Tony faked a shudder.
"Out of curiosity," Loki began, "why did you..."

"Mostly to see if I could. And I– I like my AIs to have quirks, it makes them feel..."

"Human?"

"I was going to go with an incredibly intricate and complex system of--" He pulled a face. "Never mind. Vaguely human works. I guess."

"When did you learn to do that?"

"Started off when I was a kid. I don't know, maybe it's what happens when there are no kids your age around to hang out with. But it gave me something to do, kept me occupied." Then Tony added, "Didn't keep me out of trouble though."

There was something in equal parts impressive and pitiful about the idea of a child having to resort to creating company for themselves. Something that, if Loki considered it for long enough, suggested that Tony's childhood might have been lonelier even than his own. At least Loki had Thor, growing up. He might have resented having to share him with Sif and the Warriors Three and they might have been Thor's friends rather than his, but he still had something.

"I found plenty of trouble for myself with my magic when I was young."

"Should've paid Earth a visit. Think of all the trouble we could've got each other in."

Loki had to glance away after Tony said that to avoid his expression revealing too much. "The Norns would dread to imagine, I'm sure."

"Never mind the Norns. Think of the headaches we could've given our dads. That-- That's some lost opportunities right there."

And oh how that ached in the sweetest way possible, how it tugged at his insides and made him long for something he could never have had.

Forty years was not a great length of time, but in proportion to Tony's lifespan it was. Loki kept almost forgetting that – how long Tony had left. And even if by some miracle when this was over they remained in cordial contact after Tony realised they couldn't save their mothers, then he could have had twice as much time with him if–

Well, if Loki's childhood didn’t end almost a millennia ago rather than a matter of decades ago like Tony's had. That was another thing he kept forgetting: how many years longer he’d been alive for than Tony.

When Loki had been a child, Tony hadn't even been born. And there Tony was, sat next to him. If he was Asgardian, he'd be older than Loki by a few centuries.

But Tony was not. If Tony had been a child at the same period Loki had been, Tony would have died around a thousand years ago. Perhaps longer.

They never would’ve had the chance. Even if Loki had somehow known there was a mortal on Earth he'd get along with rather well, their timelines would never have been in synchrony, they never could have grown up together.

But perhaps Tony saw the appeal of it. That was what he had implied wasn't it? That from his perspective, they could have been friends for decades now, that they both could have benefited
from such a friendship. Or maybe Loki was analysing words that the speaker had not placed as much meaning in as he saw. Wishful thinking. Dangerous delusional thinking. He had a history of doing that, after all. Maybe Tony's underlying motive was nothing more than to gain satisfaction from imagining irritating their fathers in such a way. Maybe there was nothing more to it than that.

"I might even have liked Midgard as a child," Loki admitted. Not so much as it had existed back then with its far more primitive technology and less than interesting inhabitants, but if it was something similar to how it was at the present, with its constant adaptation and lack of rigidity in comparison to Asgard...

Tony's expression was strangely soft, his mouth curved ever so slightly upwards and his eyelashes lowered. For a moment, Loki was too caught up in trying to memorise it to think of saying anything else. Then Tony glanced upwards and caught him looking before Loki could pretend otherwise. Tony’s smile faltered and his expression became more severe before it was masked with something more akin to teasing.

"I'd have to be careful not to make you like Earth too much, otherwise you might’ve decided you wanted it to be yours earlier."

Loki hoped that wasn’t panic he had observed Tony masking.

"Oh, for the love of--" Loki broke off. "Are you ever going to let that go?"

"What? It's an interesting meeting story. You know, all my other friends I might've met through work or college or parties or whatever. But you – I met you because you fell from the sky--"

"Actually, I teleported--"

"– and decided Earth was so good you wanted it all for yourself."

"I don’t think it was a question of specifically valuing Midgard."

"What then?" Tony tried not to appear too interested in the answer, keeping his voice level and stopping himself when he began to lean forward.

Loki frowned, weighing the words in his mind before speaking them. "I was convinced– I convinced myself that by rights it should have been mine." He wouldn’t apologise for something he didn’t regret, even if his opinion on his invasion had altered since. "And I was prepared to do whatever I had to in order to stake my claim."

"Whatever you had to? I've seen what you're like when you're determined enough. Don't take this the wrong way but what you did back then was kind of pitiful in comparison. You could've killed me multiple times over."

"As I recall, I did throw you out of a window."

"And not just me – you could've killed Cap in the little sparring match you had, you could've done way worse to Thor, you could’ve been way more ambitious with the Tesseract. Don't get me wrong, you still ended up killing plenty of people. But not as many as you could've done." Tony swallowed. "Not that it makes it okay. It's just… complicated."

I don't need your vindication, Loki thought. And then, I shouldn't want your vindication.

"I never tried to crown myself king of a planet," Tony admitted. "Maybe I already was, in my own way. Got all the wealth and fame with none of the boring regal responsibilities. That counts for
something, right? As long as I had that, I didn't give a shit – at least, not back then. I made my billions selling things that kill people. Hell, I might even be responsible for more people dying than you are."

There was a silence in which they both attempted to figure out what should have been said next.

"Indirectly," Loki managed.

Tony shrugged in his seat but the gesture was stiff, forced. "Directly, indirectly – doesn't matter. People are still dead because of stuff I did."

"That's... That's why you adopt this reckless sense of responsibility."

"Whoa – slow down, Reindeer Games. Did I hear that right? Someone declaring I'm responsible? Me?"

Loki played along. "I also described your responsibility as reckless."

Tony dropped the facade of good humour. "The responsibility thing – that was the whole point of the accords. Because we weren't doing a good enough job. We tried. Everyone one of us tried. And sure, we saved lives. But how many people did we end up killing while we did it? I don't– I don't even have all the numbers. Let alone all the names. And saying we won't stop when the world tells us they're scared of what we'll do to them trying to save them, that's– That's messed up."

"You would have been the last Avenger I'd expect to be willing to consent to having someone else dictate what you are and aren't allowed to do."

"I'd probably also be the last Avenger I'd expect to sign the accords at all." His eyes flickered to Loki. "Almost makes me glad you weren't on the team. You wouldn't have signed."

"No, I wouldn't," Loki agreed. Tony's opinion on the agreement he had signed might have been more swayed than he knew by how much he wanted – no, needed – someone else to be responsible for when there were accidents whereas Loki... Loki was too monstrous to have his conscience introduce such qualms, even in the fanciful scenario involving him, for some incomprehensible reason, being a part of the Avengers. Why Tony had so much as thought of that scenario, he could not say. "And I'm hardly one for being part of a team. Particularly that team, what with my history of–"

"I know, I know. Your not exactly heroic actions, allergies to righteousness, saving public-face because no one should ever think you're anything but the much better-looking spawn of Satan."

Loki smiled wryly. "I'm pleased to hear I don't have to explain myself." Then, with something that breached over the boundaries of how comfortable he was with earnestness, he added, "I doubt this will help sway you, but your contributions towards our task, even if a ledger was taken, would vastly outweigh–"

"It wouldn't be enough." For a single moment, the true weight of it, the devastation of it, the resigned acceptance of it, was evident in Tony's eyes. "Pepper was right. She always is. It's never enough."

Loki had no words of reassurance, no words of comfort. Which was just as well because Tony knew better than to expect it from him. Tony, he suspected, would much rather have harshly spoken honesty than empty words designed only to appease.

"Maybe there are some constants in the universe," Loki murmured.
"What – like nothing I do ever being enough?"

"Not just you." It was a quiet admission. Barely audible, but Tony looked at him as if his reasons for saying it were no less compelling than his own.

A long moment passed. Tony's eyes slid from his face, his mouth quirking. "Well... For two fuck-ups we're not doing so bad."

Loki’s mouth mirrored his. "No," he agreed, though others might not. "I suppose we aren't."

***

"Big day tomorrow," Tony said.

Loki had thought their nightly conversations a thing of the past when they had returned to Stark Tower, but to have Tony lying in the dark, curled up facing him and still invested in talking to him even after their last somewhat heavy exchange, was something he could place great value on.

"I suppose," Loki replied, only half-serious, "that if it all goes terribly wrong, we can always do what we did with the battle and start over."

Tony snorted. "And if that version goes south, we can always..."

Loki found himself amused at the idea of it. "I'm sure there must be limitations, somewhere."

"If it goes south enough times, it'll be like Groundhog Day. Only with less romance and more magic." There was a tag on Tony’s bedding that he had a tendency to fiddle with as he spoke. "Timeloop thing," Tony explained as an afterthought.

"I believe you have already informed me."

"Oh."

Loki watched Tony blink, the way that his eyelashes closed shut and then opened again.

"What's..." Tony frowned. "What's the plan after we get the Power Stone?"

*After the Power Stone...* Loki had been doing a good job of banishing the thought from his mind until the jolt that came with Tony’s words breaking the barrier.

"Then we'd have a choice," Loki said, knowing full well that Tony was referring to what their plan would be rather than what would happen to the two of them. "We could attempt to also relieve Thanos of the Soul Stone and possibly the Mind Stone too, depending on when we decide it would be best to encounter him. Or we could attempt to fight him straight after."

"What's he like? Without the power-ups, I mean."

"As a fighter, he is... strong. Very strong." Stronger than Thor by far. "He is not particularly fast but his strength is more than enough to compensate. He is a short-range fighter but he can fight with whatever he has to hand."

"Good job we're both long-distance then."

"About that," Loki said. "I'm not sure our weapons will be enough. Even if Thanos has no Infinity Stones, I doubt my knives could penetrate very into his flesh. And your blasts may distract him somewhat, but I can't say with any certainty whether they will be able to actually damage him."
"I'm not– I'm not above using something with more of a kick if it's what it takes to take him down."

Loki nodded. "Do you think it would be beneficial to amplify any new weapons of yours with the Tesseract?"

"Whoa there." Tony shot up in his chair. "I didn't– I didn't say I'd make any weapons."

Loki squinted at him. "How are your suits of armour any different?"

"Because– Because I'm not dealing them out. No one can use them without my permission. They're made to protect people, not–"

"And designing something to harm Thanos wouldn't be in the interest of protecting people?"

"It's..." Tony sighed. "It's like this: the suits are a part of me. And I don't make weapons anymore – I just do me."

"Your suits are weapons."

Tony stiffened, his stare hard. "Only in the wrong hands."

"If you kill someone with a shield, that shield becomes a weapon. Weapons are about the intent from the user, not the design. And if you intend to protect your kind from Thanos by killing him, then whatever you choose to enact that with becomes a weapon."

Tony’s mouth was set in a grim line and he rose to his feet, standing over Loki. "I said I don't design weapons anymore."

Loki hadn’t seen that expression since he had first transported Tony to Jotunheim.

"And I say you do," Loki said levelly. Then he added with a twist of his mouth, "You just don't want to acknowledge it to yourself that you never gave it up, that you never lost your affinity for it."

"I–" There was anger in Tony’s features now, frustration and outrage. "Fine. You want to hear it?" The darkness of Tony’s eyes had nothing to do with the darkness of the cabin. "You want to know the real reason?" Tony leant closer. Those eyes of his were practically glistening with cold resolve. "It's because I can't let myself be irresponsible enough to make a weapon like that something you could get hold of."

Loki blinked.

He didn’t know why it came as a shock, why Tony’s words came with such a sting, why he had to make an effort to keep his mask of indifference in place – why his efforts to do that might not have been entirely successful.

Maybe it was because of the things Tony had told him before that Loki had stored away in the corners of his mind. Tony had said he’d already seen him at his worst, that he didn’t think he was entirely corrupt, that they could continue to work as a pair in the future. And then there was the portal gun. The device that allowed them to travel through time. Tony would entrust him with that and not a weapon made to finish off the job, to put a true end to Thanos’s life.

"We had a bargain," Loki found himself saying. He remembered it well. If they could have a term of agreement between them regarding the Time Gem and the portal gun, there was nothing to say they couldn’t establish something similar for any devices or weapons Tony could make in the
future. Surely Tony could see that? Surely Tony’s own rationality could accept that?

But the chances were that the possibility of it hadn’t been missed by Tony, the chances were higher in favour of Tony already having considered the idea and then rejecting it. And the only difference between the portal gun and any other weaponry was that the portal gun was a fixed essential and any other weapons would be extraneous. Meaning that Tony only trusted him with the portal gun because he had to; anything else would be an unnecessary risk.

Loki couldn’t meet his eyes after that realisation.

Tony straightened. “The main problem with a bargain is there’s nothing that holds you to your word – either of us, actually. And the second problem with the bargain we made is that I noticed your wording. You said you wouldn't harm Earth but you said nothing about other worlds. I'm not gonna design something to kill Thanos only to risk you blowing a planet up in case there’s a next time you lose your temper and it ends badly for someone."

It was only at that moment that Loki realised some part of him had believed that Tony actually trusted him. After everything, he’d somehow deceived himself into thinking that Tony could trust him. Maybe Tony trusted him to kill Thanos, but there was a vast difference between trusting him to do that and trusting him in any other situation.

He couldn’t decide whether it was more idiotic or more naive that he had been unable to tell the difference.

Loki had gone very still.

"Not that–" Tony broke off. "Not that you seem like you would right now. I’m 99% sure you don’t feel like doing it anymore. But if there’s even a 1% chance left I– I can't risk it. And that’s only speaking about other planets. What happens when you go home, huh?” As if Loki had a home. “Odin might be a dick but don’t think killing him will solve your Daddy-issues. Speaking as someone whose dad got murdered. You'd think it'd satisfy you at least a little bit and make you finally stop being angry with them but it doesn’t."

"I have no plans to kill Odin." Loki’s voice was terse, how detached it was from his own thoughts reflecting in its lack of intonation.

"I believe you."

"Then why–"

"I mean, I believe you believe it. But you're – or you were, at least – volatile and... It makes you unpredictable. If you weren't an alien whose lifespan lasts thousands of years, I'd say I know you pretty well. You've changed a lot over the past few years – or outwardly, at least. As far as I can tell. Which is good, because that’s a step forward, right? But I don't know what you'll be like in ten years. Or a hundred. Or a thousand. And I– I don't wanna be the guy who handed you everything you needed to destroy something if you ever fell back. If it was just me I’d be risking then that'd be one thing, but to risk anyone else because I happen to like you, that'd be–"

"Irresponsible," Loki finished flatly.

Tony fell back into his seat. "Yeah. That.” He unleashed another sigh. “Regrettably."

Regrettably?

"I didn't realise you had such desire to test my virtue."
"I do." Tony closed his eyes momentarily. "And I don't. Because I might not like the answer. My gut says you're not gonna kill me but my brain says that doesn't mean you won't kill anyone else. They might not be people from Earth but that doesn't mean they're not people."

There were no words Loki could say in his defence.

The prospect of it alone, the notion of having to persuade someone that they need not doubt, was so repellent he made no attempt to influence the conclusion Tony had reached.

Tony bit his lip. "I don't know what happens when this over. Because let's be real, we can't get our moms back. That's– That's not happening." He glanced at Loki. "Oh. So you did know."

"As did you."

"Guilty as charged. But fuck, this is– I just– I don't know where we're going. I don't know what happens when we're finished anymore. I thought we could go after our moms but now that option is out..." Tony ran a hand through his hair. "You're not exactly the 'let's go and save people we don’t even know' type." That, Loki could not deny. "And you have to make it harder by going and being–" Tony waved an arm. "Being like that. Looking like me telling you there's a small part of me that doesn't fully trust you is like I'm Cruella De Vil or something. Sat there blinking with big Disney-eyes and humouring me by pretending that me ranting and standing over you could've actually intimidated you." Tony made a scoffing noise in his throat and then the sound of it died. "If the worst of what you've done isn't over, you do a good impression of it being over and I--"

Whatever hardness had reappeared in Tony's features had relented. "I don't know if I'd be able to tell the difference if it wasn't."

Loki swallowed.

That might have been the first time someone had been that honest with him in a long time. Maybe this was why people tended to avoid it: revealing it tended to leave them naked, raw, exposed.

He should probably say something. Tony was looking right at him, his eyes filled with a desperate need, but what for precisely Loki could not understand. Like there were words Tony wanted – needed – him to say but whichever ones he sought were utterly unknown to Loki.

"Then you have my sympathies," Loki managed. Tony's eyes grew wider and Loki watched his throat move. The next admission was even quieter. "I don't know what happens after this either."

Their eyes met.

"Maybe– Maybe we shouldn't think that far ahead. Let's just– One step at a time. The Power Stone's our next move. We'd have to do something to it whether or not we have a plan for what happens after Thanos so can we just... carry on? For now, at least."

Loki closed his eyes but it bared no consequences on how awake his mind was. "For now."

***

Before the previous night's conversation, Loki had been looking forward to retrieving the Power Stone – which was a slightly odd revelation it itself – but, he suspected, so had Tony.

There had been no resolution to Tony's doubts, nothing they could both settle on that would have served both of their needs, no solution that solved every concern.

It was with painful acuteness that Loki was aware of it, how heavy the weight of it was between
them. Only this time, Tony was aware of it too. It was obvious in his stance, how he couldn’t bear to remain still, how he averted his posture so that he barely had to look at Loki anymore. It was even more apparent in how he spoke, how forced it sounded, how none of his chatter flowed naturally.

"You ready?" Tony asked. How much it contrasted to the last time Tony had asked him that, how tired Tony sounded, how distant.

And now there was this: the last stage before the unknown. They would retrieve the Orb – and then what?

Continue tracking the rest of the Infinity Stones? Doubtful, if Tony suspected he'd regret being the reason Loki had access to more powerful objects than he deemed necessary. Maybe they'd hunt Thanos instead, appear while Thanos was at his most vulnerable, try to separate him from his army which would mean he’d only have the Soul Stone within his possession.

Loki gave a nod. "Are you?"

"Always."

Then they appeared outside the museum.

***

Their plan was limited. Limited because of the lack of information they had, limited because of their lack of resources.

The previous day. Loki had been uneasy about their proposition to split their party of two – today, on the other hand, it might make it... easier. Easier irrespective of their task to retrieve the gem, that was.

At least this way, he wasn’t quite so thoroughly distracted by all the unspoken words between them.

When Loki had first visited The Collector, it had been Tony who'd had to spend a great deal of time trying to find somewhere appropriate to land the ship. And in doing so, Tony had discovered that there were four different areas close to the museum that contained multi-story docks for small-sized aircraft. Splitting up was the most effective method of determining which of the docks the thieves had stored their vessel. If neither of them saw any groups who fit the description The Collector had supplied them with, then they would return again to keep watch of the other remaining docks. And if one of them happened to see signs of the group of individuals, then it would not take long to for either Loki or Tony to summon the other when Tony could fly and Loki had the Tesseract.

If they lacked in anything, it wasn't in speed.

"So this is Knowhere, huh?" Tony uttered, his head craned to watch the traffic above them passing through the air.

"I'd recommend keeping your eyes in front of you." Loki had only said it half-jokingly on account of the streets being so crowded, but it came across as if he was insinuating that Tony was gormless.

Tony ignored the comment, addressing Loki’s hair rather his face as he spoke to him. "Can you still work your comm?"
"I don't need instruction in using basic technology."

Then Tony finally looked at him. "Right." Tony cleared his throat. "I'll uh—" He pointed in the
direction of one of the docks. "I'll get going. Keep me posted. The second you see something, tell
me."

*I don't recall granting you the permission to command me,* Loki had to stop himself from retorting.

"Bye," he said instead and watched Tony walk away.

It did not take much time for Loki to reach his destination; his main obstructions were traffic and
the general public lingering outside of bars and traders markets.

It was a matter of convenience that the spot he decided to lie in wait happened to give him a view
of the museum.

“Are you positioned?” Loki asked Tony over the comm.

“Lying on top of a ship in a ‘paint me like you paint your French girls’ pose.” Music Loki could not
identify drifted through the ear-piece. "Not now, Friday."

And there was the explosion.

There was no sound at first, just the very sudden eruption of the walls of the museum and the
torrent of vivid purples expanding outwards.

Then there came the noise: a booming so loud it quaked the ground, accompanied by the smashing
of glass.

*Any second now,* Loki reminded himself.

"You got that, Reindeer Games?” came Tony's voice through his earpiece.

"It was rather difficult to miss."

Loki braced himself. It was a very real possibility the group would choose the dock he had
stationed himself at. He had a one in four chance of guessing correctly and—

There were figures exiting the museum, he could just about make them out against the violent
backdrop of the skeleton of the building. Parts of the roof had caved in and only fragments of the
walls remained upright, the rest having become rubble.

He counted the silhouettes.

“The group is leaving,” Loki relayed. “They’re heading towards the west of the city.”

“Coming my way, then.”

“Yes.” There were plenty of streets between Loki and the figures, he would be able to follow
without being seen and without having to trouble himself with casting any illusions. “I’ll follow in
parallel with them.” That would both make the ambush far more effective and would mean they
wouldn’t lose them in case the group decided to take a detour.

“Alright, your call.”

Loki began to move, keeping slightly ahead of the group of thieves and pausing at every
intersection to check he was still on the correct course.

“I’m coming out,” Tony announced. “Friday’s got her sights on them. I go in from the west, you take ‘em from behind.”

“Remember to stay out of sight,” Loki reminded him. If Tony gave them away, they would lose the element of surprise. Tony only needed to be close enough so his scanning devices could detect which one of them had the Power Stone and then Loki would be able to teleport them away and deal with them afterwards.

“Will do.”

They resumed their journeys, Tony remaining oddly quiet and Loki growing more and more frustrated by the growing number of pedestrians in his path.

“ Weird. It’s only in places like this that my suit blends in. Hang on – Friday’s got something. The green one. The green woman’s got it.”

Loki turned another corner. Another two turns and they’d be intersecting.

Tony should have been within eyeshot at least by now. What was Tony doing? How was he supposed to teleport them away if Tony wasn’t even within a close range?

“Uh – slight delay,” Tony said.

“What is it?”

“Don’t know. But it comes in the form of a super pissed off nun in chainmail who also happens to be beating the shit out of some guy. Is it Halloween here or something?”

"I'd recommend avoiding engaging."

There was a brief pause. Then the sound of a distant crash through the comm.

“About that…” Tony said.

“Tony, we’ve almost got the Power Stone, we just need to–”

“On my way, I just–” There was the distinctive whirring of Tony’s repulsors firing up.

“Tony.”

Then there was a blast. “Okay, now I’m on my way.”

Loki released a breath of impatience. “Good.” And then, “You need to hurry or we’ll lose them and will have to start over again.

It was odd how him mentioning losing them led him to notice that he had almost lost sight of the group himself. The next crash that sounded was distinctly louder, distinctly more metallic, sudden enough that it made Loki halt his chase.

“Tony?”

There was a hiss of pain. "Shit."

Loki had a suspicion Tony had not blasted the character he had mentioned as effectively as he’d
thought.

“Lock on the target, Friday,” Tony instructed.

So it appeared that Tony had neglected to take his advice and had chosen to engage.

Loki could have thrown something in frustration. They were so close – he was so close, the group of thieves were only a couple of streets away.

“Nun dodges well,” Tony muttered. There was another clashing noise. “Nun hits well, too.”

“Tony – I thought we had both agreed to our plan.”

“I” – something thudded – “had to improvise.”

Loki exhaled a short breath and turned around.

“Friday, direct me to Tony.”

“According to the location of Tony’s comm,” Friday said, “he is three hundred yards away.”

Loki spared one last look at the group who had the Power Stone within their grasp, the group who would result in the Power Stone landing in Thanos’s path unless himself and Tony prevented it from happening.

Himself and Tony. They were a team. They had a partnership of sorts. And there was nothing to say they couldn’t travel back again, only with the added inconvenience of having to ensure their past-selves wouldn’t see their future-selves.

It was a minor compensation that he could berate Tony all he liked once he found him. But only if he found him.

“Give me a moment and I’ll fly over, just–”

Loki knew that tone of voice, could hear how out of breath Tony was. That was no fight he was leaving, maybe even a fight he was not at the liberty of having the option to leave.

Loki turned around and followed Friday’s directions.

More crashes, more collisions. Snarls of breath and the firing of weapons, the clang of metal on metal.

Loki started to run.

Something was twisting and grinding, a high pitched sound that went straight through him despite it only coming from the speaker in his ear.

Loki couldn’t run fast enough. Couldn’t teleport to somewhere where he hadn’t been before.

Tony let out a hiss of pain.

“Tony – what–”

“My– My arc reactor.” There was the scrambling of movement. “My suit’s shot, I’ve gotta–”

Loki urged himself to move faster.
Not close enough. He still wasn’t close enough.

“Friday? How far away am I?”

“You have almost reached Tony,” Friday informed him.

“Why can’t I see him?”

“Tony is within a thirty-yard radius.”

But where? Loki needed to know, he had to know. He had come to stand in the centre of a street in the backwaters of the city. There was little around save for a few citizens and containers that looked like they belonged to a part of a factory.

“Tony? I need to know where you are.”

Breathing. He could hear breathing.

“Tony – answer me.”

There was nothing at first. And then there was Tony's voice, barely audible, and the speaker crackling with static.

“I’m alive,” Tony said. Was he whispering because of there being enemies close?

“Where are you? Tony – tell me where you are.”

“I’m—” Tony let out a small groan. “I’m on some kind of vehicle and I– I think it’s taking off.”

Loki whirled around.

Then he saw it: the huge vessel of a ship that was rising into the sky.

“I believe I am looking straight at it.” From too far away. Too far away to reach it in time, too far away for him watching to be of any use.

“Someone's coming back – someone's—”

There was the tapping of something moving.

“I’ll find you,” Loki got out. He had no way of knowing if Tony had heard it or if he couldn’t risk responding and that was why he received no reply.

And then the ship disappeared out of sight, swallowed by the clouds.

“Tony?”

The comm was completely silent.

Loki made his way back to their ship. Alone.

Tony. He needed to find Tony. Losing the Power Stone didn’t matter if he could find Tony again. Find Tony and then they could go back and try again, they could complete their plan, they had to.

Loki sat down in the cabin. The chair next to him was empty, the entire space occupied by an eerie quiet.
There was nothing Friday could read coming from the comm, he had checked. They were too far apart for her to get any readings. Out of range, she had said.

If they–

Loki rested his head against the metal of the control panel.

Think. He needed to think.

Because if he didn’t, all would be lost.

If he didn’t, all of it would have been for nothing.

If he didn’t, he’d have no advantage over Thanos at all and he’d be stuck here and both Tony and the Time Gem would be lost forever and they’d never be able to–

Loki sat upright.

The Time Gem.

That was how he’d find Tony.

Suddenly, the situation did not seem quite as grim as it had initially appeared.

Chapter End Notes

*squints at wordcount* Over 200K words?!? I was not expecting anything written by me to ever get this long. Especially as I originally intended this to be a 2K one-shot. Maybe I should sit on one-shots more often and see what happens.
Chapter 43

How odd that Loki had almost forgotten about the implantation inside of his mind, the very thing that had allowed them to locate the Time Stone in the first place. And just as it had allowed them to locate the Time Stone, it would allow him to locate Tony. Because the thing that Mimir had provided with him had not dried up after use; it was still there, lying idle while Loki had no need of it – all he had to do was follow where the compass directed him, feel the direction of the Time Gem and seek it out.

So long as Tony and the Time Stone had not been separated, it would work.

It had to.

Or he had to believe it had to, anyway.

The ship was far too slow for Loki's liking; he had considered it slow before speed had become quite so imperative, but now... Now his previous inclination had been rendered obsolete, driven out by how much he needed to travel faster, to reach Tony before the situation became any more urgent.

He just needed to get there in time before Tony's attacker–

Before Tony's attacker did what?

Tony had been taken as a prisoner, not killed after his suit had been rendered useless. That was a compelling reason to believe that his attacker wanted Tony alive for a reason. Or, at least, that was what he repeated to himself anyway.

For the first time on the ship, Loki was forced into steering without having a co-pilot. The steering was simple enough and was a task he couldn't allocate to Friday given how the directions he was following only existed in his mind. But the rest of the controls – the boosting of the engines, the changing of the gears – proved to be slightly more difficult, particularly when he was forced into swapping sides of the control panel to reach all the switches and mechanisms.

He could feel Tony – no, he should remind himself that it was the Time Gem he was feeling rather than Tony – slowly drifting further and further away.

Of course the ship Tony was on had to be faster than their pod. There was nothing quite so like a journey such as this to remind him that what they had was definitely a pod rather than a ship. Loki had a suspicion there were not many ships in the galaxy their pod was faster than. Nor many other pods.

It only made it more frustrating that he had the Tesseract in his hands – the very object that allowed him to manipulate space itself – and it was useless to him.

How could he teleport to Tony when he had not been on that ship himself? How could he even attempt to when he could only sense the location rather than the exact specifics? Assuming the Tesseract was forgiving enough of him forcing its hand to teleport somewhere unfamiliar, which was a bold assumption in itself, then if he was out by even the slightest of margins it could result in him missing the ship entirely.

Loki had no desire to drift with nothing between himself and space. Not again.
If Tony was with him, he would have had no issues combining the Tesseract's potential for altering three-dimensional space with the ship's engine. Maybe if they hadn't been so busy creating a device that would allow them to time travel as well as everything else that had come after, they would have seen giving a boost to ship’s speed as a priority. Loki could visualise it clearly in his mind, how Tony would have known the exact route for Loki to direct the Tesseract's energy through, how he would have known precisely which components would be the most effective, how he would have known how to somehow make the materials able to withstand the power of an Infinity Stone.

Tony had pointed out what the controls did before, but he'd no reason to explain the complex webbing of the circuits, how they all interconnected to form one larger construct.

Loki kept going.

Further and further out into space he went until at last the Time Gem no longer felt as if it was gaining more distance away from him. There was a reason for that, Loki saw, as he caught sight of the ship in the distance. The only reason he had managed to reach the ship Tony was on was due to the fact that ship had stopped moving. It remained floating, still, any elegance in its suspension overridden by its primitive appearance. It was an elongated brutish thing, built as if a god had taken a gigantic slab of stone and had given it a single twist it with their bare hands.

Ah.

He hadn't–

He hadn't actually anticipated getting as far as he had. Now he had to decide what to do next: to attempt to use stealth to somehow stow himself away on the ship or announce his presence and request to be granted entrance or some kind of parlay.

He couldn't see how he could possibly make his way unnoticed on to the ship, not while it was in space. Invisibility was useless to him when all the entrances to the ship would be sealed and monitored and surely it would be commonplace to have strict procedures for those kinds of things. And although the Tesseract did allow him to create portals and there was nothing to say that one of those portals couldn't go straight through the walls of the ship, there would be the slight problem of it most likely resulting in the death of every person or thing aboard the ship. There would be no sense trying to retrieve Tony if his attempts only resulted in killing him instead.

Just when Loki thought there'd be nothing for it and he’d have to forego being covert and concoct a way to announce himself to the ship, he saw something catch the light, something moving through space.

A pod, not that dissimilar to his own. Except, as it became rapidly apparent, this pod was far more agile and quicker than his and Tony’s pod.

The pod performed an elegant swerve, heading straight for–

The ship. The ship Tony was on. That was– That must have been why the ship was no longer moving: it was waiting for the pod.

And there Loki saw his opportunity, a narrow window of time in which, assuming nothing went too disastrously, he’d be able to enter the ship without being detected.

Vanishing their pod required little effort. The difficult part was maintaining enough concentration to keep the illusion in place regardless of what circumstances he could encounter, but after the
various levels of illusions he’d had to retain during the battle it was not anywhere near as daunting.

Loki urged the pod forward.

The other pod was closer now, fast approaching one side of the ship.

Loki followed.

And when a hole in the ship opened, he followed too, making sure to keep close enough that he could slip through before the entrance closed again and not so close that he’d be at risk of bumping into the pod in front.

The hatch closed behind him with a loud clang, sealing the two pods inside of a darkened chamber. Then the noises began, sounds reminiscent of that of loud gusts of wind combined with an electronic whirring. It stopped as quickly as it started and a figure exited the pod in front of him. Her back was turned and as she walked there was a slightly unnatural fluidity to her gait and certain sections of her limbs reflected what little light there was.

In her silhouette alone there was something oddly familiar, but Loki could not identify what or where he could possibly have recognised her from.

Somewhere ahead of them, there was the release of the interior door and Loki wasted no time in following the figure in front of him before he’d be sealed inside the chamber.

She moved quickly, so quickly that he had only narrowly avoided having the hatch door catch him as he walked through it. The stumble was enough to cause her to frown, for those dark eyes of hers to skim over him in confusion, but it was not enough to cause her to be unable to shrug it off.

It was only as Loki was this close that he couldn’t help but stare – not only because of how it became apparent that the things on her skin he had observed catching the light were metal parts embedded in her limbs, but because now there was no room left for any doubt that he had seen her before. He had, he knew it, but from where?

She – some sort of android, Loki could only assume – resumed her journey before he could come to a conclusion.

The corridor was dimly lit, the walls and floor made of stone filled with cold blue and grey pigments that were so dark they were almost black. The end of the passage branched outwards and Loki took the path opposite to the one the android had taken.

He could feel the pull of the Time Gem if he focused upon it and it was close, so close and yet he could not determine which directions to take in the maze of corridors and stairs.

Loki had lost count of how many turns he had made, how deeply inside of the ship he must have gone. He had passed guards lining the walls, soldiers training inside of rooms, and he seemed no closer to the gem than when he had first infiltrated the ship.

The sheer expanse of the vessel was huge. How many duplicates of their own ship could they have fit within this one? The ship did not appear to contain rooms – it contained chambers instead, and they held the same cold stone look as the walls and the floors did, making the ship’s lighting perpetually dim.

Even with his invisibility, Loki still did not trust that it would suffice. With the Tesseract’s energy having fused with his own innate magical abilities, he did not have to worry about his presence being revealed because of some sort of technology discovering him. But there was the concern that
one moment of lapsed attention, one instance of being so startled he forgot to maintain his invisibility, and he’d be surrounded on all sides by tens and tens of soldiers who he knew next to nothing about their fighting capabilities.

Tony was here. Tony was close by. Loki had to believe that, had to believe he’d find Tony at the end of this and not the Time Gem seized by someone else, someone unworthy of it.

That joke would have been beyond cruel.

Loki came to a junction, one where he had two options: left or right. There were no discernible differences between the two and they were both equally as narrow. Even when he focused on the Time Gem, on honing in on its whereabouts, it was somewhere below him rather than out to a side.

He’d have to find his way down somehow.

Loki took the next right turn.

The Time Gem felt no further away by the time he reached the midsection of the passage and so Loki continued.

He came to a direct standstill when he entered another chamber, larger than the first one he had entered, one with a huge throne-like structure centred at the back of it.

This time, he was not alone.

The first thing he noticed was that there was another figure. It stood with its back to him, its head bowed and a weapon in one hand. And then Loki felt it again, the sense that he knew this person, that he should have been able to identify them by the sight of their silhouette alone.

The second thing he noticed was that the figure was not alone either; there was some sort of fighter or mercenary to his left and the android he had followed to access the ship on his other side.

Slowly, deliberately, the man in the middle of them raised his head.

Loki had not made a single sound, remaining still, watching, listening.

“We have the Orb?” The figure in the centre asked. His was had a distinct hollow metallic tone.

Loki knew that voice.

The man on the left raised an object in his hands: a metal sphere with its surface embedded with some sort of pattern, as if it had been sculpted out of molten coral.

Loki stared. The Orb was what they had came for and it was there, right in front of him, already having been snatched from the group who were responsible for taking it from The Collector.

“The Orb is ours,” the central figure announced. If he was pleased, his voice did not reveal it. If he felt any emotion of any other sort, his voice did not reveal that either. “I will speak with Thanos.”

No, no no–

Loki couldn’t allow that to happen. To stand by and allow someone to announce to Thanos that the Orb was within his possession, to signal its exact location, would have been suicide.

Thanos had acquired the Orb before; this sequence of events must have been a part of what had led up to it.
Loki froze. Froze then lept into action all at once.

“That would not be a wise plan,” Loki found himself saying, the illusion gone. Part of him did not realise the words had left his mouth until the three figures turned to face him.

The face was enough to prompt the name.

He should have known the instant he caught sight of the hood, should have known the instant he heard his voice.

Ronan.

Loki remembered Ronan, remembered how he had fought without discrimination, how he had been the hardest of the remaining initiates to read, how he had slain and slain and slain and never tired.

If Ronan was surprised, his face did not show it. It was stoic and unmoving, those eyes looking at him as if his sudden appearance was of little surprise.

Loki did not miss the warhammer in Ronan’s hands, the threat it contained.

“You,” Ronan said.

"If you will pardon my intrusion," Loki replied, "I was not expecting to see you again either."

The two other people in the room stared at each other.

"You know each other?" one of them asked, the man dressed in armour, his eyes flicking between them.

Ronan ignored him, taking a step forwards. "Did Thanos send you?"

Loki hesitated.

He knew little of Ronan. They’d trained against one another for a time, as had they all. But what drove Ronan, what fueled him, was only something he had gotten brief glimpses into and that had all been so long ago. If he’d had longer to prepare himself, to give himself time in advance to strengthen himself enough to truly remember his time with Thanos and The Other then perhaps he could have reached a more definitive conclusion about what answer Ronan wanted to hear.

Ronan must have been unaware that Loki had failed in his invasion on Earth, otherwise he surely would have scorned his arrival. But how far did Ronan’s own loyalty to Thanos stretch? How difficult would it be to try to persuade Ronan to change his course, to abandon Thanos and the rest of them?

Loki was not particularly keen to have to fight him, not when there were so many soldiers who could be summoned at a moment’s notice and not when he remembered how ruthless Ronan was as a fighter.

"My reason for being here is linked to Thanos," Loki finally said.

“Tell me why.” And there was no mistaking it; that was a command

“How did you get aboard the Dark Aster?” the android asked.

“Nebula,” Ronan addressed her. It was a reminder to not speak out of turn, a signal that only he had the authority to demand answers. Nebula was silenced but the darkness of her eyes made it almost
impossible to discern resentment from her usual expression.

If having to fight them was an option Loki only wanted to use as a last resort, he supposed he had few other options left than to attempt to use persuasion.

“The last thing Thanos needs is another Infinity Stone delivered to him.” Any attempt to remain unaffiliated he had just ruined with his desperate grasplings for something to make them listen, for something that wouldn’t bring Thanos to their doorstep, something that had to make them act quickly and before it was too late.

“How did you know about—” Nebula began.

“The Orb houses the Power Stone,” Loki interrupted. “The Power Stone is not a thing to be given away lightly – Ronan, please—” That word had slipped out. Loki had never begged before, not like this. Not while he was being initiated and dreamed of slaughtering his captors. Not while the man who called himself his father announced that he’d spend the rest of his life alone and in a cell. Not to anyone who dared threaten his life, who dared to touch him.

Ronan remained perfectly still. “Tell me how you knew.”

“I… I’ve been following traces of the Infinity Stones across the universe.” It was not a lie. “I happened to receive a tip about certain plots to sell the Orb to The Collector.” When Ronan did not appear swayed, Loki added, “I saw everything: the explosion, the commotion, the passing of the Orb from hand to hand.”

Ronan’s eyes narrowed, the barest perceptible change. “Why?”

Loki stared back. “I have an inkling of what Thanos intends to do with the power he desires. I have no wish to see it become a reality.” Not again, not after already seeing it happen – how many times had it been now? Three should have been enough. Once had been more than enough.

Maybe this way was better. Because this way he didn’t have to pretend that it was within his interests to help them deliver the Orb to Thanos. This way had the potential to alter Ronan and the rest of them delivering the Orb to Thanos, the potential to stop Ronan completing the task Thanos had given him.

“And what would you suggest I do with it?” There was the hint of threat in Ronan’s voice, a threat that was not necessary when Ronan himself was a threat. Loki could still recall how fast Ronan could move, how much power there was behind the leather.

A test. This was a test.

Destroy it, Loki could have urged him. Either that or hide it somewhere no person could ever reach it. But Ronan would not have liked either of those answers. Instead, Loki swallowed and said, “Keep it for yourself. You already obtained it so the Orb is rightfully yours.” How he hoped that wouldn’t prove to be a mistake.

Ronan grew impossibly still. “You would turn your back on Thanos?”

This was another test, another trial Loki needed to pass. He didn’t even know if he had passed the first one. Ronan might have been inscrutable but his actions, how he had neglected to attack Loki or immediately imprison him, suggested that he at least entertained the idea. Either that or he wanted Loki to truly damn himself before doing so.

“Thanos is a madman who would destroy every living soul if he thought it meant he would have a
chance to impress Hela. I have enough self-preservation to understand how this would not be beneficial to me.”

Ronan’s eyes were locked on his. “I don’t remember you voicing any opinions on the matter before.” Still unreadable, those empty eyes of his.

“If I did,” Loki said, “then I would not be here to advise you now.”

There was the slightest of changes in Ronan’s posture; he stood taller and raised his head so when he spoke it gave the impression of him speaking down to him, having to look past his nose. “Is that all you came for? To presume to advise me?”

There were three of them and one of him. Three of them and they had Tony – Tony who was probably trapped somewhere without even a functional suit of armour.

“I came to seek an alliance,” Loki lied.

The two at either side looked to Ronan.

Ronan said nothing. Then without a hint of either mockery or curiosity, he asked, “And what use would I have for you?”

It was such a simple question and yet so loaded.

“I know Thanos as well as you do.” That wouldn’t do it, that wasn’t enough. “I know where he intends to head next. And I know where the remaining Infinity Stones are.”

Ronan evaluated him in silence. “The last time I saw you, you had been given the task of retrieving the Tesseract.” There was a pause. “Did you find it?”

Loki kept his face still. “The army Thanos provided was insufficient against Migard’s forces.” He cast his gaze downwards, as if it still shamed him. “I lost.”

“Your true motives become clear: you fear Thanos’s wrath.”

“Any sane person would fear the wrath of Thanos if they had no weapon they could use against him.”

Ronan took another step forward. “So you wish to cower behind me, to have me be bare the brunt of Thanos’s anger.”

Loki held his head up. “I know where all the remaining Infinity Stones are. I intend to fight alongside you.”

Ronan’s head tilted slightly to one side, his eyes boring into his. “Is that so?”

“I can bring you to the Reality Stone, the Mind Stone, the Space Stone. I can even bring you to the place where the Time Stone is kept. Think of how much more powerful you and your allies will be when each of you has an Infinity Stone at your fingertips.”

“I see,” Ronan said, “that you have not been idle in your defeat.”

But there was something in Ronan’s eyes, something that looked like greed, something that told Loki he had his attention, that Ronan approved of the words he had spoken.

The warrior stood next to Ronan appeared to have detected it too. “You can’t be seriously
considering this,” the man urged. “If you do this – if you turn your back on Thanos–”

Ronan did not whirl. Everything Ronan did was done with slow deliberate calculation, with no room for error. “Thanos turned his back on us when neglected to inform us the Orb contains the Power Stone.”

“Thanos is the powerful thing in the universe,” the man said. “He’ll kill us all.”

Ronan held out a hand for the Orb. “Thanos won’t be the most powerful being the in the universe. Not anymore.” Finally, there was an expression on Ronan’s features: resolve.

And then there was nothing to do but stare, caught in a trap of morbid fascination as Ronan’s hands prized open the Orb and reached in with one hand and just touched it.

Loki didn’t know if he should have despaired at the foolishness of it, the recklessness of it, or whether he should have been amazed that Ronan had not destroyed himself the instant he made contact with the core of the gem.

Great torrents of purple erupted, swirling around Ronan in a violent storm, and Ronan threw his head back and spread his arms wide and roared, though with victory or pain Loki could not have said.

The hues were so vivid, so intense, and they whirled in such rapid motions that it was dizzying to watch. It was more than a force of nature: it was a primary force of the universe, the raw unleashed potential of one of the original six stones.

Somehow Ronan was still alive. Somehow he was still moving.

The hand that held the Power Stone slammed into the head of his warhammer and the two became one, the stone embedded in the weapon.

*So that's how containers for the Infinity Gems are created,* Loki realised numbly.

Ronan's eyes flared with glowing pinks and purples before returning to their usual colour and the torrents that had erupted around him flowed into the weapon.

Seconds passed. The air stilled.

“Ronan?”

Ronan’s eyes flicked towards the man in armour. “Xandar will be mine to destroy.”

"And Thanos?"

“I have no need of him anymore,” Ronan said. Just when Loki thought he might have succeeded, that he might have knocked Ronan’s path at least slightly astray from where it had been, Ronan looked right at him and added, “This was not your doing. All you did was interrupt me informing Thanos that I have decided to decline his services.”

Loki frowned in confusion. “I–”

“I lost interest in handing the Orb to Thanos the instant I learned its true value.”

And then Loki realised that Ronan had been planning on double-crossing Thanos all along, that what he considered to be the beginnings of success in altering Ronan’s timeline meant nothing. Because he hadn’t persuaded Ronan at all; Ronan was always going to keep the Orb for himself.
and that meant... That meant that unless something drastically changed, Thanos would still retrieve the Orb from Ronan.

Loki had changed nothing. Nothing apart from briefly delaying the moment in which Thanos would discover what Ronan did.

“We head for Xandar,” Ronan announced. Loki and Ronan had not talked much during their time as initiates, nobody had. But he had heard snippets from each of the remaining initiates as Thanos had addressed them, and the name Xandar was one that had appeared with Ronan. "Once I have destroyed Xandar and have eliminated the filth that has spread from the planet my purpose will be complete." Ronan inclined his weapon. "Then I will come for Thanos." He turned to Nebula. "And then you can make your decision."

Nebula's eyes shifted, her face contorting. "You know what he did to me. I will not choose to defend him." Ronan gave a single nod but she had not finished. "You know what I used to be. I won’t let him meddle with me again."

Ronan's gaze was impassive. "Then both you and your sister will have turned your backs on him. Do not repeat Gamora's mistakes and turn your back on me too."

Nebula shook her head, her eyes glittering. "I don't care how many planets I destroy with you so long as Thanos is destroyed."

"Good. Xandar and its inhabitants must be purged."

Loki had to make an effort to conceal the sudden stiffness of his jaw, to hide his rising panic. Would all his actions only lead to another fanatic taking Thanos’s place? Would Xandar be enough for Ronan? Xandar did not sound like a heavy price to pay for the guaranteed safety of the rest of the universe from Thanos, but that was only on the condition that Ronan would stop there, that this would not be the beginnings of another mad titan.

One mad titan at a time, Loki thought. Thanos first. And presuming Loki survived that, he’d eliminate Ronan as well if he had to.

Loki would have to devise a plan to somehow steal or destroy the Orb and set Tony free at the same time.

He’d have to play along, play along until he could enact what he wanted.

None of the others said anything in reply to Ronan’s words so Loki did not either.

Ronan began to sweep from the room, the warrior following in his trail. “Prove your worth,” Ronan uttered before he exited and despite him having his back to them all, there was no doubt as to who it was directed at.

Nebula remained opposite Loki. The darkness of her eyes made it difficult to tell where exactly she was looking but he had the distinct feeling it was at him.

"What do I call you?" Nebula asked.

Lok had wanted to take his own leave too, to see if he'd be able to locate Tony without being discovered, but it seemed her full attention was on him.

"I am Loki."
She stared longer and a mechanism on the side of her face spun and clicked. "Where do I know you from?"

Loki did not wish to speak of it, did not want to acknowledge it out loud, but there was no suitable lie he could generate. "I travelled with Thanos for a time." How he wished he could have claimed they were complete strangers and left it at that.

Her head tilted to one side, the rigidity and the angle of it unnatural. "Now I understand why you want Thanos to be dead."

A moment passed.

"Good." And it would have been a good thing, a benefit if it added plausibility to his loyalty towards his new associates.

She stared at him as if waiting for something else.

"Is that all?" Loki asked.

She met his eyes, her face full of cold resilience. "If you're staying you'll need to be assigned a room. Speak to Korath."

"Korath?"

She nodded at the retreating figure of the armoured man and Loki took his leave.

***

Loki had been expecting a heist or a battle or a fight, not this. Not being granted a room and a bed and quarters to call his own. They were little more impressive than the rooms belonging to the soldiers he had glimpsed when he’d first entered the ship, equally as dark with minimal furniture and only marginally more space.

He didn’t know how he was supposed to be able to sleep there, how he could allow himself to be exposed when he was surrounded by so many enemies with Thanos looming ahead in the future and Tony locked away somewhere that remained a mystery.

A few more hours, he estimated, and the corridors would be emptier. He’d have another chance to wander them, to attempt to make another start on locating Tony.

Loki sat with his back against the wall, eyes closed.

“Loki?”

Loki startled – he had forgotten about Friday. Checking first to see if there was anyone in the neighbouring rooms who could overhear, he answered, “What is it?”

“You are no longer out of range of the comm.”

_The comm._ What was it Friday had said when he was back on the pod? That Tony was too far away and there was no connection. Except now he was on board the same ship as Tony, that had changed.

Loki activated the earpiece and tapped at it instead of speaking, three gentle touches. He did not wish to reveal himself in case the authorities of the ship had taken Tony’s earpiece and his voice would give him away.
There was a sniffing sound.

Loki tapped again, three deliberate movements.

And then—

“Hello?” Tony’s voice. Cautious, as if hardly daring to believe it.

Tony was alive. Alive. Alive and able to talk and think and move and breathe and—

Loki had been right to follow the Time Stone; it had led him to the ship Tony was on.

Loki hadn’t realised his fingernails had left marks in his skin until he opened his palms.

“Tony—” Loki managed to get out.

“Loki?”

“Are you inj—”

“You came back?”

“Yes.” Of course he did.

“You came back,” Tony breathed. This time it was not phrased a question; this time it was Tony repeating it for his own benefit. And there was relief there, so much relief that it stung.

“Are you harmed?”

“Bruised a bit. The suit’s dead. But that’s all.”

“Good.”

“Good? The suit’s down, I’m locked up and– Wait a second. How are you even talking to me? Where the hell are you?”

“I’m on the ship.”

There was a pause. “What?”

“I’m on the ship.”

“Fuck.”

Loki didn’t see why that was so deserving of the cursing until Tony asked his next question: “How did they get you?”

Loki frowned. “They didn’t.”

“So they didn’t touch you? You’re not locked up?”

“No—.”

“Then how—”

“Do you recall Mimir’s gift?”
“That brain-compass thing?”

“The very same.” Loki’s mouth was dry. “It directed me to the Time Gem, to Ronan’s ship.” Loki paused. “To you.”

“So you snuck on the ship. Wait – do they know you’re here?”

“Yes.”

“Uh – I’m gonna need you to say something to calm my nerves here because my heart’s feeling pretty delicate right now and–”

“I happened to be… previously acquainted with the ship’s captain. I proposed an alliance.”

“You did what?”

“It’s not ideal but there was little else I could have done, given that he would have contacted Thanos otherwise.”

“What?”

“Thanos sent Ronan to retrieve the Orb.”

“Wait – what? I feel like I’m repeating the same thing over and over again here.”

“Ronan was delegated the task of retrieving the Orb for Thanos. Apparently, we weren’t the only people who knew about its presence in The Collector’s museum.”

“You mean we weren’t the only ones planning to thieve from the thieves?”

“Precisely.”

“But you said you followed the Time Stone to Ronan’s ship, not the Orb.” Tony’s words caused Loki to stiffen with the realisation of what Tony had been able to deduce before he clarified it. “Does that mean you left the Orb behind to break me out of here?”

“I– I evaluated the situation. And I came to a decision.”

“That… That still sounds like you left the Orb behind to me.” Tony sounded neither pleased nor displeased. Mystified might have been an adequate description.

“The Time Gem guarantees that we can reverse time and try again if we have to. That alone makes it more valuable than the Power Stone.”

Tony was silent. “Right,” he said finally.

Loki opened his mouth and closed it again. He’d been so relieved to discover that Tony was still alive and well that he’d almost forgotten about that wall between them, about the last argument they’d had. “And I–” Loki swallowed and tried again. “I do consider you to be my partner.” He waited for a reply but none came and the seconds kept passing with excruciating slowness. Why wasn’t Tony saying anything? What had he done now to offend him? Because Loki hadn’t so much as mentioned their argument, he hadn’t even brought up any topic he knew Tony was sensitive about this time. “I did what I had to.”

And finally, finally, there was the slightest of noises caused by Tony clearing his throat. “Well… Thanks. Shit. That didn’t sound sincere. But I– I actually meant it. I mean it, I mean. It’s just...”
That the Orb was what they needed to take from Thanos, Loki could have summarised for him. That if they couldn’t stop Thanos getting the Orb then choosing to hunt Tony rather than the Power Stone could render every effort they had made towards it obsolete. That if they failed – if Loki’s choice resulted in one of them being killed – then an unthinkable number of lives would be gone.

Neither of them could say anything to relinquish the weight of that realisation and the last remnants of Tony’s sentence trailed off.

“I have a plan,” Loki said, anything to break the silence. The silence between them used to be comfortable, a warm weight. “Ronan has the Orb. He intends to head for Xandar. I prevented him from alerting Thanos so that should have bought us slightly more time. Now all we need to do is make sure Thanos doesn’t find him and retrieve the Orb.”

“Xandar?”

“It’s a planet.”

“I don’t like the sound of it.”

“Neither of us have the liberty of liking or disliking it,” Loki countered. “For now, it’s the only option we have.” Before Tony could protest, Loki spoke again. “Where are you? How securely are you guarded”

“There are soldiers outside. I’m in some kind of cell. Iron doors. Which I guess I must’ve brought on myself. They can’t hear me, I can’t hear them. There’s some kind of surveillance tech on me but it’s a visual only.”

“Won’t them seeing you talking arouse suspicion?”

“There’s a reason I’m sat like a kid in the naughty corner.”

“Ahh.” The image of the small act of defiance was almost enough to make Loki smile. “What weapons do you have?”

“They’ve got the suit. And they’ve got almost everything that came with it.” Tony’s voice lowered, becoming more urgent. “And they’ve got the Time Stone, Loki.”

Loki tensed. “Do they know what it is?”

“I don’t think they’ve even noticed it’s there. It was in the suit’s storage.”

And there was another complication Loki needed to factor into his plan: how to retrieve the Time Gem on top of everything else.

“There’s one piece of good news I’ve got for you though,” Tony said.

“What’s that?”

“I was trying to sleight-of-hand the Time Gem when I started to realise just how screwed I was. I failed that one, obviously. But there was a good reason for that. I burnt my hand.”

“How did—”

“I forgot what else I had stored in there,” Tony admitted. “Well actually, my hand started to be partially digested rather than burnt but technically speaking, stomach acid is still acid and acid burns. Except when it comes from a plant and I’m not even sure if that plant has a stomach.”
“What are you–” And then Loki realised. “That flower?” He remembered it now, how Tony’s idle curiosity on Alfheim had resulted in him pocketing not just any flower but the Crimson Flower, the plant that was capable of eating through flesh.

“That’s the one. That’s the thing that completely messed up my magician’s game. But since it’s the only thing I managed to snatch, I’m saving it for the opportune moment. I’ve uh– I’ve just gotta figure out when that moment is. Which is kind of hard when I’ve got no idea what’s going on.”

“I was going to find you. I was going to help you make your escape.”

“What about your alliance? You and your new best buddie might fall out if he finds out.”

“I don’t intend for us to have to remain here for long. This place... There are too many of them. And Thanos will follow them the instant he realises Ronan doesn’t intend to fulfil his bargain.”

“What’s the plan then?”

“For now, I ensure Ronan’s course is not heading directly towards Thanos. Therefore, the plan is this: I find you. We exit either by teleporting or in one of the ship’s pods. Then we can decide what course of action to take next. Thanos will realise Ronan doesn’t intend to fulfil his bargain. We have options. We could ambush him, we could implant false leads, we– We will have to figure out the exact specifics later.”

“What about this planet Ronan wants to visit?”

“You mean Xandar?”

“That’s the one.”

“If Xandar is the price we pay to stop Thanos then–” Loki broke off. He knew exactly what Tony would say, how Tony would understand the logic of it and how the guilt would still seize him anyway. “One planet is nothing in comparison to all the planets in the universe. We eliminate Thanos first.” Loki paused. He could feel the tension again, how Tony was about to protest. “Then we can stop any harm coming to Xandar afterwards, if you wish.”

Tony let out a long exhale. “Okay.”

“First,” Loki said, “I need to discover where you are. Do you remember anything about the route you took when they put you in your cell?”

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Loki wondered corridors and along stairs, through arches and storage units and kitchens until he came across a locked gate where the pull of the Time Gem was the strongest. The gate was heavy set, wedged between two walls, and it was the only door under heavy guard. There were six guards stood at the entrance alone and he could hear the movements of others beyond it, the sound of footsteps and the muttering of voices.

A couple of metres away from the gate was the closest Loki could get without risking one of the guards discovering something invisible was there and from that vantage point, he could just about make out other cells beyond the door and a locked storage cupboard directly ahead. The compass lured him straight to that cupboard and he could feel how close the Time Gem was if he concentrated on its essence.

And Tony – Tony had to be somewhere close. The only cells Loki could see into were empty but
there was a fork at the end of the passage and there must have been more cells beyond that point, presumably one that contained Tony.

Loki had no means of sneaking through the gate without leaving behind a trail of corpses or an inexplicably vanished set of guards. They would surely notice the clang of keys if he attempted to pickpocket them and open the locks and he wouldn’t be able to open a portal without the guards being in the way of it. And if he did any of those things and word got out, he knew suspicion would not be slow to fall to him. He was a stranger here and even though he had the briefest of acquaintances with Ronan, it was not as if Ronan would show him any leniency.

Loki would have to be careful. One false move and they’d know he would betray them without thought if he had the chance. One false move and they’d know he was here for Tony and held his and Ronan's new alliance with as much regard as he’d hold for a vow made to a piece of chicken.

Ronan was not a person he could depend upon and it seemed that Ronan also had a streak of idiocy within him if his claims were true. If he’d truly been planning to double-cross Thanos then initiating a conversation with him in which he’d reveal his true intentions was a terrible idea that served no purpose. Letting the enemy know he was coming for them and what weapons he had within his arsenal would only put them at more of a disadvantage.

But Loki would have to take what was given. And if he couldn't break Tony out himself as well as steal or destroy the warhammer, then the only option left for Tony would be for Loki to persuade Ronan to free him.

If the Norns were just – which Loki knew for a certainty that they weren’t – then he wouldn’t have to resort to attempting to cajole Ronan. Once the Orb was dealt with, he’d be able to go through the guards without so much as getting out of breath, without even having to exert his muscles.

Surely that way around would be far easier than attempting to convince Ronan that freeing Tony was within his best interests. Somehow, Loki suspected it would not be an easy task and the most likely way of proving Tony’s value would be with his hold over the Time Gem. Only revealing that would most likely introduce a great number of new risks. Ronan would know for a certainty that Tony had the Time Gem – assuming that he didn’t already know – and may decide to take it for himself. Ronan would be outnumbered by people capable of wielding Infinity Stones, which Loki suspected he wouldn’t be fond of. And Ronan would know that Loki had omitted the truth when he had first claimed he had boarded the ship in order to propose an alliance. But perhaps Ronan would see the advantage in them having another person on their side if they were to eventually face Thanos. If Ronan cut his contact with Thanos, then it would only be a matter of time before Thanos assumed betrayal and would come for him – no, would come for them. The Soul Stone would see to that.

* * *

“*I managed to locate you,*” Loki told Tony over the comm after he’d retreated back to his room.

“*How many people are guarding me?*”

“I counted twelve soldiers on my journey alone, though they were guarding around the general area rather than you specifically.”
“Awesome,” Tony said. “I’m flattered they think I’m such a threat.”

“There is also a locked gate you will need to navigate through and your belongings will most likely be in the storage cupboard directly opposite it.”

“Got it.”

“Once I get the Orb – or the Warhammer, as it is probably called now – I will be able to use portals to our advantage to retrieve you.”

“So I’m supposed to do what – wait around and look pretty?”

“Are you objecting because you don’t have to risk anything?”

“I– Maybe I am.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you–”

“Have the attention span of a Mayfly? Yes. Often. Except I lost count because, you know, low attention span.”

“I was going to say that you are ridiculous but then I realised the absurdity of asking in the first place.”

“What’s that make it now, 4–2?”

“Pardon?” And then Loki realised what it was that Tony was referring to, the score of their friendly competition they had before everything had taken a turn for the worse, before their argument and before Tony had been taken away. “I believe it was 5–2.”

“Not that you’ve got any ulterior motives or anything.” Tony’s laughter was slightly strained but Loki appreciated the gesture of it all the same, the show of good faith in attempting to get a step closer back to the rapport that had existed between them.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Loki responded dryly.

“Hey, uh – about the comm. Do you think it’d be a good idea to leave it on? I mean, if someone figures out what you’re up to I might need to make an emergency exit and meet you halfway or something. Don’t panic, I’m not gonna be talking in your head all day. Actually, I can’t guarantee that. I’m bored in here already and there’s nothing to do. So maybe I’ll keep a running commentary going all day but there’s a mute button on your earpiece for a reason. If you can’t tolerate me that much, you can always just press it. And I guess you’ll have to make an effort not to talk back to me when other people are around because that wouldn’t look good for the general state of your sanity. Or who knows, maybe they’d eventually piece it all together when you start yelling at me to shut up.”

Loki waited for Tony to stop rambling; the thought of being stranded and uninformed about the goings on of the ship must have unsettled him. “I can see the benefit of leaving it on.” There was a small inhale picked up from Tony’s microphone. “Though I wouldn’t recommend talking to me if I am speaking to someone else, particularly if they have an important role on the ship.”

“Right.” Tony’s voice was only a little breathless. “Yeah. Keep your wits about you and all that.”

“I will get you out of here, Tony.”
There was the sound of another inhale. “Okay.” An exhale. “I believe you.” There was a long pause before Tony added, “And Loki?”

“Yes?”

“For the record…” Tony trailed off and Loki pictured him biting his lip. “I do trust you when it comes to stuff like this.”

“I know.” It was the other things, the less important things Loki could have done that Tony did not fully trust him with. Tony had made that perfectly clear.

“And when it comes to a lot of stuff that isn’t like this either.”

It wasn’t perfect but for the first time since their disagreement, there was something resembling a smile on Loki’s face.
Chapter 44

If Loki closed his eyes and tried to not think, he could pretend they were back on their pod. Nothing existed apart from himself, the darkness, and the sound of Tony's voice.

They must have talked well into the night.

The flow of conversation had been stilted at first, the uncertainty remaining between them in the aftermath of their argument making for long pauses and gaps where neither of them knew what to say. Their speech was clumsy, the spaces between the words filled with the underlying tension made all the more intense by the thought of it continuing, by the thought of them never being able to return to what they had once been.

But Tony was persisting. And if even Tony wasn’t finding it easy to talk, then something must have been severely amiss. But Tony was trying, at least. After their botched attempts at conversing about matters that had little to do with their situation, Tony still hadn’t admitted defeat to the pressing awkwardness. That in itself, the defiance against the loss of their natural rapport, meant more than the words Tony did not say. But the knowledge of its presence, that Tony must have at least on some level desired the same thing Loki did – to be able to speak freely and without having to mind their tongues – made it easier to continue.

And as they carried on, bit by bit, it became easier. Just ever so slightly.

Tony did not deal well with silence. And considering how much he despised silence, Loki was not surprised that Tony particularly despised being locked alone inside of a cell. That must have been part of the reason why he kept pressing him to talk, why he kept prompting Loki to speak for longer turns that went without his usual interruptions. It was ironic in a way how Tony's hatred of silence resulted in him being so uncharacteristically quiet, pushing Loki to fill in the proportion of the conversation that would under normal circumstances be occupied by Tony. So much so that when Loki had been talking for some time about his first visit to Muspelheim and he'd received no feedback or response, he was able to pass it off as the imprisonment having a detrimental effect on Tony. It was later, though how much later Loki had no way of being able to tell, that he realised Tony must have been asleep, the sound of his gentle even breathing barely perceptible through the earpiece.

***

"You insulted me greatly," Loki said the next morning when he heard the sound of Tony stirring, the rustling of a blanket and disgruntled noises coming from his throat.

"Huh?" Tony's voice was dry. Loki imagined his eyes would be bleary.

"I had no idea you found me quite so droll," Loki said with enough lightness in his tone for Tony to be able to deduce that he wasn't being entirely serious even at such an early hour of the morning. There was a grating noise. Loki assumed Tony must have been scratching the skin near his ear.

"If the past number of months have taught me anything, it's that it's impossible to be bored when you're around. I swear it's like you're a chaos magnet or something."

"Whereas you're the perfect image of orderliness?"

"Alright, you got me there. But uh... What were we talking about again?"
"I was about to accuse you of finding conversation with me so dull that you fell asleep during it."

Tony paused. "I did that?"

"You stopped responding while I was talking so I can only assume so, yes."

"Oh," Tony said. And then, spoken so offhandedly even by Tony's standards that it sounded slightly odd, he added, "Yeah, there's nothing for it. You must've bored me to sleep."

Loki had no desire to comment on whatever was causing Tony discord, not while they were still on the process of repairing the fracture between them.

"At last, the truth comes out."

Given that enough time had passed that others were occasionally seen walking past his door, Loki saw little point in putting off getting up any longer and sat upright.

"What are you doing?"

Loki had forgotten that Tony would have been able to hear that movement.

"I won't achieve very much by remaining in my quarters."

"Fair play. You're gonna press mute while you're in the bathroom though, right?"

Loki grimaced. "I do have certain standards to maintain."

"Just checking."

"You're locked inside of a cell and that's your primary concern?"

Tony was probably shrugging.

"I'd hate you to ruin your upper-class gentlemanly image." Tony almost sounded like his usual self, the only thing remaining slightly off being the key. "I mean, sure, I'll sleep by your side for weeks in a room so small we're practically cosying up to each other but I draw the line at having to listen to you pee. To be honest, I find the whole thing kind of weird. Even the thought of you brushing your teeth is weird. Like Norse Gods having to maintain their hygiene and doing normal human things like eating and shitting and washing their clothes is just… unnatural."

"I hope you're not going to continue with this topic of conversation while I speak to Ronan."

"That's your plan for today?"

Loki had reached his door and paused before opening it. "There's only so much I can plan. I suppose I'm going to be forced into improvising."

***

Ronan was not particularly difficult to locate. Neither was he inconspicuous, the darkness of the markings streaking from his eyes contrasting against his blue-tinged skin. Not Jotun-blue, Loki noted, although the hue was not that dissimilar.

His eyes were sealed shut, the warhammer standing upright, locked between his hands.

"What's going on?" Tony asked over the comm. "Why's no one talking?"
Loki could not reply without drawing unwanted attention to himself.

Ronan's eyes opened.

"Seriously," Tony continued, "can you tell them to speak up? I can't hear shit."

The rest of the chamber was not empty; as it had been the previous day, Nebula and Korath were present, standing a few meters behind Ronan.

"You," Ronan uttered, his gaze cast straight at Loki.

Loki straightened. "Is there a problem?"

"Yeah," Tony muttered, "the problem being I'm missing half the conversation."

Loki’s face twitched.

Ronan analysed him for a number of seconds. "Come closer."

There was nothing that made Loki particularly keen to do so but he forced himself to anyway.

Ronan glanced at the warhammer and then back and Loki, clenching his fist tighter around it.

Loki braced himself. Maybe Ronan had somehow figured out his true motives, or maybe Ronan didn't care what his true motives were but had decided that Loki's assets weren't worth the risks that came with his presence anymore.

And then Ronan asked, "What do you know of Infinity Stones?"

Was that a trick question? Ronan was too much of a void to read but the only signal he was giving seemed to be that he was expecting an answer. Loki supposed he had implied that his contribution would be to benefit them with his knowledge of the stones and so perhaps it wouldn’t be all that unreasonable to believe Ronan might have an interest in taking him up on his offer.

"Where do you want me to begin?"

"I don't know," Tony sighed, "maybe by turning up the volume."

For that, Loki decided, as soon as he had the opportunity he would discretely lower the volume of his earpiece until Tony's commentary wasn't quite so distracting.

"The Infinity Stones..." Ronan began. "How long do they take to completely master? What is the full extent of the Power Stone? What is it that the Power Stone is trying to show me?"

That made Loki pause. Show him? Was that like the visions the Tesseract had supplied a number of the mortals with just by sheer proximity?

"What do you think it's trying to show you?"

For once, for what Loki counted as a blessing, Tony did not see it as an appropriate moment to speak.

"The stone... connects me," Ronan said. "I can feel the birthing and the dying of the stars as we pass them. I can feel the energy of the ship, the life force of every person on board this ship. But there is something more."
Loki swallowed. He could recall how he had been able to feel the sensation of the Tesseract reaching out to the Time Gem when they had first collected it, how the gems had responded and reacted to each other. If he had been able to detect the Tesseract recognising a fellow one of its kind then there was nothing to say that Ronan could not do the same with the Power Stone.

"What more?" Loki asked, almost wishing that he didn’t have to hear the answer.

Ronan frowned. "There is something else with great power on this ship or somewhere close by. I…” For the first time, Ronan looked uncertain, his frown deepening and his mouth hesitating to form the words. “I don’t know what to name it. I don’t know where it comes from.” Then the traces of doubt vanished. “But it is close. That much is definite.”

Ronan knew there was a powerful object on board. He might not have known that there were in fact *two* unaccounted for powerful objects on board the ship, but given that over the course of a single night Ronan had gone from being able to touch the core of the gem and starting to detect sources of power, it was only a matter of time before the truth was discovered.

They needed to be off the ship before that happened.

If Ronan found out of his own accord, Loki would be a traitor, someone who had deliberately misinformed him. It was better to be a traitor of his own admission. He already had the Tesseract on his person. If he attempted to introduce Tony as yet another ally, there was no telling what would happen, whether they would both be welcomed to the cause or whether Ronan would see them as conspirators.

*No,* Loki decided. It would be better to find the Time Stone as quickly as possible and use his magic to hide it. But since Ronan already knew there was another large power source aside from what came from the Orb...

"I may have an answer to that," Loki said, and it went against all instinct to bring the Tesseract to hand, to display the most powerful weapon within his arsenal for all to observe.

Ronan eyed it. "What," he said, "is that?"

"I told you the truth when I said that I lost the battle on Midgard. What I did not tell you was that despite losing the battle, I still managed to salvage the Tesseract."

"Uh," Tony said over the comm, "I really hope I didn't hear that right. Because that sure sounded like you just told someone you've got the Tesseract."

Loki ignored the noises of protest Tony was making and Ronan moved forward to examine the Tesseract, his fingers hovering by the faces of the cube.

Then Ronan reevaluated his focus, his eyes boring into Loki’s. "You did not think to mention this earlier."

If Loki allowed himself to be humbled, to be abashed or shamed, then there would be no redeeming himself. Their standing was already as imbalanced as he was willing to allow it to be, and if he were to bow his head and apologise then the dynamic between them would shift into one where Loki would have to be far more subservient, a standing he would not be able to reestablish. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see how Nebula and Korath had lent forwards, how eager they were to witness his downfall.

Loki held Ronan’s gaze. "I hope you can understand why I chose to remain cautious before revealing my hand."
"It’s no coincidence you chose to reveal that only after you realised I would discover your secret soon enough."

Loki forced himself to maintain eye contact. Ronan’s eyes were such a pale blue they were practically white. "I don't like to take unnecessary risks." And then just when there was a flicker of anger on Ronan's features, Loki said, "We are both risks to each other: you do not know yet to what extent you can trust me and the same is true in reverse. I wanted to ensure you would not take the Tesseract from me before revealing that I had it, which, I hope you can understand, is my only slight advantage against Thanos."

None of the muscles in Ronan's face moved. Loki had no way of telling whether or not that was a good sign. Ronan turned his back on him, his fingers curling tighter around the shaft of the hammer. "I had my doubts when you infiltrated my ship with the means that you did."

"In my defence," Loki said, his voice quieter than usual, "I did not know it was your ship."

Ronan turned back around. "You were there when we were all allocated our tasks. You knew I was assigned the Orb."

"That was years ago--"

"No more than a couple."

Loki’s mouth shut. Of course. He had almost forgotten that far more time had passed from his own perspective compared to the perspective of others.

"I had no way of knowing what had become of you," Loki said instead, "or whether you were succeeding or whether you were even on its trail."

Ronan’s eyes flashed. "You doubt my competence."

The flashing was a signal that it would be wise for Loki to amend his statement.

"It was your motives that were unknown to me rather than your competence." When Ronan did not immediately respond, Loki continued. "I had no way of knowing where you were, what your plans were, how you would respond if someone approached you seeking an alliance, whether you would stand with or against Thanos…"

"Then you finding your way onto my ship in the first place is an unlikely coincidence."

"I was just as surprised as you were," Loki said. "But I suppose it is not that improbable given that we were both following the same stone. It was bound to lead us to the same location at one point or another." Ronan still did not appear satisfied. "I understand," Loki pressed, "that you have few reasons to trust me. The way that I made my way on to your ship was not exactly... honourable."

"I care little for honour. What I care for are results. And if you in any way attempt to thwart my plans--"

Loki held open his hands. "I have no intention of doing so. I want Thanos dead, just as you do. That is all I want."

Ronan evaluated him in silence. "Then you will need to prove yourself worthy of being on our side. You claim you know the location of all the remaining gems. I want to hear the proof."

Loki swallowed. "I suspect my knowledge could be the only thing ensuring my survival if
you question my motives."

"Your survival is not ensured," Ronan answered, his voice flat.

Loki supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that Ronan wasn't the type to speak the words he knew the other wanted to hear, even if lies would have made most people more likely to cooperate.

"What if I can prove my worth without having to disclose all the information I have gleaned at once?"

"Can you?" Ronan asked without any intonation.

"If I reveal the locations of each stone one at a time, you can see the evidence of my worth and we can begin to collect the rest of the gems ourselves. In the meantime, we can come to some sort of arrangement, I'm sure."

For a long moment, Ronan evaluated him and Loki dared believe he might actually have been considering it. "Tell me, then."

Now? Loki blinked. He hadn't expected Ronan to take him up on his offer quite that quickly.

He ran through the stones in his mind. The Tesseract was his. He wasn't going to reveal the Time Stone's presence too if Ronan wasn't able to distinguish between its energy and the energy of the Tesseract yet. Thanos had the Soul Stone. Ronan had the Power Stone and that made three Infinity Stones aboard the Dark Aster alone. The Reality Stone remained at The Collector's museum, which was certainly obtainable but perhaps a little too close for Loki's liking. If Thanos was already on their tail then the last thing Loki wanted to do was lead him to the Aether.

That left only one stone as the last viable option to prove he could be a trusted ally.

"The Mind Stone," Loki said, "is on Midgard." Upon seeing Ronan’s blank expression, Loki realised his mistake. How he hated to push himself to remember, to recall the precise words Thanos had spoken. "Planet C-533. Terra. Earth."

Loki could hear it, the intake on Tony's breath before Tony whispered, "You better have one hell of a good reason for that."

Doubt was another distraction he didn't need.

"Where is this planet?" Ronan asked.

"Far from here," Loki replied. "But," he added, "distance means very little when you are able to open portals."

Nebula stepped forward. "That's your idea? We trust you to lead us through a portal to a place we don't even know?" She looked to Ronan. "The Power Stone has the ability to destroy entire planets. The Power Stone is all you need to destroy Xandar." Her eyes flickered between them. "And if the Power Stone can eliminate planets then it should be all we need to eliminate Thanos too."

How exactly was Loki supposed to argue? He could hardly point out that the Norns had neglected to proclaim Ronan as a viable ally which meant therefore he would be doomed to fail. He doubted they would take to that very kindly.

"And what about after?" Loki asked. "The Power Stone is a desirable object. Destroying Xandar
will create enemies and will mark you as targets. What happens after?"

Somehow, Ronan's eyes were colder as they met his. "Don't presume to advise me."

"I won't advise you. Instead I'll only remind of the facts: Thanos has the Soul Stone. It knows you. It can encapsulate you. The Power Stone may not be able to stand against that for long. With only stone against another, you are not maximising your chances of winning against Thanos."

Korath spoke before Ronan could. "By not trusting an outsider I'd say we are maximising our chances of winning. After Gamora, the fewer people we involve, the better."

Loki closed his eyes in exasperation. "Then let me go alone. You would risk nothing."

"Except you bringing back more people we can't trust," Korath pointed out. "The first thing you said was that you were tracking the Orb. I don't know if I believe you about Thanos but I believe you were telling the truth about the Orb." Korath strode forward to whisper something in Ronan’s ear and Ronan became very still, the motion of his eyes moving towards Loki being the only thing that had caused him to realise just how statuesque Ronan usually was when he was standing.

"You expressed you weren’t sure how the Infinity Stones would fare against each other,” Ronan said finally. “Let’s test that.”

Before Loki could react, Ronan closed his eyes and a blast of purple exploded from the warhammer, wrapping itself around the Tesseract, forming a film over the top of it.

The touch was wrong, intrusive, the tendrils clutching at the Tesseract like a claw.

"You said you can teleport," Ronan stated. "Is that still the case?"

With something akin to horror, Loki realised the Tesseract was distant from him, the Power Stone shielding its energy from him, as if it had formed a barrier between them.

He could feel its energy underneath the surface and instinct made him attempt to call through to the Tesseract through the barrier with his mind.

The Tesseract was Loki’s – it was supposed to be his. He had wielded it for far longer than Ronan had wielded the Power Stone and surely that would mean he should have had far more control over it than Ronan, far more of an established relationship. Loki’s connection with the Tesseract had to be stronger. It had to.

Something in the air broke and then Loki was whole again, the Tesseract completely within his grasp.

Ronan watched him, remaining impassive. "I will think on your proposal. Until then, you are dismissed."

***

"Loki?" Tony asked while Loki was walking back to his quarters.

Loki didn't have it in him to respond, not yet.

"Loki?" Tony asked again.

Loki could pretend he had taken Tony up on his offer and had silenced the sound of his voice.
“Loki? You there?”

"I need a moment," Loki managed to get out, picking up his pace.

His head thunked against the wall as he all but collapsed into the slab of a bed he had been allocated and his breath started to go in and out faster and faster because Ronan had almost managed to block the link between him and the Tesseract and Thanos would be coming and he hadn't been able to do anything about it and there was still so much left to do and–

"Loki," Tony said, more gently this time. "I might not have heard everything that went down but trust me, if they let you walk away that's a pretty good sign they don't want you dead. And since you're still very much alive and aren't locked up like a dumbass," Tony continued, "you're free to wreak chaos."

"Wrecking chaos may have caused the problem." Loki's voice had still not quite regained its strength.

"Take it from an expert – there's nothing like more chaos to solve a problem caused by chaos." A moment passed and Tony cleared his throat. "Just– Just remember we've got no reason to panic yet. If it all goes south, you can come and burst a portal through the wall to my cell if you have to and then we can figure out another way of getting the Power Stone before Thanos does."

Loki's forehead met his knees with a hollow thud. "That's where you're wrong."

The only response he received was silence.

"Ronan–" Loki broke off. "Ronan has the Power Stone. It’s not like the Tesseract or the Time Stone – the Power Stone’s domain is power itself, rather than space or time and–" The next admission was spoken at a volume barely above a whisper. "He almost did it, Tony. He was almost able to block me from the Tesseract’s power. The Power Stone must favour something about him, his ambition or his ruthlessness or his capacity for strength. Ronan hasn’t even had the stone for longer than a week and he’s already… " He could feel the pitch of his voice rising. "What if I can't make portals soon? What if I can't get to you? What if I can’t teleport us out of here? I–"

"Shit."

"I don't think that quite covers it."

"Okay, worst comes to the worst then we do it the old fashioned way without teleporting or my suit and we fight our way out. There are still pods here, right? We can take off in one of those, plan an escape and salute at them on our way out with a ‘Gentleman! You will always remember this as the day you almost caught…"

Loki ignored whatever reference Tony was trying to make and squeezed his eyes shut. "There is an alternative."

"Is this the part where you tell me what you were doing when you told them the Mind Stone's on Earth?"

“I had to tell Ronan something.”

“I’m not–” Tony cut himself off. In his mind's eye, Loki imagined Tony was holding up his hands. “I’m not telling you flat out that you shouldn’t have done it, okay? I’m just telling you I don’t know why you did it yet.”
“Ronan has started to wield the stone; in doing so, the stone’s abilities allow him to detect sources of power. He knows there is something else on board, namely, the Tesseract.”

“Not the Time Stone?”

“Not yet.” He hadn't been able to hide it without knowing precisely where it was yet but it was only a matter of time, a question of how long it would remain unnoticed. Loki relayed his reasoning, how he’d needed to give Ronan some assurance, how the Mind Stone was one of the only few remaining options left, how he’d only said it with the intent to stall rather than hand over another Infinity Gem to someone who wasn’t them.

“I get it,” Tony said when Loki had finished. “I don’t know what call I'd make but for the record, your call wasn’t a bad one.” There was the faint click of Tony’s fingers. “Except for the part about the paradox.”

“Pardon?”

“But that’s only if Ronan actually gets the Mind Stone. Because it’s either in my lab right now or stuck in Vision’s forehead and we need it to stay that way because ULTRON not happening would change… a whole lot, actually.” Tony swallowed. "So what we could do with round about now is a plan."

Loki let out a small snort.

"They're still heading for Xandar," Tony went on. "They're not expecting you to do anything until after. And they seem to have forgotten all about your illusions so that’s a dumb move on their part."

“You sound as if you are about to suggest something.”

“I'm betting Ronan doesn't sleep with that magic glow-stick of his. He's gotta put it down at some point, right? And maybe when he thinks he's picked it back up he'll realise it doesn't feel exactly how he remembered it."

***

The increasing fragility of Loki’s alliance with Ronan left with him with few options but to bring his plans into action sooner than would have been ideal. And that meant in order to acquire the Power Stone, he needed the warhammer. To find the weapon, he suspected, he would have to find Ronan. Ronan must have slept at some point, surely, but if there was any being capable of not tiring then Loki would have placed his bets on Ronan.

Chambers. Ronan must have had chambers somewhere. Everyone else did.

Loki left a duplicate in his room again in case someone came to check on him before he began wandering the corridors.

It was different this time. This time he did not have the pull of the Time Stone, the information supplied to him by Tony's voice.

He’d warned Tony that he needed him to be quiet and wasn't all that surprised that when he stressed the importance of it, Tony didn't find it quite as impossible to remain silent as he might have otherwise done.

Loki walked the corridors for what must have been hours. He’d started trying to locate the largest
living quarters in the ship, assuming that no other than the ship's captain would occupy them, only to recall that Ronan was far more prone to pragmatism than ostentatiousness. After that he'd started searching more systematically to ensure his pursuit of the Power Stone would be made easier if he had to resort to looking for it night after night.

During the journey back to his room his limbs were weary, the exhaustion of the past couple of days causing his mind to be less than sharp.

He hadn't noticed there was someone inside his room at first, someone who had opened the door and whose hand had gone straight through the double he had left.

Nebula stared at the fingers that had passed through the double's wrist.

The scene was telling enough; Nebula must have been sent to retrieve him and having found the double reluctant – Loki's double wouldn't have been able to do much talking, let alone fight – she must have decided to use a method that was a little more persuasive.

The door to his room was still open and Loki slipped through and closed it behind him.

Nebula whirled around, her fists drawn, only to find that she could not see the intruder.

Loki's double disapparated, only Nebula did not appear to be particularly shocked by it. Instead, she drew her knives, each one at least the size of her forearms, and took a step closer towards the door, her posture drawn, prepared for combat, prepared to attack.

It was the ease at which she set into her stance, how almost eager she was for it that caused Loki to deliberate.

If he allowed her to leave then she would no doubt recanter her tale and what efforts Loki had put into attempting to validify the temporary alliance between himself and Ronan would be destroyed.

That did not leave many options remaining.

Before he could act, she swung at him with one arm, a strike that would have been a surprisingly accurate guess for where his neck was, had he not dodged.

Nebula lunged forward again and Loki grabbed her wrist, a manoeuvre which earned him a knee to the gut.

And then Loki didn't have the desire to split his attention between remaining invisible and combatting her and it wasn't as if she didn't know precisely who it was she was fighting anyway.

Loki twisted her wrist, an action that was supposed to cause her to involuntary release the knife in her hand except her wrist twisted all the way around and the sheer wrongness of it was enough to cause him to fumble.

Android.

He'd forgotten that her limbs might not operate in the same way as he'd expect.

She threw the knife and caught it in the hand that was facing the wrong direction and Loki only just managed to move his arm away in time.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted," she said.

"I'm glad I managed to make a positive first impression," Loki replied, jabbing at her stomach and
causing her to double over.

“Er…” Tony’s voice sounded in his ear. “Did I hear that right? Because, historically, you’re not
great at those.”

She did not remain incapacitated for long, sending kick after kick and strike after strike with her
knives until Loki was having to block, block and dodge, in a flurry that left him with little
opportunity to retaliate with attacks of his own.

“Wait a second,” Tony said, “are you– Is someone beating the shit out of you or is it the other way
around?”

“Both,” Loki replied and Nebula refrained from trying to stab him for long enough to give him a
look that left no questions about how much she doubted his sanity.

And then they resumed, her knives causing sparks to fly from his daggers as they met.

Just when he was thinking he’d need to increase his attacks, that he’d need to resort to using his
illusions, to using the Tesseract, the siren began. It was a dreadful, unmistakable wailing, loud
enough to make his ears throb.

Tony? Had he decided to escape without warning him and trigger some sort of alarm?

The siren was enough to give Nebula pause, the fight temporarily forgotten. Her knives remained
poised in the air as if she was unsure what to do with them.

“You think pretending to look shocked will save you
now?” she scorned, attempting to shove him
out of the way, the movement lacking in any grace in comparison to how she fought.

“This is none of my doing.”

“We are being attacked and you claim it’s not because of you?”

Being attacked, Loki’s thoughts repeated, dread knotting in his stomach, making him unable to
move. That must have been what the alarm was for.

"I was sent to retrieve you for Ronan only to find some hologram in your place and you expect me
to believe you? You think the timing of this means I'll let you get away with it? That I won't come
for you after I kill everyone who comes for this ship?"

“What?” Loki uttered.

“As if you don’t know who by.” Nebula advanced closer, her blades reflecting in the dark.

“I told you – I want Thanos dead as much as you do.”

She locked her gaze with his. “So you told him where we are, did you? You just couldn’t wait until
you managed to get the opportunity to–”

"I was the one who stopped Ronan from contacting Thanos in the first place. Why would I–”

Nebula’s eyes grew darker. “Then we were all idiots to believe you could’ve been on our side.”

Then Loki could see there was no getting through to her, no way of convincing her in time.

Loki closed his eyes. “Then defend your ship to the best of your ability.”
“Wait. Where are you–”

***

Loki appeared on the corridor that led to Tony’s cell.

“I’m getting you out,” Loki stated over the comm, his words rushing as they left his mouth.

There was no time to explain.

“Is it him? Is he coming?” Tony’s voice was urgent.

“Yes.”

No time to get the Power Stone.

They’d have to find another way, they’d have to travel back and try again. There’d be a narrow window of time in the past six hours or so when neither of them had been in the presence of the Power Gem. Yes. That was it. They’d have to go back to that point, make sure they didn’t see themselves, make sure that no one else did either.

But he needed to get out Tony out first. Tony and the Time Gem.

The sirens were still wailing, flashing red on the walls. Somewhere behind him, there was the running of footsteps and voices shouting out for the soldiers to assemble.

Loki vanished and moved closer towards the gate between the corridor and the cells.

Four guards. That was less than last time. The rest of them must have been summoned to assist with the attack, to man the weapons and get into formation in the pods around the ship. It was a minor blessing, the only stroke of good fortune that an invasion provided.

Every second was one second closer to the moment Thanos would arrive.

Loki reached the first guard, his blade sliding across the neck from behind. The second only had time to look to see what the commotion was before he sent a knife through his temple.

The body of the first guard was still in his arms. Loki flung it at the third guard, the one who had now had sufficient time to pin down his whereabouts. There was a grunt and then the body collapsed on the ground. The guard trapped underneath it would not remain incapacitated for long but the dagger Loki threw afterwards ensured that he would.

The fourth guard managed to take advantage of the distraction, bludgeoning him with the weapon all the guards carried, a blow that by the guard’s sheer luck struck him in the chest. It was a collision that made his illusion fall and the guard had just about enough time to spot him and open their mouth to call out before Loki grabbed their head and twisted.

They were puppets of Ronan’s, Loki reminded himself as he shot a portal through the gate that separated the prisoner’s section from the rest of the ship. The guards might have been defending their ship but they were also defending it so it could achieve its true purpose: destroying Xandar.

Loki wasted no time in moving forward.

The cells were empty.

“I’m here,” Loki said.
“I think I can hear you.”

Tony’s voice was not only audible through the earpiece; Loki could also hear it without its aid, the sound fainter, its origin further away. It had come from somewhere to the right so Loki prepared to take that turn when he reached the fork in the corridor.

“I can hear you,” a different voice said.

Loki turned.

Korath.

He didn’t have time for this. Not now. Not with Thanos coming.

“What are you doing here?” Loki regretted it the instant the words had left his mouth, how accusatory it was, how guiltier it made himself sound.

“I was sent to question the prisoner about where he acquired his armour. The source could be a valuable one for arming our own soldiers. Then the alarm sounded before I began and I had different priorities.” Korath narrowed eyes. “Then you arrived and I had very different priorities.” Korath moved forward, his fingertips lightly touching his gun. “What brings you here, Loki?”

*Think quickly.*

“Ronan sent me.”

Korath shook his head. “What for?”

“He wanted me to retrieve the prisoner.”

The disbelief was apparent in his eyes. “You but not me?”

“In light of a very recent conversation, myself and Ronan came to the conclusion that it would be beneficial for the two of us to speak to the prisoner.”

“And in light of the very recent alarm, you still thought a conversation would be a priority?”

“The prisoner has something.” Loki moved closer towards the area where he had heard Tony’s voice coming from. “Something that will help us greatly against those that dare attack us.”

Korath raised an arm, blocking Loki’s path. “Is that right?”

“We are running on a very short schedule, I warn you–”

“No, I am warning you. Try to pass me before I contact Ronan and I’ll take you for a traitor.”

Loki could see it, how Korath’s hands had tightened around his gun, how he had already taken a step back to give himself space to fire.

He was going to shoot.

He couldn’t allow that to happen. He wasn’t going to allow that to happen.

Loki summoned the Tesseract to hand, prepared to create a portal to push Korath out into space or into an ocean or anywhere he wouldn’t be returning from only–
Only it didn’t work.

Loki stared at the Tesseract, willing it to cooperate, to assist them, to just do this one thing, this one thing that would spare their lives and allow them to escape unscathed.

And then he realised the connection between them was hindered.

Ronan announced himself by speaking before Loki turned around.

“When this is over,” Ronan vowed, enough chill in his voice to make Loki freeze, “I will throw each one of your organs to a different star.”

The bitter unfairness of it lodged in Loki’s throat. “I’m trying to buy us more time!”

Ronan did not so much as blink. “Is that why you killed my guards?”

“Plenty more will die than just your guards if I can’t–”

“If you can’t do what?”

“I can buy us more time – I can transport us across the universe. We don’t have to face Thanos right away, we can make time to plan, to strategise, to form a–”

“I will not flee. There is no one more powerful than me in all the universe, not while I have the stone.”

Loki’s mouth was filled with everything he couldn’t say, with the sheer wrongness of Ronan’s statement, with every reason he had why Ronan would never win. “You won’t win, you can’t win, you don’t have enough–”

“I have the essence of power itself.”

“You have it,” Loki allowed. “But you haven’t mastered it, not yet.”

Ronan remained indifferent. “I won’t need to.”

Loki chanced a glance further down the corridor, past the section Korath was blocking.

Nothing.

Except…

Were those fingers were clenched around the bars?

Tony.

Tony’s fingers.

“If you want any hope of surviving Thanos,” Loki said, “you’ll need to master it, master it and–”

Ronan stepped closer. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning.”

Loki was painfully aware of the enclosure that was the ship, how he was surrounded on all sides, how he had nowhere to go, nowhere he could teleport to while Ronan still had hold over the Tesseract.
“I came here to give us an advantage,” Loki said. “I know where the Time Stone is, I know who can wield it, who can give us more time to prepare, who can reverse everything and make this—”

“I’m right here, asshole,” Tony called out to Ronan.

“And I can prove it to you,” Loki continued, the words flying from his tongue. “The Time Gem is on board the ship, I can prove it to you in a matter of seconds and then you can—”

“I’ve heard enough.” Ronan raised his hammer. “You had your opportunity to tell me everything. You did not take it. I stopped my alliance with Thanos for the same reason and now… You are no ally of mine.”

Loki took a step back. “You’re not listening to me! We don’t have time for this, not while—”

“No,” Ronan corrected. “You haven’t been listening to me. I never needed your allegiance.”

And then Ronan came for him.

Loki managed to dodge the first swing of the warhammer by leaping back but Ronan continued to advance, his eyes cold hard steel.

Loki’s knives appeared before he’d made the conscious decision to conjure them and Ronan jerked to one side, causing the flung blade to narrowly miss his head.

“Go,” Ronan commanded Korath. “Join Nebula in leading the fleet.”

Korath hesitated then disappeared.

"You have to get out, Tony," Loki urged in the split second he had. "Do what you must."

The Tesseract was still in Loki’s other hand. Loki recalled how tenuous Ronan’s hold of it had been, how he’d still been able to break through the barrier Ronan had created during their last conversation.

Loki’s eyes must have given him away because Ronan lunged for the Tesseract just as Loki broke through to it and then they were somewhere else, the fight for its power causing them to flit from one place to the next so fast the landscapes were blurring.

He could feel the full extent of the Tesseract’s power sitting just out of reach, as if his hands were stretching out for it but it would always remain only inches too far away. Opposite him, Ronan remained resolute, one hand trying to wrestle the Tesseract from him, the other clutching his weapon.

Loki had one hand free. Ronan did not.

As Loki sunk a knife into the flesh of Ronan’s chest, there was no cry of pain, no change in his face, nothing to indicate that there was a metal object between his ribs, that it had affected him at all.

But Ronan was somehow still breathing, still able to move.

Then Loki felt the Tesseract again, how it was as if the pathways had opened again.

Loki brought them somewhere else before Ronan could get his bearings for long enough to calculate his retaliation.
They appeared in the mountains of Jotunheim until Ronan seized control of it again and then they were at the top of Mimir’s well, in the trees in the forests of Alfheim, facing the winds of Niflheim. It all happened far too briefly for Loki to use it to his advantage, to use his familiarity with the landscapes against Ronan.

Ronan clenched his hand more tightly around the Tesseract, the strain causing the veins at the sides of his temples to bulge.

Ronan couldn’t control the Tesseract itself but he had some fleeting hold over the flow of its power, over which way it could be directed. And the confusion of it, the conflicting channels and commands, must have been the reason for the frequency of their flitting.

Loki summoned another dagger but Ronan saw it coming, abruptly bringing an arm forward that trapped Loki’s wrist against his body and rested the tip of his warhammer against Loki’s skull, the threat causing Loki to go very still.

One push of that and he’d be dead. And that wasn’t even taking into consideration if Ronan was able to direct the Power Stone using the weapon yet.

“Bring me back to my ship,” Ronan said, “and I’ll let you take your chances against Thanos instead of ending them all now.”

Loki stilled, the only motion being the rise and fall of his chest.

He had to go back, he knew that. Tony was there and the Time Stone was there and yet it was the place where the rest of Ronan’s allies were, the exact place where Thanos himself was heading for.

The Dark Aster was the last place he wanted to be; naturally, it was the place he had to be the most.

And then they appeared back on the ship, the effort of the constant fighting over who dominated the Tesseract leaving them exhausted. So exhausted Loki had been that his thoughts were muddled, his concentration askew, and they had appeared in the chamber with the throne rather than by the cells.

Loki had forgotten his previous thoughts about how he’d place his bets on Ronan not being one to tire, but there he stood, his posture doubled over but his stance still steady.

One knock of the warhammer and the Tesseract fell through Loki’s fingers. One knock and he had been struck on the side with a sick wet cracking sound. One knock and he was on the floor.

The stone floor might have been swimming but it was solid enough that Loki could use it to bring himself to his feet, the movement causing his ribs to scream.

Ronan was advancing on him, like some sort of grim bringer of death. Like it was his duty, both his service and his commitment.

A double would give him a few seconds, Loki realised. A double would take his place while he regained a handful of breaths and would allow him to seize the Tesseract again.

Loki did exactly that, only he’d made one miscalculation. He’d forgotten that now he no longer had hold of the Tesseract and that his illusions would disperse again with a touch.

The head of the weapon would have collided with his double’s skull if it had not gone straight through. For a brief instant, Ronan stared at the spot where Loki had vanished.
Loki went straight for the Tesseract but Ronan got there before him.

It was a deliberate calculation, a show of fear, the face of a coward Loki put on a show of before he ran.

Ronan pursued.

And now Loki couldn't teleport himself away, couldn't run fast enough with the aftermath of the blow to his side. He would have to fight. Fight against the one who wielded the Power Stone. Fight without using any Infinity Stone at all. But first – first he needed to act.

Loki created a mirror illusion, then a mirror of that mirror until the entire chamber was filled with tens and tens of Lokis.

The sudden appearance of the many Lokis threw Ronan off, causing him to hesitate.

Loki released a dagger. It struck Ronan's shoulder joint. He had been aiming for the neck but Ronan's reflexes were quick, allowing him to evade being hit as if he'd been told in advance the move Loki would make.

Loki had no desire to get into close combat with Ronan. If he did that, if he stood armed only with his daggers against a weapon like that then he was bound to lose. No, he would do this his way. He would keep his distance and confuse the enemy with his illusions, all the while slowly whittling down Ronan's ability to move with his knives. He would have to pray to appease the Norns so that Thanos would not make his arrival in the meantime.

Ronan charged.

The next dagger narrowly missed Ronan's eye, slicing his cheekbone instead.

Loki would have to do better than this. His life depended on it. Tony's life depended on it. And Thor's and every Midgardian Tony cared for and–

Ronan's warhammer ploughed on. Relentless. He was systematically trying to make a sweep of all the Lokis. Loki was not going to allow them all to remain in a line to be dissipated so easily, instead directing them to disband, to run in senseless scattering directions that made them impossible to keep track of.

The Tesseract remained on the floor on the other side of the room. Ronan was already making his way towards it but he had no way of knowing where exactly Loki was as he did the same.

"Loki..." Ronan growled. "I've had enough of your games."

Something impacted the ground, the aftermath of the shockwave causing Loki to find himself on the floor.

Then he was pinned down by a weight, the handle of the warhammer pressed against his throat, the pressure squeezing and pressing and squeezing and pressing and Ronan's face, that impassive face, above his own.

This couldn't be the last sight he would see. Not this. Not Ronan. Not his empty resolution.

It was enough to make Loki nostalgic for the last time he had died, with Thor cradling him, with the few words of comfort Thor had tried to provide.
Loki couldn’t breathe.

His fingers clawed at the handle, at Ronan’s skin. He was running out of air, his throat spasming and his vision filling with black spots.

And then Loki saw it, finally saw something on Ronan’s face that was different from his detachment, from his usual impassiveness. That something was satisfaction. And Ronan was enjoying killing him like that, his strength not relenting, the handle continuing to press into Loki’s flesh, against the tendons of his throat hard enough for Loki to wish Ronan had just struck him with the head of the weapon rather than making it like this, this slow way of dying.

Then there was a noise. A rumble.

There was light in the chamber – *light*.

The sound of footsteps. Heavy footsteps. Someone must have entered the chamber. *Tony*? Could he have escaped and gotten his armour back somehow?

Loki was not the only one the unanticipated arrival had surprised and the momentary distraction allowed him to dislodge the handle pressing against his windpipe, his lungs screaming for air, drinking in gasps like a man dying of thirst.

Ronan fought for a grip on the hammer but Loki managed to stick a knife in his abdomen give it a twist before his knee sent Ronan’s weight off to one side.

The voice that came with the footsteps turned Loki’s hopes to ashes.

“Ronan,” the voice said. It sounded from somewhere behind him but Loki didn’t *need* to see, not when that was the voice that had stayed with him, not when that was the voice he’d tried so desperately to forget. Everything had happened so quickly with the fight, with trying to evade Ronan and regain the Tesseract at the same time, and somehow that voice had the power to make everything stop, to slow time itself. "You betrayed me."
There were times when Loki's memory did not allow him to recall Thanos's face at all, only the vague impression it had left, as if his mind had painted a wash over him that made the features fade and blur into each other. In spite of it, the resulting impression Thanos had left was no less intense; some of Loki's memories might have become less vivid over time but the impact of them had not diminished over the years.

Some things Loki knew with absolute certainty. He knew there was no limit to what Thanos would do to gain Hela's attention. He knew Thanos had been the one to send him after the Tesseract, and he knew how taxing his initiation had been. Other things were more vague, more fleeting, half-formed impressions of words Thanos might have said, information he'd gleaned but couldn't place why. The moments of blankness, pieces of lost time, were perhaps the most alarming of them all. Because if the things he could still recall were what his mind had deemed as tolerable then perhaps it was for the best if he was ignorant of what it deemed as something he wouldn't be able to withstand.

Loki had not forgotten how Thanos dominated whatever space he occupied but he had failed to recall exactly how large Thanos was, the sheer height and breadth of him when he was this close.

He still hadn't caught his breath back from Ronan cutting off his airflow and he remained rooted to the floor, unable to do anything but gasp in gulps of air. He couldn't differentiate between the thud of his pulse being a result Ronan's attack or from the visceral instinctive reaction to Thanos and the blood beating around his head was so loud it made it difficult to hear anything else, difficult to think beyond anything but his lungs and the fact that his heart was still beating.

For the first time, Loki found himself grateful for Ronan, grateful that it was Ronan Thanos was glaring at, grateful that it was Ronan who distracted Thanos from his own existence.

Ronan had to use his warhammer to balance himself as he stood, wrenching the dagger Loki had left in him out and letting it fall to the floor. Ronan appeared to have forgotten about Loki too, his eyes trained on Thanos and Thanos's eyes on him, observing him in a similar way to how someone might observe an ant underneath their thumb.

"You think to stand against me," Thanos said. His voice was loud enough to override the explosions outside.

Somehow, Ronan did not flinch. "I am the most powerful being in the universe."

And in that moment, in Ronan staring at Thanos without hesitating and the outright defiance and proclamations of his own greatness, Loki knew for a certainty that Ronan wouldn't survive this.

Loki's stomach clenched at that thought. Because once Ronan was dead, once Thanos had dealt with the one who had betrayed him, he would be next. That was more than enough for Loki to forget Ronan's attempt on his life, for him to wish fervently that Ronan could still somehow best Thanos, that maybe despite everything the Norns had said, everything they had implied, the Power Stone on its own would be enough after all.

Stupid. Hopeless.
No, not hopeless. Not yet.

The Tesseract. He had to get the Tesseract back. Get Tony. Get the Time Stone. Get away. Start over again. Make this version of events not real.

Somehow.

Loki’s breaths were still coming in great rugged pants, ones that were far too loud for his liking, ones that would have drawn attention to himself if Thanos and Ronan weren't so occupied with each other.

If only he could breathe properly again, if only he had enough oxygen in his blood to pull himself to his feet, to be able to use his magic and disguise himself.

“Loki?” it was Tony’s voice, Tony’s voice coming over the comm. The concern in it would have been touching if Loki had not had other far more pressing concerns. “Tell me you can breathe, tell me–”

Loki’s lungs were loud enough to give him his answer.

“Alright,” Tony said. “Now you just have to get out of there or come find me or–” Tony broke off. “Actually, maybe I'll come find you.”

And then before Loki could make sense of Tony’s meaning, Thanos’s voice came in a great boom: "You are nothing but a child playing at war. You have no ambitions beyond eliminating the Xandarians, no higher purpose guiding you, nothing–"

"This *is* my higher purpose," Ronan roared back.

Thanos shook his head but that was the only movement he made. The fact that Ronan had the Power Stone appeared to be of no immediate concern to him. Justice, Loki recalled, was something Thanos did not rush into.

“I thought,” Thanos said, his voice quieter now, infused with a twisted gentleness, “that we had an understanding.” Then traces of doubt, traces of disbelief began to seep in. “I thought I taught you well, I thought I made you all understand, I thought you were all finally seeing clearly what truly matters: your true paths, your roles to play in what will come.”

"My vision has never been clearer. Destroying Xandar is what matters. Not your distractions."

"My *distractions?*" The brief calm had vanished and Thanos’s rage made him swell. "This is about something greater than us, someone greater than us. This is my life's work, a privilege to be a part of, an opportunity you should be *honoured* to–"

"The evidence would suggest," Ronan said, his voice perfectly level, "that Hela is as indifferent towards you as she has always been."

Thanos’s face hardened, his eyes flashing, and he stalked forward speaking in a low growl. “You are unworthy of speaking her name.” He took another step forward. “You are unworthy of the gem you sought.” Another step. “You are unworthy of life. Unworthy of death.”

“Your judgement means little to me. Not when I have this.” Ronan raised his warhammer, the purple glow of the Power Stone shining.

But Thanos hadn’t finished. “I *moulded* you into what you are, Ronan. I gave you purpose, I gave
you direction, and you remain ungrateful. But you have chosen not to accept my gift. I see that now."

There was a loud clanging over the comm. Then it happened again. And again.

“I’m coming to you,” Tony announced. “Just gotta piss off these Chitauri bad enough first.”

Loki had managed to sit up. The Tesseract was meters and meters away, positioned where – if he was lucky – he had a slight chance of not being noticed getting to it. And that was including if he left behind a double.

Loki closed his eyes. His lungs were no longer burning. He needed to move. He had to move. Now all he needed was to reach his magic.

The energy required of it wouldn’t be the problem: Thanos was the problem.

It was difficult to concentrate when the reason for having to watch Thor die was present, when the reason for everything that had happened after he’d fallen into the void was in sight, when the reason he couldn’t have simply rested in Valhalla with Frigga for the rest of eternity was stood right there in front of him.

Fear made him weak but rage made him strong.

All this time he’d been waiting… And now the moment had come. The moment had come and yet he was unprepared, didn’t even have the Tesseract in his hands, didn’t even have Tony by his side.

How he’d love to thrust his daggers into Thanos’s swine-like eyes, to twist and twist and wrench –

He’d die for it but that made the urge no less tempting.

No. If he was going to do this he needed to ensure his survival, to ensure Tony’s survival.

At least if he fled, they’d have time to plan, to try to ensure they’d win, that by the end of it Thanos would be dead.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Ronan said, "why you are an unfit leader?" He did not wait for a reply. "You lack objectivity, you are too fueled by your emotions to see things for how they truly are.” Ronan tightened his grip on the shaft of the warhammer. “You grant yourself far too much importance. I know the Xandarians have to die but I don’t care whether it is by my hand or someone else's, only that it is done."

And then Loki managed to have enough strength to leave a double sat in his place and begin his journey on the floor, shuffling his way towards the Tesseract.

"You forget," Thanos said, "that I have seen through to the base of your soul. It's not Xandar's demise that you crave. No, what you crave is a sense of direction, something to stop you wallowing in your own indifference." He drew himself to full height. "I gave you something better. I gave you a choice, a proposal with more than generous rewards. But as you have declined my offer..."

Ronan had no counter-words, nothing to fire back, only his weapon. And Ronan lunged forward, one blow aimed for Thanos's gut that Thanos prevented by catching its head in his hand to cushion the impact.

Loki turned over, getting to his knees and crawling faster and faster, the Tesseract still a tantalising
distance away, his ribs protesting from the blow they’d received from the warhammer.

Something was sounding through Tony’s earpiece, the impact of fists and limbs and then there were screams and hisses but none of them were Tony's.

Loki continued, determined that nothing would stop him, that his resolve would not fade, that nothing could get between himself and the Tesseract and that–

The sound of a singular laugh made Loki stop.

There were very few things in the universe that were able to make Thanos laugh.

"You think you can stop me with that?" Thanos asked and then Loki found himself turning around, the anticipation filling him with nausea, only to find that Thanos was talking to Ronan and that Ronan's hands were compressed against the head of the warhammer, his teeth bared and purple light filling his eyes and flaring through the air between where they stood.

"I have power itself! I am power itself!" Ronan was like thunder, torrents of purple swirling around him in great gusts.

Thanos lifted his arm. A flash of yellow glinted on the gauntlet he wore. “You have power itself,” Thanos agreed. “But I… I have you.” Thanos’s gem grew brighter, its light shining like a sun. "So tell me," Thanos said, almost pleasantly. "Who does the power truly belong to?"

And then Loki knew it was about to happen though he did not know how, only that he had to leave and he started to scramble to his feet despite the surge of pain in his ribs that threatened to bring him back to floor, only he couldn't take his eyes from Thanos, couldn't bring himself to look away.

Ronan drew his arms back to make another swing, the entire weapon infused with the violent violet of the Power Stone. Thanos did not bother to raise an arm to block the attack; instead, he held out one hand, the one with the gauntlet. "I think the Power Stone knows who its true master should be.” He paused. “But first…” And then he beckoned with one finger and the light of the yellow stone – the light of the Soul Stone – shot out of it, forging a connection between his finger and Ronan’s body and Ronan was screaming, his mouth wrenched open wide, the sound of it excruciating and piercing, his back arching as if being pulled by a hook towards the stone. The light grew more intense, only there were distant murmurs of voices that came with it and the light started smouldering, the smoke coming off it forming whisps, whisps that reminded Loki of something, reminded him of–

The Basin of Souls. That was what it reminded him of – the forms looked almost identical. They were souls, Loki realised, trapped souls within the stone.

He hadn’t witnessed that trick before.

Then it was silent.

Ronan’s body fell to the floor only, Loki saw, he was still breathing. Still breathing but not moving, still alive but no signs of life in his eyes. Those eyes were hollow, empty, staring without thought or emotion.

“He wasn’t worthy of death,” Thanos muttered, but whether it was for his own ears or anyone else’s, Loki did not know.

Then Thanos started to move and Loki saw where it was, which direction it was in, and then he was racing, racing to reach the Tesseract only when he got there Thanos’s fingers had already
closed around it and the sight of it made his ribs feel as if they were a fist clenching around his organs, squeezing and squeezing.

“Ah,” Thanos said, “Loki. I see you have brought me the Tesseract.”

Loki stopped.

Too late.

He’d been too late.

And now Thanos had the Tesseract and the Soul Stone and soon to be the Power Stone too and–

Loki changed direction and headed for the warhammer instead. If he couldn’t wield it himself, then he could at least attempt to stop Thanos adding another Infinity Stone to his collection. If he couldn’t wield it himself then maybe he could pick out the stone like Ronan had done, only he’d crush it or turn it on the Tesseract or hide it or disguise it or–

Loki almost had it but then there was a splintering, a breaking, and the stone broke free from the warhammer and started floating, floating off towards–

Loki turned around.

The Power Stone landed in Thanos's outstretched hand and he closed his fingers around it and placed it in the metal casing of the gauntlet.

Three stones.

Loki couldn’t breathe again, only this time it wasn’t because of anyone choking him.

"The Power Stone knows its true master," Thanos stated, admiring his hand. "It came to me of its own accord." Thanos dropped his hand and eyed Loki. "But you, Loki... You did not."

Loki needed to speak, to do something before the same fate as Ronan’s awaited him. You are unworthy of death, unworthy of life. That was what Thanos had said. And he had left Ronan as nothing more than an empty husk, something that was alive and not alive at the same time.

He couldn’t rely on the Tesseract to help them escape, not anymore. The only thing he had was his wits, his magic, his words, and… There was Tony. Tony who – if he managed to get out of his cell – could reach the Time Stone. Tony, whose bravery would make him able to face Thanos armed with only one stone. Tony, who would inevitably lose, not unless they had something else on their side.

Thanos had three Infinity Stones and an entire Chitaurian fleet and Ronan’s ship. If Loki acted against him now, if he succumbed to reckless and ill-thought out plans, he’d be ensuring their deaths. And the only way he could begin to even the odds against them was if Thanos trusted him, if Thanos believed he was on his side, if Thanos believed he’d never truly left his side.

"I wanted to do better," Loki found himself saying. His voice was dry, the first few vowels sticking in his throat. "It… took more time than was ideal for me to retrieve the Tesseract." Loki forced his fingers to remain still, to stop twitching. “And then when I discovered Ronan planned to betray you, I took matters into my own hands.”

"Two years, Loki," Thanos said. "Two years with no word from you. Two years after I sent you to Planet C-53 with one of my fleets you lost. Two years with nothing to show for yourself."
Loki made himself nod, the muscles in his neck stiff. "I wanted to... compensate."

"You left me in the dark."

"I had no way of contacting you, I–"

"I provided you with the Mind Stone because Planet C-53 would be too far for holographic contact." And then, as if suddenly remembering, Thanos asked, "What became of the Sceptre? Where is it?"

It appeared any luck Loki’d had in attempting to temper him had run dry. "There was a slight complication."

Thanos’s nostrils flared. "Explain."

"The Mind Stone was split from the Sceptre. It..." Would telling Thanos what became of the Sceptre be a terrible idea? If he did, Thanos would have been warned already and would have another advantage if he ever reached Midgard, but if he didn’t, Thanos’s suspicions would raise if he wanted specifics. "It became unusable, untouchable."

Thanos did not appear impressed, his mouth remaining in a hard line. "So you traded one of my Infinity Stones for another." The lines between his eyes deepened as he frowned. "And you lost me one of my armies in the process."

Loki lowered his gaze, as if overcome with guilt. "Now," he said, the lie already forming in his mind, "you understand why I wanted to return with more than just the Tesseract."


For what was probably the first time, Loki thanked the Norns that his title of a liesmith was an earned one. "My conduct was not... sufficient. I underestimated the enemy, I rushed my strategy, I had a lapse of judgement when my brother tried to stop me."

Thanos nodded. "Yes," he said. "I thought that might happen."

"It did," Loki confirmed. "But I fought it."

"For two years longer than it should have taken you."

Loki made himself wince. "Yes."

Thanos moved forward and Loki braced himself for the worst. Then Thanos grasped him by the arms but the squeeze was an attempt at conciliatory.

“Walk with me,” Thanos commanded.

The hands released Loki, the same hands he had seen squeeze the life out of Thor.

Loki obeyed, following behind Thanos as he walked from the chamber out into an adjacent gallery where there was a large window offering a view of the exterior of the ship. The entirety of the sky was filled with Thanos’s fleet, the number of ships as countless as the stars. Interspersed between them were a number of Ronan’s smaller vessels and pods rigged with weaponry, though they were vastly outnumbered.

Thanos came to a standstill by the glass, his hands behind his back as he observed the scene. “You are the only one left, Loki. The only loyal one left.” Thanos turned to place his hands on either side
of Loki’s neck so he had nowhere to stare but his face. His fingers felt as if they would stain, as if
they’d leave his skin tainted by his touch. Loki forced himself to think of something else, think of
anything else but how the same touch would have been the last thing Thor would have felt. He
mustn’t glare, mustn’t show any sign of hostility, of his true intention. If only he knew the
specifics of what his true intention was. “I wouldn’t have guessed it would be you but here you are.
I suppose it makes sense: you lost your home, your place, your purpose. You wanted to be given a
new purpose. You wanted to find your place in the universe and stake it. You were reborn in the
void, reborn out of nowhere, made whole again out of nothing.” Thanos’s eyes were shining. “I
gave you that."

It was only with the greatest of self-restraint that Loki’s eyes did not give his loathing away.

“And I am grateful,” Loki replied, the words tasting like bile in his mouth.

Thanos gripped him tighter, giving him a shake. “No, Loki. I need you to understand. I need you to
understand how this will make everything better, how this will make us better.” Thanos’s eyes had
the look, the untinted look they got when he was at his most delirious. “For centuries, I have tried.
From the moment she first glimpsed me, she rejected me. I almost perished from a fever and I saw
her, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. But the fever broke and after that I couldn’t help
but want to see her again. I am not like most men: I have no fear of death – I seek to embrace her.
My next attempt was by drowning. I got to see her for longer but still, she did not want me. I tried
again and again, I tried different ways to die, I tried begging her, pleading with her. But she would
not take me.” Thanos met his eyes. “I’m sure you of all people can understand that. You must have
felt her call when you made yourself fall.”

Thanos released him. Loki made himself feel nothing, be nothing, only it didn’t work. Loki might
have wanted to die all those years ago, might have wanted to let go of Asgard, of his father, of his
brother, of everything he had to be, but he had nothing on Thanos’s derangement.

“My body was too strong,” Thanos continued, “it acted against me. Or so I thought. But every time
she denied me, I grew more determined. I got better. My will got stronger. I didn’t want to die: I
just wanted her. Almost dying was the only way I could see her. She didn’t want to be there, I could
tell. And one day she stopped appearing. That was the first day I took another person's life. After I
did it, I felt her again. I felt her gratitude like an embrace. I knew I was on the right path, that I had
to keep going. Only she still hasn't had her fill – I can feel her hunger as if it is my own. And each
time I kill, each time I grant her gifts, I can feel her satisfaction too. That is how I know. That is
how I know why she chose for me each and every time to remain alive. Because she knew I would
be more useful to her here, that I could do more for her in the realm of the living while I still walk
in it.” Thanos’s smile was a hideous thing. “But soon... Soon I will have acquired all six of the
Infinity Stones. And then there will be no limit on how long she is satisfied for. I will have brought
her the ultimate gift: I will have brought her everything of value that the universe possibly has to
offer. And only once I have done that will there be one thing of value left... Me.” Thanos’s eyes
were worlds away. “Then she will accept me. Then her tests can stop. Then I will no longer need to
get any better because her lessons will have shaped me into everything I was supposed to become,
everything I need to be in order to be her equal.” Then Thanos was back in the present and he
trained his gaze on Loki, a gaze that was suddenly sharp. “You understand, don’t you? You have to
understand.”

Loki gave a curt nod. “I understand.”

Thanos turned his gaze outside again, watching as one of Ronan’s vessels exploded, taking three of
his men with it. “Good. You might be the only one left who does.”
“What about The Other?’’

“Ronan killed him.”

“... Ah.’’

“As I was saying,’’ Thanos said, “you are the last of my loyal subjects, the only one who is left.” Thanos let out a sigh. Another one of Ronan’s ships suffered at the whims of the Chitauri, the bodies inside starting to float outwards. “What a pity you lost me the Sceptre. If I had not appeared, you would have lost the Tesseract to Ronan along with it. Two Infinity Gems you would have cost me in total. Two, all because you did not return to me.”

“I—’’ Loki broke off. He needed to prove his worth, prove that Thanos taking his life on a whim would not be beneficial, prove that Thanos could trust him. “I can get the Mind Stone back.’’ He swallowed. That would have to work. If it didn’t… He couldn’t allow himself to think about that. Delay and put a dent in the number of Chitauri in one swoop, that was the plan. That would be the best course of action. If only it’d work. Thanos did not appear to detect anything was amiss so Loki continued. “If you would allow me.”

“I don’t recall you being quite so audacious the last time we spoke, Loki.’’

And when had that been? For Loki, it had been during their revisit of the battle, the time before that when it might have been the true version of the battle and the time before that– When Thanos had sent him. When Thanos had offered him a crown and an army in exchange for bringing him the Tesseract.

When Loki thought he’d actually wanted it. When Loki thought he actually had a choice.

“I know better now. I have learned from my errors. We do not need to stage a siege: we need a quick attack, one that does not allow Midgard sufficient time to prepare.’’ One exactly like the one Thanos had staged, Loki realised just after the words left his mouth. And oh how he really hoped Thanos’s strategy hadn’t been his fault this entire time. But the people of Midgard were still safe, Loki reminded himself, so surely that meant himself and Tony must have managed to prevent Thanos reaching Midgard somehow. “I will not waste your time by begging your forgiveness for my failures. Instead, I will repay you for each loss I have caused. I am the most experienced commander in invading Midgard that you have in your arsenal. I know precisely when and where to invade, who to avoid, who to target. I could bring you back the Sceptre within a matter of seconds if—”

“You expect me to give you another fleet – my own personal fleet – after you are responsible for the demise of so many of my soldiers?’’

Technically, Loki thought but did not say out loud, that particular manoeuvre was Tony’s doing.

“I do not expect it,’’ Loki admitted. “You have plenty of reasons not to. But you should know that I will even forfeit the crown you promised in return for the Tesseract if you would grant me a limited use of—’’

“My army,’’ Thanos finished. “You want me to let you have free reign over my army.’’

“With minimal risk this time,’’ Loki stressed. “I know the precise location of the Mind Gem, the building they think they have hidden it in, all those that protect and guard it. They believe me to have slunk away and not to be returning anytime soon. If we have the numbers, I can be there and back within minutes and give you all that I promised. By my return, you will have four of the six
Infinity Stones."

"I mastered the Mind Stone. I will be able to hear it calling out to me from across the galaxy. Why would I need you to lead me to it?"

Anything that could have vaguely resembled hope left in the following release of Loki’s breath. But he persisted. "You're right – you wouldn't need me to. But without the Tesseract, it would take years for you and your fleet to reach Midgard."

Thanos’s gaze passed between Loki and the Tesseract. “I have the Tesseract.”

“I am sure that if I told you the name of the building the Sceptre is kept inside of then you would be able to teleport there.” Loki paused to search for the right words. “The question,” Loki settled on, “is how long it would take. From my experience, the Tesseract is no easy stone to wield. I fear the Tesseract is slow to warm to those who would use it. It might take some time for it to allow another to wield it.” And then when Thanos’s face darkened, Loki added, “But there is a way I can assist you in quickening the process.” Thanos gave the barest inclination of his head so Loki carried on. “As I’m sure you already know, the stones can feel one another, are linked to one another. The more Infinity Stones you have, the more likely the next one has the desire to be a part of your collection. If I grant you the Mind Stone then I am certain you will find mastering the Tesseract far less time-consuming. Otherwise it could take months longer than necessary, even years.”

Thanos narrowed his eyes.

"Or," Loki said, "it could take minutes."

“I have three of the Infinity Stones with me here now. If I send you, knowing your history, will that mean I will only be exchanging one of the gems for another?”

“Not this time. I do not repeat my mistakes.”

Thanos’s head cocked to the side as he contemplated the offer. "Half my army," Thanos finally conceded. “But only because I have little need of them now I have the Power Stone.”

Half of it. Half, Loki would have been delighted with in any other circumstance. Except that half would still leave Thanos with tens of thousands of Chitauri. Half would mean many of them would still survive the attack from Ronan’s ships. There’d be no sense in trying to face Thanos if the instant they had an unlikely success, the Chitauri would swarm.

Loki wore a mask of gratitude. “That is generous of you,” he said. The worst part was that the offer had been a relatively generous one. But it still wasn’t enough. And there was the matter of how to ask for more without coming across as insolent and ungrateful. “Before I go on my way, I have a question I would ask of you.”

“I will hear you.”

There were barely any of Ronan’s ships outside now that had not been destroyed.

“There are numerous honourable warriors on Midgard – each one individually might go unnoticed but a large number of them… Do you want me to–”

“Yes,” Thanos said before Loki had finished. “The worthy ones can be gifts.”

“I am sure Hela will be pleased.” The only thing Loki was certain of was the opposite. “How much
of a delay do you want to compensate for granting her the gifts?”

And then Loki could see it, how the word ‘delay’ had been implanted in Thanos’s mind, the displeasure of the idea of having to wait rivalling the thought of pleasing Hela.

“You can have three-quarters then,” Thanos said after a moment. “Though I still want you to return in a matter of minutes.”

Loki frowned. “Me? What of the Chitauri – how will they return without me?”

“You will open the portal. But I will keep hold of the Tesseract.” Thanos twisted his hand, a large finger circling the Power Stone. “I will sustain the portal without your aid.”

Loki supposed it was only natural that just as he might have had a chance of convincing Thanos to allow him to leave with both a large portion of his army and the Tesseract, things would start to return to their usual order. And Loki had no words he could say, no counter-arguments he could make, not without casting further suspicion on himself.

“Of course,” Loki got out. “I will serve you well.”

“I hope so, Loki,” Thanos said with a twist of the mouth, “I really do.” Thanos almost smiled. “But I should warn you: if you do not return promptly, I will seek you out far quicker this time.”

Loki gave a singular nod. “May I?” he asked, one hand outstretched for the Tesseract.

Thanos held up the Tesseract, approaching to allow Loki to touch it but then he stopped short. “Your soul…” Thanos said. “I can feel it. It is…” He frowned. “It is different than what I remember.”

For a second, Loki was incapable of moving. “It is?”

The frown had yet to disappear. “Without a doubt.”

“I suppose most souls do not remain the same indefinitely.”

Thanos made a grunting noise but he did nothing to stop Loki touching the Tesseract.

And to be that close to having it, to be able to touch it but not to take it for himself, was agony.

Loki suspected that despite Thanos’s brief contact with the Power Stone, he’d still be able to detect influxes of energy from other sources, perhaps even the type of energy that was used. And what Thanos would detect from the Tesseract would be a portal, namely because what Loki had created was a portal. What Thanos would not detect, however, or what residues would be lost in comparison to the Tesseract, was the glamour, the illusion that covered the surface of the portal.

Because it wasn’t Midgard where Loki was sending the Chitauri.

It was the void.

Thanos gave him a nod of dismissal, his eyes set on his fleet as they began to turn towards the portal.

And then Loki knew he could delay it no longer.
Loki appeared not on Midgard but on the other side of the ship, in the spot where he had last seen Tony.

"Tony?" Loki whispered over the comm.

There was no immediate response.

Loki started racing towards the cell where he had seen a hand clutching at the bars. When had been the last time he’d heard something over the earpiece? When had been the last time Tony had said something? Why hadn’t he said anything since? Had he encountered trouble or did he remain silent to allow Loki to fully concentrate on trying to persuade Thanos or–

_Maybe I’ll come find you._

That had been it. Only Loki hadn’t been able to give a warning, hadn’t been able to think beyond what had been in front of him.

“Tony,” Loki tried again. “Don’t– Don’t go anywhere. It’s Thanos. Thanos is here and–”

The door to the cell was wide open. And inside were three Chitaurians, lying dead on the floor, broken staffs and some sort of guns by their sides and their arms, the stink of their arms, what could have caused their arms to be so–

The Crimson Flower, Loki realised.

Tony had been there. It must have been Tony’s cell.

Loki backed out, turning back around the corridor and running.

"Loki?" Tony’s voice hadn’t just come from the comm, Loki could hear it, he must have been close. The door to the storage cupboard opened and Tony walked out of it, his suit of armour assembling around him.

Tony’s eyes met his. "Loki – what the hell is going on?"

Somewhere in the distance, Loki could still hear some of the Chitauri stalking through the ship.

"We have to–" Loki spared a glance ahead and then pulled them into the storage cupboard.

They pushed their way through the shelves and crates, coming to a section where they could both stand side by side without the space being so narrow that they’d be cutting off each other’s breath.

"I got the Time Gem," Tony said. "I have the suit, I even plugged in the arc reactor and it's still up and running." Tony looked to him. "What you got?"

Not for the first time that day, Loki’s jaw clenched. "Nothing," Loki said and realised how true it was. "I have nothing."

"Wait – so Thanos has the Tesseract?"

Somehow, nodding was easier than admitting it out loud.

Tony ran a hand through his hair, his fingers tugging on the ends of it. "Right. We're er... We're gonna have to come up with one hell of a plan. Because we can't start over again, not without the Tesseract. How many Infinity Stones does Thanos have?"
"Three."

Tony exhaled a breath. "Three." He stopped as if to fully process it and then thought better of it. "Let's hope it's not about to be four."

"Thanos believes it is. That’s where he thinks I am – he thinks I’m currently retrieving the Mind Stone on his behalf.” Loki shook his head. “The only positive thing to come out of this is that I managed to divert his fleet. So it’s only Thanos who is our major concern now.” Only Thanos, Loki had said, as if it was that simple.

Tony screwed his eyes shut. "Right. Good. I think. One thing at a time." There was a long silence. "When does he think you'll be back?"

"In a matter of minutes."

Tony swore under his breath.

"Okay, so– I have the Time Stone, I can– I can attempt to use it against him, right? I mean, we’re fucked if we don’t at least try."

"If Ronan was able to hold me off by using his stone against mine, I see no reason why you shouldn’t be able to. Not unless Thanos's bond is far more powerful than your bond to the Tesseract. Not unless you are trying to go against a gem Thanos has already mastered."

"The Power Stone then. Unless he’s already mastered that one too."

“No. Not yet. A small mercy he hasn’t.”

Tony attempted to pace, the furniture and closeness of the walls preventing him from being able to take more than a couple of steps in any given direction. “So I can– I can attempt to reverse the Power Stone, right? And then it'll go back to what it was before Thanos started using it. Hell, it'll suddenly find itself in his clutches with him still trying to use it and I bet it won’t play nice after that."

The prospect was almost enough to alleviate Loki’s mounting dread for a brief moment. "Not one bit."

"And after the Power Stone’s out the way and is distracting him with the sheer amount of how pissed off it is, you can pick up the Tesseract and hey, while we're at it we might as well go after the Soul Stone too."

Loki stared. "You mean the gem he has mastered."

Tony clicked his fingers. "That's the one."

"And how exactly," Loki said, "do you propose to do that without him noticing and proceeding to kill you?" Tony gave him a meaningful look. "Oh," Loki uttered. His magic. That'd be their best chance of hiding Tony from Thanos, of ensuring Tony wouldn't be detected. "It's no guarantee. If I lose concentration for a moment you'll be detected. If Thanos reaches out far enough with the Soul Stone, you'll be detected. I don't know how well I can hide the Time Stone from detection without the Tesseract and–"

"It's all we've got," Tony said.

"And," Loki emphasised, "I doubt I can stop Thanos noticing when the behaviour of his gems start
to change towards him. He'll know something is amiss before too long."

"Then what Thanos will need is--"

"A distraction," Loki finished. "Thanos will be expecting me to hand him the Sceptre. How long do
you think it'll take until--"

"Reversing the Power Stone shouldn't take too long. Seconds, maybe. And we don't know how
much of a handle he’s got on the Tesseract yet. It’s probably not much more. Might even be less.
But the Soul Stone – he's had it for how long now? Months? Years?"

Loki nodded. "Years, most likely."

"Then it'll take longer. Don't know how much longer. Minutes, at least. Hopefully not hours."

"Tony," Loki said and there was that urgency again, that desperation. "I don't know if I can stall
him for hours."

"Unless you can come up with something else in the next minute, we don’t have time for a
different plan."

They’d already been talking for minutes, there surely wouldn’t be much longer he could delay
returning to Thanos for.

Loki closed his eyes before opening them again. "The first thing he'll want is the Mind Stone. We
can't deliver the real one to him, not without risking him enforcing complete control over myself at
the very least."

"Arc reactor," Tony said.

"Pardon?"

"My arc reactor," Tony repeated. "It stopped you mind-fucking me. Don't see why it wouldn't stop
him doing the same. Oh. Except it’ll cause a bit of a paradox problem if you take the actual Mind
Stone, what with ULTRON and everything."

“Then I’ll…” Loki shook his head. “I’ll need something that's half-way convincing, at least.”

"Your illusions are pretty convincing to me."

“They won’t be to Thanos. Not when he’ll be able to sense they aren't anywhere near as close to
being as powerful as an Infinity Stone. He has three of the stones; he'd notice the difference if he
had four."

Tony glanced at his chest and then away again. "You know how we were just talking about arc
reactors? Because if you need something blue and shiny with a whole load of power...

The arc reactor’s power was not the same as the power of an Infinity Stone, but if it had been
enough to block an Infinity Stone then surely Thanos would be able to detect something and
attribute it to being from the Mind Stone – even if he’d know it wasn’t the genuine Sceptre the
instant he tried to use it or if he was able to recall with any clarity exactly how the Mind Stone’s
energy felt.

“That might bide us some more time,” Loki admitted.

Tony nodded, his eyebrows pulled together in what was thought or concern. “We’ll need all the
extra time we can get.”

That, Loki had anticipated. What Loki had not been anticipating was Tony reaching into the casing of his suit and pulling out the very same arc reactor that had been powering it.

“It’s the only one I have on me,” Tony said with a shrug that was far too stiff.

Loki stared at the device lying flat in Tony’s palm. “But your armour–”

“Being able to shoot things is pretty useless if we can’t stall Thanos long enough to reverse his Infinity Stones.” Tony’s hand still remained outstretched and Loki couldn’t help but stare at it for a few more seconds.

“Are you certain?”

“Yep.” When Loki did not immediately take it, Tony placed the arc reactor into his hand, the metal cool against his skin.

“But you’ll be–” Loki cut himself off. He had been about to say ‘defenceless’ until it registered who he was talking to. “You’ll be at a huge disadvantage.”

“If me being at a huge disadvantage means we’ve got a better chance, I’m taking it.”

Loki closed his fingers around the metal, the uncertainty making him slow. “Thank you.”

Tony looked to him and gave a singular nod. “You ready?”

No. "I don't think it is possible to be any less ready."

"Sounds about right." Tony reached for the door and paused to turn around, his eyes flicking to the arc reactor still in Loki’s hand. “Look after that for me, yeah?”

Loki nodded and his promise was a sincere one. “I’ll do what I can.”

Tony almost smiled. It was a ghost of a thing, barely a whisper of one. And then when Loki made to move through the door Tony reached around and clapped him on the back, capturing him in a brief sort of embrace.

"I really hope you don't die," Tony said by his ear.

Something caught in Loki’s throat and he squeezed his eyes shut. What he wouldn’t give to remain trapped in that moment…

"Oddly enough," Loki replied, his arms hesitating by his sides, “as do I." Tony released him, stopping Loki from having to make a decision about what to do with his arms. "And I do happen to prefer you very much alive, Tony."

There was that ghost of a smile again, just for a second before Tony went for the door.

“Well… Good luck.”

"I hope it isn't luck we have to depend upon,” Loki said. If even he himself could detect the strain in his own voice then surely Tony must have been able to as well. “For both of our sakes.”

Chapter End Notes
... One more week.

Or alternatively, feel free to join me in pre-Endgame fave-related stress. And why does this have to align with the last season of Game of Thrones as well - why?
The first thing Loki did was hide both himself and Tony. The second thing he did was to head back to Tony's cell to retrieve a weapon belonging to one of the Chitaurian corpses. His method of attaching the arc reactor to the end of the staff – wedging the reactor in a gap in the firing mechanism – was far from elegant but his illusions would disguise it for the time being.

Loki stepped over bodies of Chitauri and bodies of the guards and soldiers of Ronan's crew alike. "I can hear him," Tony said quietly over the comm.

Loki did not have to ask who. "How close are you?"

"Don't know. Must be pretty close if I can hear him. Heading up some stairs now."

"Stairs?" Loki repeated. "I don't recall any stairs. Where exactly are you?"

"Uh… Passing a massive window. Which is the only thing that could make this whole thing any worse."

Ah, Loki thought as he realised how many Chitaurian ships would still be in plain view outside of the ship. "Keep moving," Loki advised.

"I wasn't gonna just sit here and enjoy the view." Despite Tony's offhand remark, there was a subtle quaver in one of the gaps between the words that betrayed him.

"What opportunities you are letting go to waste." Loki’s attempt at humour was ill-fated before the words had even left his mouth.

Tony neglected to respond. And then, "All clear. Next room. No more windows for me."

Loki stepped over another body. "Yes – windows. Frequently the bane of your existence, I'm sure."

"Got it in one. But uh – which way should I head? Left or right?"

Loki threw his mind back to his previous exploration of the ship, trying to visualise where he estimated Tony was, plotting the route he’d have to take.

"Come to a stop outside the door – you'll be entering the balcony that overlooks the chamber once you do."

"Gotcha."

Loki reached another corridor full of bodies, ones of guards, ones of the Chitauri, ones that were so torn apart he couldn't distinguish one from the other.
"Where are you?" Tony asked.

"Almost at the dock."

Loki reached the metal door. The windows to either side were smaller, barely larger than portholes, but they offered him enough of a view to allow him to render a convincing enough illusion of himself returning through the portal on a Chitaurian vessel. And since a vessel would have to enter the ship through the dock, Loki had thought it better to minimise any risk and activate the necessary mechanisms in order to open it. Better to go the long way around than for something to alert Thanos to the fact that Loki couldn’t possibly have boarded the ship, meaning Thanos would realise he had never left it in the first place.

“I’ve finished,” Loki announced when he was done. “I’m making my way towards the main chamber.”

“‘Kay.”

On his way, Loki passed a number of Chitauri who were still making their rounds on the ship. It was strange, going against his instinct to allow himself to be seen by an enemy, but stranger still for his enemies to let him pass unchallenged. But it meant his illusion must have worked, that no one suspected his trip to Midgard had been nothing but a deception.

When he saw the entrance to the chamber, Loki stopped still.

"I won’t be going anywhere," Tony said, speaking far more quietly now that he had positioned himself on the balcony that overlooked the chamber.

Loki spoke as loudly as he dared, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm beginning to think we have a deathwish." He closed his eyes and filled his lungs, focusing on the feeling of it, on the simple act of being able to do so, of still being alive.

When Tony spoke, Loki allowed himself to focus on his voice too. “Not unjustified.”

Loki might have been amused in any other situation.

Then he stepped into the chamber.

"Loki." Thanos turned around to greet him. His eyes settled on the illusion of the Sceptre and the sight of it brought a smile to his lips. "It seems you have served me well after all. I see you've been putting your assets to good use."

"Of course." Loki inclined his head. "I keep my bargains."

Thanos beckoned him closer. "You haven't completed your bargain just yet, don't forget."

The look Loki received was expectant, a look that told him he was waiting for Loki to deliver the Sceptre to him.

So it was to be that quick then. Loki had been hoping it’d be otherwise.

There was a slight crackle through his earpiece and then Tony said, “I've got a hit on the Power Stone. You got me covered?”

The balcony was directly behind Loki so he gave a short nod, one that was meant for Tony but one that Thanos took for compliance as Loki stepped closer.
“Starting reversing…” Tony waited a few seconds. “Now.”

Thanos held out an arm, one palm facing upwards, waiting for Loki to place the Sceptre in it.

They hadn’t even started getting results from reversing the Power Stone yet, nothing definitive otherwise Tony would have said something.

There was nothing for it – Loki would have to stall.

After pausing, Loki made a show of briefly studying the Sceptre, taking in the false glow he had given it, the details of the carvings in the metal. "It's come to my attention that I didn't realise I almost missed the Mind Stone." His lie was not disputed, though Thanos appeared no less unamused.

"I have been separated from the stone for far longer than you." Thanos's patience was wearing thin, Loki could feel it.

Thanos was so occupied with the illusion of the Sceptre he hadn't noticed the amber glow that had briefly illuminated the particles of dust in the air floating between where Tony was standing and the Power Stone before Loki had been able to mask it. Loki kept the illusion in place over the Power Stone, not altering it but lying above it.

It took strength not to turn around, not to glance back to where Tony was stood just to satisfy his worry that he had not hidden him properly, that there was some part of him or the reverse-beam that was visible.

“Something’s happening,” Tony relayed.

"Its capabilities are... truly remarkable." Loki held the tip of the Sceptre close enough that it would have been at risk of cutting his face, had the tip of the staff really been the Scepter.

Thanos remained unmoved. "It's an Infinity Stone. Of course it is."

An opportunity for a debate. An opportunity to further stall him.

"But there is no other stone that takes away a person's free will, that completely eviscerates who they are quite as much."

"Did you not witness what I did to Ronan?"

Ronan had not moved from his spot on the floor, staring with glazed eyes at nothing in particular. Loki’s mouth fell closed.

“And with the utility of the other stones," Thanos continued, "that should not be essential."

“The Power Stone’s done,” Tony interjected. “I think.” They wouldn’t know until it was put to the test, until Thanos attempted to use it. Assuming that he would. "Starting on the Soul Stone now."

That would take longer, though how much longer they did not know.

"I'm sure there are always extraneous circumstances," Loki replied to both of them, a warning for Tony to remain vigilant as well as a counter-argument for Thanos.

Thanos gave him an odd look. One that Loki supposed was earned – in comparison to how he’d behaved during his initiation, he was being practically brazen. He'd need to be careful about that. Very careful. He’d need to pretend to be the person he had been half a decade previously, only with
better skills, better resources, better conviction. Thanos had already mentioned how his soul wasn't as he remembered it, if he realised that was because Loki was from the future then–

"Why?" Thanos asked. "Do you have one in mind?" Thanos nodded to the Sceptre. "You still haven't returned it to me." He smiled as if an idea amused him. "Unless you're hoping to attempt to enchant my mind with it."

"Using it to command a mind like that," Loki said, joining in with feigned mild amusement, "is one example of what the Mind Stone can do that the others cannot."

Thanos re-emphasised his held out hand. "I have no doubts about its worth."

"Er..." Tony said. Loki kept his mask in place. "This is taking longer than I thought."

Loki swallowed, straining not to look directly at the Soul Stone while he disguised the Time Gem's alteration.

But Thanos was still waiting.

"May I congratulate you on–"

Thanos gave his arm an impatient jerk. "The Sceptre, Loki."

Loki had little choice but to pick up his pace.

The sight of Thanos ahead of him, the gauntlet worn on one wrist, now adorned with another light inside–

_The Tesseract_, Loki realised. The light was a brilliant blue, brighter than the colour of Alfheim’s sky. Thanos must have put the core of the Tesseract in its place.

Some feet away, the empty casket of the Tesseract's container lay on the floor, discarded.

The thought of Thanos prizing it apart, reaching in with his large fingers and daring to touch the heart of the Tesseract was not one he could afford to linger on.

"You're not usually this slow to respond," Thanos accused, the exasperation making his mouth form a hard line. "You’re not usually this talkative either."

Loki made himself smile, the muscles in his cheeks protesting against it. "I know what my purpose is now." He was a distraction. One of the components required so Thanos would lose his hold over the stones. A tool to bring Thanos to his death.

And then Thanos stepped forward, his hand stretching towards the Sceptre and Loki had nothing to do but hope that he'd only clutch the staff handle, that he wouldn't notice the difference in its weight and energy, that he wouldn't notice the subtle changes between the body of the staff and the body of the true Sceptre. Because once he touched it, once his fingers came into contact with it, Loki's illusions would surely disappear. But if Thanos only touched the body of it then he stood a chance of the rest of the false Sceptre remaining in place, the parts that would be easier to spot a visible difference with remaining the same.

Loki shifted his grip so Thanos was more likely to grasp it by the handle and then Thanos was touching it, his hand where Loki wanted it only–

Only the illusion – the _entire_ illusion, not just the one of the body of the Sceptre – had remained in
place.

Somehow, despite Loki not touching the Tesseract, despite the Space Stone being housed in the gauntlet, the illusion was intact. And that meant, surely that meant, that if Thanos was to touch the tip of it, the point of it, the part that was supposed to house the Mind Stone, it would not disappear to reveal the sham-weapon underneath it.

Loki would have grinned, would have rejoiced, if it hadn't been for Thanos then reaching to break the shell of the arc reactor, if he hadn't pulled out its core with his bare fingers, if Loki hadn't only just managed to be alert enough to disguise the interior of the arc reactor as what he imagined the raw Mind Stone might look like.

Thanos placed the arc reactor core in his gauntlet.

And somehow, despite it being a completely different species to the Infinity Stones, an entirely different kind of element, Thanos still had yet to realise.

Thanos flexed his fingers, admiring his hand, the way that four of the holes in the gauntlet were filled.

Thanos's eyes moved to Loki. "My last loyal subject..." Thanos murmured, the gentleness in his tone sounding wrong, making Loki have to bite at the skin inside his mouth to retain an outward appearance of neutrality. "I believe you deserve a reward." Loki stared. Not another crown, not another war. "Not an Infinity Stone, of course, but something else. Name your desire and I'll think it over, see if it is a worthy gift in return for your services and if it is worthy of my time." When Loki did not say anything, Thanos did not react, continuing regardless of Loki’s lack of feedback. "If you renounced your claim to Planet C-53, there are still a great number of similar planets you could rule if you wanted, planets you could destroy, even people you could destroy," Thanos said. Loki swallowed. "Or if you're feeling truly sentimental, people the Sceptre would ensure could never turn on you again." Thanos evaluated him, no doubt waiting for Loki’s gratitude for his generosity. "I could grant you that."

Loki’s tongue caught in his mouth. "I... I thank you."

"Does nothing come to mind?"

"I– I am sure something will, given time."

One corner of Thanos’s mouth lifted. "Waiting until I have the full set of Infinity Stones, are you? Waiting until you can reap the full rewards?" The questions were not accusatory.

"I’m sure the other stones will have their uses. The Reality Stone, for instance–"

Thanos’s eyes were shrewd, calculating. "You want to change forms, is that it? To make yourself – what was it? – Asgardian rather than Jotun."

For half a heartbeat, Loki didn’t know why a part of him was almost surprised that Thanos had remembered.

Of course Thanos would have remembered.

Not for the first time, Loki truly despised the Soul Stone for all the information it had armed Thanos with, all the things he had never spoken of, all the things he would never say, all there for the taking.
The Soul Stone might not have been able to make him do anything against his will but it made everything so unbearably _him_ laid out in the open, made everything so unbearably him something that Thanos could practically taste; he could cut through to his core and see everything Loki wanted, everything he desired, everything he couldn’t stand and everything he loved.

Loki’s fingers clenched. "I forget sometimes," Loki said, his voice flatter than he had intended, "how well you know me."

Thanos missed the traces of underlying resentment and nodded instead. "I forget that sometimes too." And then before Loki could fully grasp what had just been said, Thanos added, "I saw what potential you had, don’t overlook that." Thanos smiled down at him and there was something sickeningly paternal about it, as if Thanos was _proud_ of his achievements. "I also saw your shortcomings. I hoped one day my hard work would pay off. And here it is." Thanos held out his gauntlet for show. There were only two empty slots left.

Loki hardly dared believe it, hardly dared believe that – for now at least – Thanos had questioned nothing, had accepted the forged Sceptre for what he believed it to be. Something would have to wrong – something _always_ went wrong.

The best he could do was to delay the inevitable.

"What happens next?" Loki asked.

"I've heard rumours of the Aether not being far from here. I sent..." Thanos frowned. "What was her name? The one you fought more than once, the one who would have killed you if The Other hadn’t had different ideas for you. You know who I am speaking of, I’m sure. I sent her on the trail of the Reality Stone and that led her to these parts of the galaxy where she perished in combat."

If there was another opportunity to keep Thanos conversing, to keep him occupied. Loki was going to take it.

"Who killed her?"

"I don’t know."

"Then how are you certain she is dead?"

And then, just when Loki dared believe he'd planted the seeds of doubt, that he could have misled Thanos with the prospect of yet another one of his subjects having betrayed him, Thanos replied, "Her corpse convinced me." He shook his head. "She is of little consequence now. Her path has led me as far as it could to the Reality Stone. As for the Time Stone... I trusted him. Loki could barely recall what the initiate had looked like but he remembered their venom. “I trusted him and he intended to take it for himself. If he’d been competent enough to find its location then at least one of his actions would have benefited us.” Thanos’s jaw was set. "No. We will have to find it ourselves." His gaze grew sharper. "Finding the rest of the stones won't be trouble for us anymore.”

Loki tasted dread. "Why's that?"

Thanos's lips twisted upwards. "Because," he said, holding up one hand, "I have this." The Power Stone glinted in the light. "And what better thing to use to detect sources of power than this? What better tool to use to reunite it with the rest of its siblings?" He drew in a breath and closed his eyes. "As for the Reality Stone… that’ll be the closest. I’ll start with that one." Before Loki could protest, Thanos clenched his fist. The gem glowed a brighter purple and the veins in Thanos's hand and arm began to bulge from the strain. His eyebrows furrowed and he looked to the gem. "What—"
On the second attempt, Thanos’s entire hand began to glow. At first there was just a trickle of it, a light that started to flow down from the gauntlet like a stream of molten violet lava flowing through his veins. Thanos let out a hiss, wrenching his arm back.

“What–” Thanos uttered again.

Loki hid a smile. Whatever Tony had done to the Power Stone must have worked. “What’s the problem?”

Thanos glared. “The problem–” He broke off to shake his hand again as if to rid it of the pain. “The problem is that it acted against me.” He’d spoken as if he still couldn’t quite believe his words.

Loki would have to say something, assure him that there was a perfectly rational explanation outside of him having people working against him.

“The Power Stone didn’t object to you wielding it before,” Loki pointed out. “Perhaps the Power Stone has reason to not want you to discover the other stones.”

Thanos shook his head. “The Power Stone is attracted to power – to both powerful objects and beings capable of harnessing great power. It would be against its own best interests if it did not want to become part of the complete set of Infinity Stones.” Thanos readjusted the gauntlet. “No. The only thing that has changed since it offered me so little resistance when I first wielded it is that I now have this.” With his index finger and thumb poised together, Thanos began to reach to pull out the faux Mind Stone.

Loki knew he’d have to stop him, that if he continued Thanos would finally realise what the root of the problem was: that the Mind Stone was no Mind Stone at all, that not just his hold over the Power Stone had been altered but also his hold over the Soul Gem.

“Bit longer,” Tony stated over the comm, causing Loki to startle.

Loki couldn’t physically stop Thanos, not when he had no way of doing so.

"Perhaps the combination of the stones is the problem.”

Thanos paused, squinting at him. “What do you mean?”

“The gems are sentient to some extent. They must be – they choose their masters, don’t they? If they can form opinions of their users then it is not outside the realms of possibility that they can form opinions of the other stones too.”

Thanos’s teeth glimmered when he smiled. It was a grim smile, a resolute one. "If they do I will be the first to find out." He continued trying to pick out the false Mind Stone.

Any second now, he’d know something was wrong.

“What makes you assume it’s not the fault of the Tesseract?”

“Because I was able to maintain the portal using the Power Stone when I had the Tesseract.”

“But–” Loki’s mouth was failing him, his mind was failing him. “The Tesseract and I grew acclimatised to one another. Maybe it’s something to do with how I directed the Tesseract to open the portal – it might not have been aware it had another wielder waiting and when–”

“I’ve had enough of your talking. There’s only one way to know for definite.” Thanos had
managed to prise out the core of the arc reactor and it sat in his hand.

It wouldn’t be long now, not when Thanos was actively searching for a reason why the Power Stone was acting against him.

There was only one name Loki knew that in whatever deranged and delusional way was able to sway Thanos. Only one name that out of every name was almost guaranteed to make Thanos listen, to send Thanos’s mind to his faraway place where logic and reason meant nothing in comparison to her.

“What if H–“

“Silence.” The arc reactor core was held between two of Thanos’s fingers as he tested its weight, tested how its energy felt. Thanos’s face turned to stone. The core fell between his fingers. Loki took a step backwards but there was nowhere he could go, nowhere he could escape to without being found. Thanos knew. Somehow, Thanos’s face was a perfect calm, his eyes devoid of anything. Then in the quietest of voices, Thanos uttered, “You betrayed me.”

Loki didn’t have the ability to speak, barely had the ability to move.

Then Thanos’s face morphed and there was only raw anger, raw rage.


“No–“ Loki managed to utter.

Thanos’s hand seized his arm and that strength, that impossible strength, he could not break free of. Loki tried to take another step backwards but Thanos wrenched him closer again, his face in his, his entire field of vision reduced to nothing but Thanos’s eyes.

“You thought to trick me.” Thanos squeezed tighter. “Me.”

“I didn’t–“

“As if I didn’t already know what you were, as if I gave you nothing. As if I haven’t taught you anything, as if I rewarded you with nothing.” Thanos’s breaths were coming out in pants. “I was generous to you, I would have given you a crown, Loki. I looked into your soul and I offered you exactly what you wanted, exactly what you needed. And this is what I get in return? Another betrayal?” Thanos shook his head in disbelief. “The last of my loyal subjects… I suppose it’s for the best that I don’t need subjects anymore. I have half of the Infinity Stones, there’s no one that could think to stand against me and survive. Even you, Loki. Especially you. I–“ Thanos almost laughed. “I don’t understand how I managed to overlook your tendency for treachery, your knack for lies. You’re loyal to no one – not even yourself.” Disgust glimmered in his glare. “There’s no trusting a trickster, not even when you think you’ve given them enough to persuade them to join your side.”

As if he had ever given Loki a choice.

“I was helping you,” Loki lied.

Thanos seized his other arm. “Helping me? By thinking you could replace an Infinity Stone with some man-made invention and I’d never know the difference?”

And where was Tony, how much longer did he have to reverse the Soul Stone for, how much longer until–
Thanos wouldn’t kill him for his deception. Thanos would feed his soul to the stone and if Loki wanted any chance of avoiding that fate, he had to continue, had to make sure Tony had enough time to reverse the Soul Stone as far back as it needed to go.

Loki needed Thanos irrational, incapable of logical thought, too consumed by his own emotions to notice anything was amiss with the gem.

Loki met Thanos’s eyes. “Your mission to woo Hela has been doomed to begin with, you don’t–“

Thanos squeezed his arms tighter until the tendons in Loki’s wrists crunched.

“You dare–“

“Hela doesn’t want you. She never did. She never will.”

“No. She is testing me, she is making me better, she has a plan for me–“

“Oh, I don’t disagree that she has a plan for you,” Loki said. “She wants you dead.”

Loki watched as the rage ebbed and was replaced by joy, by serene hope.

“She wants me to join her.” Thanos closed his eyes in relief. “She wants me by her side.”

“If only to punish you for your insolence.”

Thanos opened his eyes and the almost childlike confusion was disjointing. “I never gave her any offence.”

“She rejected you, multiple times, because of her lack of interest in you, not because she was trying to mould you into something else.” Loki might have been trapped but that didn’t mean his words could not be more effective weapons than any steel, than any stone. “Hela despises you.”

Thanos shook him, his eyes wide and frantically darting between both of Loki’s. “You lie. You are lying. This is another one of your tricks, another one of your games.”

“She asked me to kill you.”

Thanos stopped, frozen in motion. “No,” Thanos said. “She couldn’t have done. She wouldn’t have graced you with her presence, she wouldn’t have asked any favours of the likes of you.”

“She is my sister.”

“Creatures as low as yourself can only dream of being so blessed.” Thanos was squeezing so tightly his fingers would surely leave imprints for years to come. “Your games become more badly played by the minute, Loki.” Without warning, Thanos lifted him by the arms and surged forward to slam him against the far wall, causing the back of Loki’s head to smash against the stone. “You insult her name, her person by such association with you. This is another one of her tests, it has to be!” Thanos released one of Loki’s arms to seize his throat instead, his eyes bright with conviction. “And I won’t fail her.”

The yellow glow of the Soul Stone was right there, right in front of Loki’s eyes and he squirmed, thrashing, kicking, jerking, its glow getting brighter and brighter. Thanos frowned at it as if it wasn’t cooperating fast enough and then–

“Hey.” It was Tony voice. Only it wasn’t just coming through the earpiece – it was coming from somewhere behind Thanos. “Hey, sneaker-face.”
Thanos turned around.

Loki couldn’t see where exactly Tony was stood with Thanos blocking his view, couldn’t see if he’d managed to retain Tony’s illusion of invisibility, and so he made mirrors and mirrors, filling the entirety of the chamber with multiple Tonys.

Loki could feel his pulse hammering against Thanos’s fingers, his chest tight, his skull throbbing.

Thanos didn’t let go of him. “Another one of your tricks.” He directed the words at Loki. “I haven’t forgotten what you are. I won’t be overlooking what you are, not again.”

“The issue with that,” Tony remarked, “is you’ll be completely overlooking what I am. Plenty of people have done it before you. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Thanos ignored him, reactivating the Soul Stone and then Loki could start to feel it, like an anchor had pierced something inside of him.

“Feel that?” Tony asked.

Thanos hesitated. “He’s older,” he murmured, directing the words at no one. “Older than he should be.”

“Well, yeah, there is that. But there’s also the problem with your little pieces of jewellery. And you’ve noticed it, haven’t you?”

Thanos finally paid Tony attention, turning around.

Tony continued. “That thing you dropped – which, ouch, my heart – had nothing to do with the rest of your little rock collection malfunctioning. You wanna know why?” Out of the periphery of his vision, Loki could see the Tonys holding up the reverse-gun. “It’s because of this.”

Thanos squinted at it. “Am I supposed to be threatened by such an object?”

“I don’t give a shit whether you’re threatened or not. Because any minute now, you’re gonna be left with nothing.”

*Any minute*, Loki repeated to himself. Anything could happen within the span of minutes – Thanos could rid him of his soul, they could complete turning the Soul Stone against Thanos, Thanos could strike out at Tony or Tony could–

“Is that so?” Thanos pulled Loki closer by the throat. “If that’s the case, I suppose I should hurry.”

Fear entered Tony’s eyes but he masked it quickly enough. “Bad call. Wouldn’t do that. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Loki could feel the anchor starting to tug, the sensation deep inside of him, like a harpoon yanking at something he’d never been so acutely aware existed.

Thanos was straining from the effort, drips of perspiration rolling down his face.

*Good*, Loki thought. It had started to work – Thanos was already having to exert himself more to use the stone as he had once done.

“If you’re gonna attempt to take someone out in the last minute you’ve got left with that thing,” Tony commented, the note of panic in his voice only detectable to trained ears, “then you’re going after the wrong guy.” Tony adjusted his hold on the reverse-beam so the Time Stone was visible.
“Oh and by the way. You’re starting to piss your stone off.” Tony paused. “And me, coming to think of it.”

Loki took advantage of the distraction, jabbing one of his daggers through the hand at his throat. Out of reflex more than injury, Thanos’s grip loosened enough for Loki to duck and run, conjuring even more Lokis, even more illusions that wove around the rest of the Tonys.

The Tonys nodded at him. “How you holding up?”

“Still alive,” Loki replied.

“Should we get on with this thing then?”

Loki sighed. “I suppose we’d better.”

Thanos looked between the illusions. “What’s this?” The question was directed at the Lokis. “You’ve got yourself an ally?”

“Oh, believe me, I was surprised too.”

“Of course a true ally would actually have to be able to trust you, Loki.” Thanos turned his gaze to one of the Tonys. “I wonder if he ever could.”

“I’m doing it right now, dumbass.”

Thanos smile was a cruel thing. “Are you? Really?” He gestured to the Soul Stone. “It took me a while to detect it but I can feel it – your soul.” Thanos started to move, coming to a stop in front of one of the Tonys. “And what a thing it is… Vibrant and in constant motion, with the ability to move so fast it leaves other souls behind. The soul of both a fighter and an inventor all wrapped into one. A marvellous sacrifice, I am certain. But you’ve had doubts. I can see the link between the two of you. How it is wrought with doubt. How the doubt has riddled its way almost all the way through in places. And it would have been so touching for Loki to finally have a friend.” The next words were said with such callousness that Loki almost flinched. “Even if that friendship can’t last more than a handful of decades.” Tony’s face soured but Thanos ignored it. “There’s still so much both of you hasn’t told the other, so much that’s been left unsaid.” Somehow, impossibly, Thanos’s grin grew more vicious. “Loki likes you, you know. And you – you don’t even know what you want.”

Tony’s jaw tensed. “I know what I want. I want us to be the ones to take you down.”

Loki couldn’t stop watching Tony, couldn’t tear his eyes off him. Nothing on the surface suggested he had registered what Thanos had just told him, but Thanos’s words had been ambiguous, prone to interpretation.

Loki cut his line of thought off. And the stupidity of it, the idiocy of that being a concern at such a time was beyond ridiculous.

Before Loki could get any closer, Thanos struck.

Tony’s armour was hindering him, preventing him from moving as quickly as he could have done without it, and the only thing it gave him when it wasn’t powered was the protection the metal offered.

The Soul Stone, though it had made it more difficult for Thanos to wield it, still had not rebelled.
Tony ducked underneath the first swing of Thanos’s arm, a blow that was surely intended to strike his head. Loki flung one of his knives, hitting his target and striking Thanos in the neck, but the knife barely tore into his skin, leaving a cut so shallow it would have been no more irritating than an insect bite.

Loki would have to do better, be better.

Thanos attacked again, disregarding Loki entirely, following Tony as he ran from one side of the chamber to the other. And then there was nothing to do but pursue Thanos, armed with nothing but knives. Loki’s illusions were rendered useless when Thanos could still use the Soul Stone to separate the real versions of themselves from the fake versions, but if Tony was able to just rewind the Soul Stone a little further…

Tony needed time. Time in which he wasn’t distracted with having to defend himself. And while they’d agreed that Loki would serve as a distraction, Loki was certain this hadn’t quite been what Tony’d had in mind.

Loki took a running leap, sending himself flying up in the air and landing on Thanos’s back, his arms around his neck. And then his daggers were in his hands and he managed to sink one of them into something that squished, something he hoped was one of Thanos’s eye sockets.

Thanos threw him off and Loki landed on the floor, his forearms having prevented his face from colliding with the rock. Thanos towered above him, the knife still wedged in his eye, his teeth grit together in what was impossible to discern anger from pain. Loki rolled over before Thanos would take the opportunity to crush him, to pin him down with his weight.

And then something happened that none of them had expected.

There was a scraping noise.

The sound of metal on rock seemed to come from the heart of the ship and there were crashes and clangs and still that dreadful high-pitched scraping, growing louder and louder the closer it came. It was moving, whatever it was, and moving at a fast rate.

It did not take long for the source of the sound to make itself known – it had entered the room.

An object, metal and wedged between the walls of the corridor, large enough that it barely fit, large enough that its shell had become so badly misshapen it barely resembled its original form. steered towards them.

The object was a pod, one of the vessels Ronan had sent out to fight the Chitauri.

And inside the pod, there was a figure.

Nebula.

The pod was armed. Loki had just about enough time to grab Tony and dive, dive to avoid standing in such close proximity to Thanos before Nebula started firing, lasers ricocheting off the walls and floor, flooding the chamber with flashes and flashes of light.

Thanos remained stood where he was, not caring how many lasers hit him, not flinching when they did. “Nebula,” he called. “My daughter.”

The lasers stuttered to a halt.
Nebula kicked open the door to exit the pod, the metal too crumpled for it to function as a door anymore. She stood in front of the pod, a weapon in either hand, her posture poised, tensed, ready. “I’m not your daughter. I’m not your anything anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Thanos said. “Are you here to join me or fight me?”

“I’m here to do something.”

Thanos went from looking grieved to disappointed. “You know I’ll have to punish you for this.”

“I don’t care anymore.” And then Nebula leapt forward and they were locked in combat, her rapid successions of slashes and hacks against the swing of Thanos’s arms and fists.

Tony stumbled towards them but Loki grabbed him and hissed, “Go!”

Because what had they been waiting for? They had a distraction, a distraction that was better than Loki alone, a distraction that would allow both Loki and Tony to be able to operate at the same time without having the entirety of Thanos’s attention directed at them.

Tony had moved to duck behind the pod and it took another few seconds for the reverse-beam to start up again. When it did, Loki saw how Thanos almost had Nebula, how he’d lifted her off the ground with one hand around her throat. Only he wasn’t squeezing – he was holding her in place. Nebula bared her teeth and growled, reaching for the knife embedded in Thanos’s eye and then she pushed and Thanos let out a roar, dropping her. Nebula started scrambling, moving as quickly as a spider.

And—

What was Loki doing, just watching?

Nebula had been right about one thing at least: Thanos’s eye was definitely a target. She’d managed to hurt him by pushing it further, actually hurt him.

Loki managed another leap onto Thanos, only this time Thanos was prepared for it and he threw Loki off, causing him to crash against the stone wall.

With a stumble, Loki got to his feet.

Nebula was still fighting only Thanos kept trying to restrain her, kept trying to make her hold still.

Thanos was holding back – he didn’t want to kill her. And Nebula knew it too, Nebula was taking full advantage of it, twisting out of his grip and moving into the blows that would have hurt her, would have crushed her if Thanos used his full force.

He wouldn’t spare Loki. Loki suspected that a similar fate to Ronan would be waiting for him if he failed. But if he succeeded… If he succeeded then Thanos wouldn’t be able to wield the slightest bit of power from the Soul Stone, wouldn’t be able to have the choice.

Thanos was prepared to guard his face, to not allow either of them to go anywhere near his eyes. And that was why Loki went for the gauntlet.

While Thanos was still occupied with Nebula, while Thanos was so set on trying to restrain her, to prevent her attacks, Loki’s hands seized the metal and then he started tugging and felt the gauntlet actually start to give way until Thanos kicked at him and he ended up sprawled on the floor.
Loki glanced upwards and blinked the blood out of his vision.

His bones hurt.

Thanos had Nebula within his grasp again, one hand cupped around the back of her head.

Loki staggered closer but Thanos had thrown him so far that it did not matter.

"Nebula," Thanos said. "You’ll receive your punishment after you wake up."

There was time for Nebula’s eyes to widen a fraction before Thanos’s fingers sunk into the plate of metal attached to the back of her skull and tore it off, leaving severed wires that sparked and smoked.

Nebula went limp, her body collapsing.

Thanos turned, his eyes roaming the room. Tony. He was searching for Tony.

Loki positioned himself between them, standing between Thanos and the pod, a dagger in either hand. It was laughably little to be armed with.

Thanos took in his crouching form. “You think you’re a threat to me?” The reverse-beam was the threat to Thanos but if he didn’t understand that then Loki wasn’t going to enlighten him. “I’ll deal with you later.” Thanos’s eyes flicked behind Loki to address Tony. “You are a pest.”

“If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s pissing people off,” Tony replied.

Thanos pushed past Loki as if he weighed nothing. It was a shove that would have sent Loki to the floor yet again if he hadn’t been anticipating it, if he hadn’t moved at the last second to use the momentum to pivot. So confident in his success, Thanos hadn’t bothered to check he’d done what he’d wanted to accomplish and continued to stride towards Tony, leaving his back unprotected.

Loki tore after him, his knives slashing, keeping trying to penetrate through whatever flesh was vulnerable and within reach. The tendons at the back of his knees, gaps between his armour and flesh. Paper cuts, all of them. He might as well have been attacking Thanos with parchment for all it slowed him down.

“Finally,” Tony said, “you’ve got the sense to come after the right guy. You might be a fucking moron – learn to take a hint, Hela just isn’t that into you – but at least you’ve finally managed to get one thing right.”

Loki made another grab for the gauntlet, his fingers just managing to grasp the cusp until Thanos, without breaking his gaze from Tony’s, reached out with one hand and grabbed the clothing that covered Loki’s chest in one fist. Only Thanos didn’t throw him this time. This time Thanos dragged him over to where the pod sat, lifted it up with his other hand and let it fall with Loki underneath it.

The impact knocked the air out of Loki’s lungs and one of his ribs cracked. Loki couldn’t move his torso or either of his legs, could feel every other bone in his chest creaking under the weight of the pod.

The only part of him that wasn’t being crushed was his head and that was a minor blessing.

Tony ran and Loki didn’t realise where, not until Tony picked up the arc reactor core Thanos had allowed to slide between his fingers, shoved it back into its rightful place, and then his suit was
alive again and Tony hovered in the air, one hand aimed at Thanos.

Tony blasted.

Tony blasted and Thanos stared impassively, his head tilted to one side. “The Power Stone may punish me for this,” Thanos said, “but I think it will be worth its wrath.” Thanos flexed his fist. Veins in his forehead stood out, and even from where Loki was, he could see the smoke starting to rise from the Power Stone’s slot in the gauntlet, as if the stone was trying to escape.

With a roar of anguish, Thanos directed his hand at Tony.

The arc reactor exploded.

Three things happened in quick succession: the first was the suit falling like a heavyweight. The second was Thanos standing over Tony, tearing off strips of his armour like they were nothing more than meat. And the third was Loki’s struggle to free himself reaching a new level of desperation, the adrenaline fueling his strength, making himself numb to the pain caused by moving.

Loki’s struggle skidded to a halt as he watched Thanos grab the reverse-beam from Tony, Tony who tried in vain to wrench it from him, to snatch it back.

Thanos was stronger.

Thanos was stronger and now he had the Time Stone too.

Then Loki started moving again, pushing and pushing on his forearms with all the strength he had. Something gave way, something that allowed him enough leeway to crawl forward and dislodge himself from the pod.

Despite himself, Loki managed to stand. Somehow he managed to get closer, each step resembling more of a lurch than a stride. Somehow he managed to reach Tony, lying in the debris of his armour, bleeding and gasping, but still alive.

Thanos had already prized the Time Stone out of the reverse-beam and he almost smiled when he saw Loki had returned.

“I thank you, Loki,” Thanos said, “for unwittingly being responsible for me gaining another three of the Infinity Gems. It’s a shame you had to betray me – your rewards would have been beyond great otherwise.”

Loki couldn’t stand to look at him, to look at the gauntlet, to look at the reverse-beam in his hands, the device Tony had designed, the device Tony had crafted to suit his own understanding of science and magic.

“It’s not for you,” Loki managed. His voice was weak. His argument was weak. Everything about him was so weak.

“I’ll take whatever I want.” Thanos let the reverse-beam fall from his fingers to the floor, disregarding it now that he had the stone. “First I’ll kill him,” Thanos said, nodding at Tony. “And then I’ll make you watch as I kill your brother. I’ll make you stand by my side to while I traverse across the universe because I know there’s nothing you’d dread more. And then, once I’m done, I’ll leave you with Ronan for the rest of eternity. I’m sure his soul will harbour some resentment towards yours given how you betrayed him too.”
Loki’s stomach clenched. He’d come this far, only to–

No. They’d come this far.

And now Loki could barely carry on standing and Tony couldn’t even get up off the floor and Tony was going to die and Loki couldn’t even die with him.

“Now,” Thanos said. “I want you to kneel.”

Loki did not kneel.

“Kneel,” Thanos pressed, “and I’ll give your friend here a cleaner death.”

Loki did not know how many seconds passed but then he was on one knee, the taste of bile in his mouth, his limbs vibrating with the intensity of his rage and hatred and dread.

Loki directed his glare at the floor, at the shards of metal, at the empty casing of the Tesseract, at anything but Thanos. Such defiance would only make it worse. But as Loki glared, he saw something – an object sitting on the stone floor. It must have come from Thanos tearing apart Tony’s armour.

The portal gun.

It was sat there as if to remind him of all the hope they’d had, of how much they’d accomplished, only for it to be rendered useless as they’d both lost their stones and every other weapon in their arsenal.

They had nothing when they’d had everything.

They had no gems, no weapons, no armour, no defence. Thanos had taken it all. All of it, except for that one object. That one object, which, if he was to figure out its purpose, would mean that Thanos would not only have his selection of all the currently alive souls but also all the souls that had ever existed throughout history. Assuming the paradoxes he created didn’t mean that–

Loki froze – not with fear but with hope.

The first thing Thanos would do if he knew would be to retrieve all the gems. All of them, not just the missing ones.

He’d been so certain that Thanos had taken the last of their weapons, but no matter what he took, no matter whether Loki’s blades were of any use, or his illusions, or even his Infinity Stone, there was still one thing Thanos could never take: his tricks.

Loki straightened. Then he caught Tony’s eye and gave a very pointed look at the portal gun, watched as Tony’s confusion morphed to wonder, wonder because Loki had a plan, regardless of whether Tony knew the specifics of what that plan entailed.

“Loki,” Tony managed, his voice a croak. “I think it’s about time we got our SHIT together.”

Tony made a move to sit up but Thanos placed a foot on his chest, trapping him, making him unable to move.

“You, little mortal, your beacon of a soul, will be a tremendous gift. I hope that knowledge will give you comfort.” Thanos braced himself, one fist raised above his head, Tony thrashing beneath him. “Are you watching, Loki?”
It was with deliberate calculation that Loki tore his eyes from the portal gun and Tony made a show of trying to scramble to reach it, attempting to escape Thanos’s boot.

It was enough to rouse Thanos’s curiosity for a split second, to make him glance at the object they were displaying such concern for.

Thanos did not need to free Tony in order to reach it and he picked up the portal gun, turning it in his hands.

“Is this one of your inventions, mortal? I can feel the residues on it. You are more clever than I thought, I see that now.” His fingers traced over the slot for the Time Stone and the slot for the Tesseract to click into.

“Oh,” Thanos said. “So this is why your gems feel so intertwined already.” His frown was gentle as he reexamined it from a different angle. “I wonder…” His attention drifted to the cubic that had contained the Tesseract, once back and forth between the casing and the square mould. “A perfect fit,” he murmured. The Time Stone was still in his other hand, still contained within its casing. It was almost delicate how he did it, how he placed the Time Stone in the gun and then removed the Space Stone from his gauntlet to put back in the cube. He was so preoccupied that he almost seemed to have forgotten about Loki and Tony. “But why… Why would you make something like this? What’s its purpose?” He held up a finger. “No. Don’t tell me. I told you I could detect your mark on the device but there is more to it than that. This– It entwines the stones together somehow, makes them function as one rather than as two. The Time Stone and the Space Stone… Now, why–” His eyes settled on Loki. “You. I felt it, how your soul had changed more than I anticipated. You said souls are ever-changing but yours – yours had aged more than should have been possible since I last saw you.” Thanos clicked the Tesseract in place and Loki hardly dared to breathe, to move, to utter a single word for fear it would deter Thanos from his current course. “Space and time,” Thanos said again. And then, “Oh. That’s what this is for. You came from the future. Your soul feels older than it should be because it is older than it should be.” Thanos beamed down at Tony. “You are a clever mortal, aren’t you?”

It was not difficult to give the appearance of being horrified at Thanos’s realisation.

“Cleverer than you,” Tony spat out.

“Is that why you’ve given me everything I need to get the other gems?”

“No,” Tony whispered. His eyes were wide, his mouth open in apparent dismay.

Loki had never seen Thanos smile so widely.

“It’ll be so much easier now. I thank you both,” Thanos said, “in spite of your lack of cooperation.” He nodded at Loki, Loki who made himself appear as if he was paralysed with fear. “I knew you’d come in useful – what I didn’t predict was how useful. Useful enough that you’d be able to grant me all of the Infinity Stones definitely surpasses any expectations I had of you. What a fine choice I made when I took you in.”

“What,” Loki said flatly, as if he didn’t already know what Thanos was planning.

“Now all I have to do is travel to one time and place where all of the Infinity Stones are together and then I can acquire them in one swift move, all in a matter of seconds.”

“But h–”

“The Infinity Stones are elements older than the universe itself. They existed before the universe
even formed; the universe formed *because* of them, because of their power.” Thanos squeezed the trigger. “So I’m going back to get them all.” Loki willed the Tesseract to obey, bore the brunt of the pain it brought when he wanted to tear a hole to outside the universe itself. “And then, once I’m done, I’ll come back for you, Loki.” The pain from the Tesseract had made Loki fall to his knees. “And I’ll make you see what you’ve done, I’ll make sure you see that all of it has been made possible because of you. You tried to betray me but your actions still make you the best subject I could ever have hoped for. So I thank you, Loki.” Thanos faced the portal, the light of all the stones through it reflecting on his face.

Nothing was louder than the thud of Loki’s heartbeat.

Then Thanos stepped through the portal and Loki almost collapsed from relief.

Chapter End Notes

So, with days to spare, I’ve just about managed my goal of finishing the Thanos side of the plot in time before Endgame comes out. That being over is good news for Loki and Tony but it also means I’m not going to be feeling the need to rush and write and edit an average of around 8K words a week. Which means I’ll probably be going back to posting once every two weeks instead to give myself more time to spend on each chapter. Aiming for the next update to be the week after next, anyway. Hopefully, I’ll see you then.
Chapter 47

Loki stared from where he lay on the floor at the spot where Thanos had gone.

Thanos was gone.

Gone.

Loki blinked again but there was no portal, no sign of him returning.

No sign of him ever returning.

Loki could breathe.

They'd done it. They'd actually done it.

Thanos was gone. In the end, he'd been his own undoing, even though Loki had been the one to nudge him onto the course of self-destruction.

The air was a precious thing.

"That's why you do your research, kids," Tony croaked from somewhere next to him.

And then they started laughing, staring up at the ceiling, breathless at first, then the sounds of their laughter growing louder and louder. One of Loki's laughs became too much, causing his stomach to push up against his ribs and there was a stab of pain that felt like a knife trying to cut its way out of him but he still couldn't stop laughing and the jabs grew more savage.

There was so many hurts Loki couldn't tell which pain was from where – from the weight of the pod that had pinned him down, from his body being repeatedly thrown to the stone floor, from the fingers that had squeezed his throat, from the last protests of the Tesseract when he'd commanded it tear a hole to outside of the universe itself.

The pain was a different kind of hurt to when he had died: it was one spread out across almost the entirety of his body, caused by a multitude of injuries rather than one concentrated one.

But he wasn't going to die. Not this time.

Loki had caused Thanos to obliterate himself from existence and he'd fulfilled his bargain to Hela in the meantime. *Only after he is no longer breathing will your life be your own again*, Hela had promised.

Loki laughed again, more out of sheer disbelief than anything else.

A quieter stream of chuckles had been coming from Tony, the sound more muted than what Loki’s full-blown laughter had been.

His eyes kept being drawn to the spot where Thanos had vanished, half anticipating his return and having to remind himself that it was over, that Thanos was over, that they’d never have to bother with him again, that himself and Tony had succeeded, that--

Tony.

Loki sat up straight and his ribs punished him for it. Then he saw the blood on Tony and any
remnants of his laughter died.

"Tony?"

The movement was so stilted it was hardly perceptible as Tony waved, barely moving his wrist.

"I'm uh..." Tony didn't tilt his head, addressing him with his eyes only. "I'm finding it kinda hard to move with all this metal stuck in me."

Moving was not easy for Loki either with the need to move his ribs as little as possible no doubt causing him to move in a very odd looking fashion.

From his kneeling position, Loki could see the problem. How the damage done to Tony's armour meant nowhere was spared of the shards and spikes of metal, how some of them were already digging into Tony's limbs, how Tony was hardly able to move without them digging in further or finding himself impaled on more metal. There were strips of his armour missing, torn off and flung to one side, and there was an indentation over his chest where Thanos had pinned him down with one foot.

Loki stared at all, at the stains of dark blood on the metal and at Tony's exposed face. There were so many cuts all over his body that he couldn't count them all. Tony's eyes were still alert; Loki hoped that meant he hadn't lost too much blood.

"I..." Loki trailed off. "I don't know much about Midgardian physiology."

Tony gave his shoulders in a small shrug and flinched. "I'm no doctor."

"Which area is the worst?"

"Left leg."

The metal covering his thigh had been severed far less cleanly than it had been on the rest of his armour, leaving strings of thorn-like edges and plate ridges that looked sharper than Loki's blades.

"Tell me what you need."

"Can't stay here forever. I'm gonna-- I'm gonna need the metal out. Don't think anything's broken. In me, I mean. The suit's way past it."

Loki's eyes fell to Tony's armour again, to the destroyed intricacies of its inner workings. Thanos had left it like a dissected animal – no, not like a dissected animal, more like an animal that had been mauled by some sort of savage beast.

Tony started attempting to move, one hand reaching for a shard of metal digging into his other arm and then letting out a hiss when a spike cut further into him.

"I could do it," Loki found himself offering.

Tony ignored him, fumbling to relieve himself of another shard, letting out a gasp of pain rather than a hiss this time.

"You're only making your injuries worse."

"I--" Tony's arm stilled and he panted for breath. "Fine."

"Fine."
Loki came closer, his fingers hovering over one of the pieces that appeared to be bothering Tony the most, one that was sticking into the flesh near his elbow.

Loki met Tony's eyes. "This will hurt."

Tony's fingers tightened into fists and he nodded. "Do it."

The metal was warm on Loki's fingers, stained with Tony's blood. Loki pulled it out, trying to find the balance between not doing it painstakingly slowly but allowing himself enough time to make sure he was pulling it out at the precise angle it had entered.

The worst part was the sound effect, the wet pull of the material as it slid out of the flesh.

Tony's jaw was tight. Blood trickled down from the wound. Loki dropped the piece of metal and it made a soft clink as it met the stone floor.

"Next," Tony said. And then when Loki pulled out that one, Tony said, "Next," again and again and again.

Blood stained Loki’s hands. Blood stained his fingers.

The pile of metal grew larger but Tony was flinching less with every piece that was no longer sticking into him. Loki had taken out the most painful of the pieces first – which in hindsight may have been a bad idea because those were the ones that tended to make Tony bleed the most.

The bleeding, though alarming at first, was nothing too excessive. Most of the marks were shallow, on surface level, and the cuts that were deeper were few in number and hadn’t appeared to pierce anything important.

Once Loki was finished, Tony was able to prize himself out of the ruins of his armour.

"What about you?" Tony asked. "I can't be the only one who got pretty beat up."

"I heal faster than you." Loki had been able to push away the feeling of the punishment from his last command over the Tesseract with how hard he was having to concentrate and it was only as he thought of it that he realised the effects had mostly disappeared. It was a pleasant surprise in comparison to how severe the Tesseract had been the first time he had used it in a way it did not wish and the thought of its lenience was almost enough to make him long for the gem again.

"Right." Tony started to stand and one of his legs started to buckle underneath him. "You er-- You mind if we just sit for a bit?"

"Not at all." Loki would prefer to delay having to move for his own personal reasons as well – he suspected his ribs would not thank him when he stood up.

There was a cut that ran from Tony's temple to near his ear, another that ran across the bridge of his nose, and another horizontal line on one side of his forehead. Somehow, despite it all, as Tony sat he managed to look peaceful, as if he was enjoying having a brief rest. There was something gentle about how his--

Tony let out a bark of laughter, startling Loki out of his thoughts. "I can't believe Thanos paradoxed himself out of existence. I mean, I know I called him a dumbass but I wasn't expecting him to be that dumb."

Loki forced himself to stop staring. "Better to have used his own power against him rather than
attempt to work against all the power he had."

One half of Tony’s mouth lifted. "If only we thought of that. Oh – wait. You did. You thought of that." Tony rose to his feet, taking care not to put too much weight on his left leg. "Nice improvising, by the way." Loki gave him a nod and then asked, "Can you walk?"

The look he received was only slightly disparaging. "Just tell me where."

Loki stood up and grimaced. His suspicions about his ribs had been correct. "That’s... actually a very good question."

They’d be so set on getting to their feet, on getting Tony out of his armour, that they hadn’t considered what their goal beyond that was. Because they couldn’t simply teleport away anymore, not with the Tesseract and Time Stone gone. And that left them stranded on a ship drifting through space five years in the past surrounded by what was left of the remains of both Thanos’s and Ronan’s fleets.

"Er... Does this mean we get to go all space pirates again?"

It took Loki a brief moment to figure out his meaning. "You want to take over the ship."

"Why not? We're the only ones on it. And it’s gotta be way faster than our little pod thing."

"We don't know how to fly it."

"We don’t," Tony agreed. He nodded to the site where Nebula’s body lay. "But she might."

***

Loki suspected that if it wasn't for how unconscious – unconscious or malfunctioned? – Nebula was she’d despise him for this, hate him with an absolute vengeance because of the humiliation of them carrying her between them while they made their way to their pod.

Their tools were in the makeshift workshop and they – well, Tony – would need it in order to fix her, to repair the damage to her wiring that Thanos had inflicted.

Tony’s walk more closely resembled a hobble and Loki could barely hold any weight across him and move at the same time without the stabbing sensation once again making itself known.

They headed out of the main chamber and into the adjacent gallery.

"Shit," Tony cursed.

Loki’s thoughts had not been far off the same sentiment because he had succeeded in sending three-quarters of Thanos's fleet through the portal to the void. But having one quarter left – less than a quarter in fact, given that some of them must have perished against the remains of Ronan's own fleet – still meant that they were outnumbered. And even if the Chitauri didn't pursue them, the remains of Ronan's fleet would find them onboard the ship eventually.

"We shouldn't linger," Loki said. "They won’t be distracted with each other for long."

Tony nodded.

They journeyed on. On through corridors and passageways and smaller minor chambers until they reached the docking area and were able to locate their pod.
"The Planet Express," Tony murmured as he saw it. It was small and well worn but the sight of it was a welcome one. "I've missed you."

The intention had been for Loki to leave Nebula in the workshop while Tony washed himself of the blood but his plans were interrupted when, as he walked through the kitchen, he discovered the carnage. Empty packets lay on the floor, corners of cupboards were splintered, and for a moment Loki wondered why any of either Thanos's or Ronan's underlings would have bothered to search their pod when he caught sight of a rat licking at droplets of water congealed on the tap.

Splinter. That was what Tony had named her.

He'd almost forgotten – almost forgotten about their existence in the aftermath of Thanos, almost forgotten about how they'd somehow already managed to break their way into the kitchen before, almost forgotten that they had no way out of the ship and were essentially trapped with no other sources of food.

Considering the circumstances, Loki found himself glad to see her figure had become somewhat more plump in the meantime. Though it was at that moment he realised they might have an issue with food – both in terms of the lack of hygiene from having their food broken into and as well as how they couldn't simply teleport back to Earth anymore whenever they began running low on supplies.

Hauling Nebula's body on top of a bench was the worst part, worse than being stabbed by any knife. It left him having to stand and brace himself against the table, teeth grit together, nothing filling his mind but the sheer agony of it.

It took much stumbling around for him to be able to locate the remaining rats and he was pleased to note they were still alive, though it remained a mystery how they were managing to break into the kitchenette.

Remi had run at him from her position behind a chair leg and made a point of climbing up to his shoulder and began licking at his face which was a gesture Loki wasn't sure if he appreciated. That had been two rats he'd located – two of five.

Another one of the rats had decided to make her appearance by scurrying around his ankles while he was washing Tony’s blood off his hands. A further two he discovered deep inside the cupboards after hearing their content crunching.

By the time Tony returned, all the blood cleaned from him, Loki was searching for the remaining missing rat in the workshop, having eliminated the kitchen area.

"Chaos demons," was Tony’s assessment when entered the room.

"The rats, I assume you mean."

"Uh – yeah. You seen the kitchen?"

"It was rather difficult to miss."

Tony pulled out a tray of tools. "Right. Anyway. Bigger problems right now. I'm going into operation mode." He selected the soldering iron. "Lucky for us, I'm operating with wires, not nerve endings. Makes this thing a hell of a lot easier."

Loki grabbed the box of wiring. The knife was back as he bent over, a sudden sharp pain.
Tony frowned at him. “You okay?”

“I said that I heal faster than you do, not that I’m fully healed.”

“Do you need–”

“This first,” Loki interrupted. “Reviving someone who can navigate the ship is more important.”

“Maybe she’ll know where they keep the first aid kits.” Tony didn’t sound fully convinced.

“You’re assuming the Kree would have any.” Loki found that if he stood up straight and without moving, his ribs didn’t protest too much as long as he kept his breathing shallow. “There’d be little anyone could do. I’ll heal faster the less I move.”

“Does this mean you’re gonna be standing around like a gargoyle for the next few weeks?”

“If I’m going to be standing around like a gargoyle, it’ll be for a matter of days rather than weeks.”

“You heal that fast, huh?”

“Admittedly, I’ve never broken a rib before.”

“You broke a rib?”

“Possibly.” Loki didn’t think it would be a good time to mention that others may have been bruised too. “We have a goal, Tony.”

Tony redirected his attention to Nebula, easing one of the wires sticking out the back of her head out of the way so he could get better access. Loki watched as Tony started the process of repairing, stripping out the damaged and broken wires and soldering new ones in place.

It was only as Loki stood still that he spotted the missing rat climbing her way down from a tower of tools and equipment that created a meandering path through the vent that joined the cage and kitchen. She scurried around the side of the cage and reappeared a few seconds later in the bottom of the tray. *Magically portalling rats indeed*, Loki thought, what a ridiculous notion. Why was it that that option had been the first explanation they’d thought of when the answer was as simple as there being damage to the plastic of the tray.

*Later*, Loki decided. They had more pressing concerns at the moment: flying out of danger and gathering supplies. And for that, they’d need Nebula.

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At first the faint whirring noise was the only indicator that Tony had managed to make something work. Then Nebula awoke with a gasp, sitting up straight, her eyes wide, hands clawing at the closest things to her.

The closest things to her happened to be Tony and the jolt caused him to drop his screwdriver.

"Hey – hey. You're safe. I'm not–"

Nebula’s eyes were wild. Tony’s words would have no effect on her, not when she’d been woken like that. Not when the last thing she saw would have been Thanos’s face as he tore off a section at the back of her head.

Nebula was on her feet and she launched herself at Tony. “What,” she snarled in his face, her
fingers digging into his shoulders, “did you do?”

“Damage repair. That’s all, I promise.”

Loki decided it had gone on long enough.

"Thanos is gone," Loki said. When he moved closer, he did it with slow deliberate steps.

Nebula whirled around. Then she charged at Loki and he dodged to one side, avoiding the kick aimed his stomach.

“Thanos is gone,” Loki repeated.

She spun and lashed out with both a leg and an arm and though Loki managed to avoid another kick, he didn’t manage to avoid the fist that collided with his stomach.

The punch was worse than the knives in his abdomen, so much worse. A noise escaped from his lips.

He should have blocked it, should have moved out the way. He shouldn’t have remained standing there doubled over and gasping from a single blow.

Her arms seized him then, seized him and tried to push him back, pushed against his chest until he let out a strangled cry and wrenched her hands off him.

“Thanos,” Tony said from behind her, “is gone.”

Nebula’s almost feral expression was replaced with momentary disorientation.

“He’s gone,” Loki repeated. “He’s never coming back.”

Nebula’s hold on him went slack. “What?”

“We dealt with Thanos,” Tony said. He’d been advancing with nothing but a pair of pliers in one hand and Loki wasn’t certain if he should have been flattered, amused, or mildly horrified.

She blinked, the heaviness of her breath causing her stomach to visibly move in and out. "What?"

Loki moved out of her reach. "He inadvertently destroyed himself."

"Paraded himself out of existence, to be precise."

Nebula’s mouth opened and closed again. "He's--" Her mouth struggled to form the words. "He’s… gone?"

"Yup."

Her limbs went still. “But how?"

"Long story," Tony said. "We'll tell you all about it later. For now, we've got a bigger problem."

“But Thanos had four Infinity Stones, how did you--”

“Thanos is no longer a problem,” Loki cut in. “We have other problems now.”

"We?" Nebula repeated.
"Assuming your attack against Thanos meant you no longer wished to be associated with him or the Chitauri, then yes, this is a problem that involves all of us."

"Why? Why should I care what happens to you? To either of you?"

"Because," Loki said, with, as far as he was concerned, far more patience than was warranted, "the three of us are the only ones left alive on this ship and I believe we all intend for it to remain that way."

***

Due to Nebula’s captaining, within a matter of less than a few hours, the ship was flying away from the remains of the warring ships. It had been because of Nebula that they were, if she was to be believed, heading towards another planet where they’d be able to sell some of the weapons on board and purchase food and supplies.

Loki misliked having to place all their trust in her given how it easy it would be for her to lead them into a trap, but he supposed they had few other options given that neither himself nor Tony were familiar with these parts of the universe.

Except that, as Loki stared out of the gallery window, it occurred to him that he might have been more familiar with these parts of the universe than he previously thought. There was a trio of ringed planets and they’d just passed some kind of floating fuel station with a logo that reminded Loki of a bilgesnipe and the sight of it was disturbingly familiar. And so far ahead in the distance he almost couldn’t see it, was a hole filled with nothing but darkness, staring down at the galaxy like a watchful eye.

The void.

The pit Loki had fallen through.

The sound of approaching footsteps disturbed him from his thoughts.

Those weren’t Tony's footsteps – they were quieter, more measured, more cautious.

Loki turned around.

Nebula.

She examined him without saying anything, her expression neither cold nor warm. She approached closer and came to stand next to him, her eyes looking at the same patch of space.

"Do you think this is where we recognise each other from?"

Loki’s mouth was dry. So he had been here before. Thanos is gone, he reminded himself. "It could well be."

They stared ahead in silence.

"I'm glad he's gone," Nebula finally said. She did not have to say who she was referring to. "But I wish I was the one to do it."

"Do you? I had to die in order to get the information I needed." Upon seeing her surprise, he added, "But I suppose you don’t know about that part yet."

"No," she replied. "I don’t." She brought a hand to the back of her head, feeling over the edges of
the new plate she’d taken out to check if anything had been implanted before she’d placed it back again. "Was it painful?"

Loki frowned. "Which part?"

"My f-- Thanos's death."

Loki hesitated. She'd wanted him dead certainly, but how much torment she'd wish on him he had no way of gorging. "I doubt he would have felt anything."

Her face darkened. "He deserved worse than what he got."

"He did."

"Much worse. He deserved pain, he deserved fear, if there was any justice--"

"The universe isn't a just place."

Nebula rested one hand against the glass, her eyes far away. "My sister's out there. Somewhere."

"My brother is too."

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"My sister, she... I should tell her Thanos is gone. That there's nothing for her to win by beating me anymore. She can finally stop. We can finally stop." Her eyes glistened with the intensity of her words.

"Do you know where she is?"

"I know where she was. I can find her again. Or she'll find me." Her lip curled. “She’s good at doing that.” Thor used to be good at doing that too, Loki couldn’t help but think. Nebula noticed his expression. "I’ll stay on this ship until we get the supplies. Then I’ll go. I’m not staying here."

Loki gave her a nod and turned to leave.

"I..." she started.

Loki paused.

"I didn't know I could trust your motives before," Nebula admitted. "If I did maybe..."

"You weren't cautious without good reason to be."

"I know."

"If I knew I could trust your motives, maybe we could have devised a better plan."

"I know." The words weren't spoken harshly, only wistfully.

***

"Look what I found," Tony grinned, revealing armfuls of bottles of liquid.

"What exactly..." Loki trailed off.
"Drinks," Tony announced. "We've earned it."

"Do you even know what those are?"

"Nope."

"Neither do I."

"I found them in the soldier's storage so I can take a pretty decent guess." Tony saw Loki was still hesitating. "You in?"

"Anyone would accuse us of being reckless, drinking on empty stomachs after being wounded."

Tony handed Loki a bottle. "Take it that's a yeah then."

"Maybe we can afford to be a little reckless on occasion now."

Tony clinked his bottle against Loki's. "To winning," Tony said, his eyes very much alive. It was a sight hard to look away from.

"To winning."

Loki took his first sip. The taste was not that dissimilar to ale, though fruitier than expected, and he suspected it was flatter than it was supposed to be.

Tony pulled a face. "Victory should taste better. I think we’ve earned better. Well, you have at least."

"It wasn’t as if you stood by and played no role, Tony."

"I take credit for the math and the– Wait – does that mean I did the equivalent of all the paperwork? Because everyone knows how I feel about paperwork."

"Paperwork is a more considerable foe than Thanos was, no doubt."

Crinkles formed around the corners of Tony’s eyes when he laughed but somehow they did not make him look any older.

“I’ve got an idea,” Tony said.

“I’m listening.”

“You, me, drinks, The Planet Express. For old time’s sake.”

“We have the entirety of the ship at our disposal and that’s where you choose?”

***

It was only after the first few drinks that Loki recalled how little he’d had to eat and drink within the past couple of days and Tony did not appear to be faring much better than he was. But the alcohol had started to relieve some of the pain of his ribs whenever he moved and that was as good as any incentive to continue.

They already had a small pile of bottles on the floor and Loki’s head was pleasantly fuzzy.

"What happens next?" Tony finally asked after taking another swig.
"We agreed that once we defeated Thanos, I would return you to Midgard."

Tony wiped his mouth. "How long's that gonna take without the Tesseract?"

Loki faltered for words. "I... I don't know."

"Guess we've got a faster ship now. Might take off a few years compared to the pod." Or it could still take decades. Perhaps longer. Perhaps longer than Tony's entire lifetime but neither of them had the heart to point it out. They didn't even know where Midgard was in relation to the system they were passing through.

"I thought we were supposed to be celebrating," Loki said and upon seeing Tony's face sober, he spoke again. "I meant it, Tony. I will return you to your home."

Tony nodded, a singular sharp one. "I know."

"You do?"

Tony's eyes did not leave his. "Yeah."

"Another drink?" Tony asked.

Loki managed a nod.

Tony threw another his way. "What you gonna do with your retirement?"

"I... I don't know." Loki hadn't presumed to think that far ahead. Tony would return to his usual life and then Loki would... Loki would do what exactly?

"Fair. I'd say I'll finally rest up but let's face it – that's not gonna happen. There's always something to make something for, always something to fight."

The alcohol must have made Loki bolder. "Is that what you want?"

Tony’s mouth opened but it took a second for any sound to come out of it. “I…” Tony fell silent as he took in the sight of Nebula at the doorway. “Hey," Tony greeted. "Uh – we've only got two seats.” Tony stood up to offer her a bottle. “Drink?”
Nebula did not look particularly impressed. "Alcohol isn't good for my system."

"Yeah, it's not good for my liver either but—Oh. You mean your system, not your system."

Nebula nodded, the motion stiff.

“Right,” Tony said. “You know what? Have my seat. I’ll just… find somewhere else.” That somewhere else turned out to be on the floor, sat facing them with his back against the control panel. “Sure you don’t want a drink?”

Nebula reached for a bottle from the pile. The way she took a sip made it appear as if she thought they might’ve poisoned it.

"Who are you?" she asked, the question directed at Tony.

"I'm not from around here. I'm from a planet called Earth." When the name did not appear to mean anything to her, Tony added, "We blew up a bunch of Chitauri once. Maybe you've heard of us."

"I asked who you are, not where you're from."

"Back home they call me Iron Man."

Nebula's nose wrinkled. "Why?"

"Because I fly around in a metal suit a lot. It's not actually made of iron, it's made of… Nevermind. I'm Tony Stark."

There was enough tension in her fingers to make Loki wonder if she’d break the bottle in her grasp. "Why are you so far from home?"

Tony pointed at Loki. "His fault. Well, not really. Long story."

Nebula's voice was firm when she addressed Loki. "Tell me how you did it." Apparently, she had no inclinations to skirt around the topic of Thanos.

Tony took another swig and responded before Loki could. "Storytime! Let me. Where the hell do I start? Oh – got it. It starts with a rat." Tony kept his eyes on her to make sure was engaged. "Her name was Jingles. She's responsible for saving the universe. Partially." Tony looked to Loki. "Did we commemorate her? Give her a little gravestone or something?"

"There was no body."

"Oh. Guess that's why. And we've been kind of busy since. But we can figure something out."

"Sentimentalist." Not that Loki disagreed,

Tony grinned at him over the rim of his bottle. "You know what? That’s not something I've been accused of before. It's kind of refreshing."

Nebula folded her arms and stared at the space between the two of them.

It was strange to witness Tony taking a hint.

"So," Tony continued, "after I invented time travel" – he didn’t bother disguising his pride in being able to say that sentence – "I figured we should probably do some testing. Make sure we don't destroy the universe or ourselves if we start hopping through time. Turns out I was right. I
engineered a paradox, sent Jingles to the past, and when she caused the paradox she never came back. Just like dying except with no corpse left over because you just don't exist. Not that you never existed, it's just the moment you make a paradox you can kiss goodbye to existing from that moment on."

"What?"

"That's how paradoxes work," Tony said. "You make a paradox, the universe says nah to dealing with it and presses the stop button on you."

Nebula had not stopped frowning.

"It's backstory," Tony said. "But it's important – trust me."

Nebula did not appear convinced. "... Go on."

"Okay so for SHIT to work–"

"Tony has an unfortunate fondness for terrible acronyms," Loki interjected.

"Stands for Shooting Holes In Time, did I mention that?"

“No,” Nebula said flatly.

"Well now you know. Anyway, we needed the Space Stone" – he pointed at Loki – "and the Time Stone. I was time, he was space. And I designed SHIT so you plug both stones in and then you pull the trigger and make a neat hole through time and space. You following?"

Nebula hesitated, then nodded but didn't look as if she had full confidence in doing so. "Where does Thanos come into this?"

"Soon, actually. Real soon. Shit. I forgot to mention I made a reverse-beam before I made SHIT. Uh – that happened, anyway. So we're both on Ronan's ship and I'm locked up and Loki's convinced Ronan he's on his side when Thanos rocks up. Then Loki somehow manages to persuade Thanos he's on his side too and he knows what Thanos is after. He knows Thanos wants all the Infinity Stones. So Loki does the smart thing and offers him them. But the offer isn't a real one – Loki doesn't actually want Thanos to kill everyone. He's got a plan. And it doesn't matter that he managed to lose Thanos his army last time Thanos gave him one because Loki uses his mouth and just talks and somehow ends up convincing Thanos to let him open up a portal to take most of his army to Earth to get another Infinity Stone." Tony snorted. "Except it isn't actually a portal to Earth. He's put an illusion over it to make it just look like it is. It's actually a portal to what's basically a vacuum and Thanos is giving the order for his ships to fly through it." Even in the darkness of the room, Tony's eyes and teeth were shining bright.

Nebula sat in the space that existed between hostile and defensive. Aggressively defensive, Loki might have placed it as, remaining with them only in order to extract the information she wanted. Tony was too wrapped up in telling the story to pay it much mind. "But here's the thing: the Sceptre Loki brings him doesn't have the Mind Stone in it. It doesn't even have any stone. It's just an illusion."

Nebula leant forward. "Then how did Thanos die?"

"Because of this tricky bastard," Tony said, nodding at Loki. Was that pride in his voice? "I was trying to reverse Thanos's gems, Loki was diverting. Which isn't the job with the best health
insurance, but hey. Oh and it's around this point where you made your entrance, guns blazing. In the literal way."

“What happened after he...” She fingered the back of her head.

“We fought a bit more. Well, Loki did most of the fighting. My suit died and Thanos ended up with our gems and I thought we were fucked.” Tony caught Loki’s eye. "I was waiting to die. I didn't think there was anything else I could fight with, not until–"

"Not until what?” Nebula interrupted. Her tone made it clear it was impatience that drove her rather than being enraptured by his tale.

"Not until Loki noticed SHIT. And I– I got as far as figuring paradoxes would have something to with it. I didn't get as far as figuring out how but Loki had this look on his face and I knew he knew and–" Tony shrugged. "Well, the rest is history."

Nebula sat up straighter. "Paradoxes. That's how–"

"That's right," Tony said with a grin that was perhaps larger than any Loki had seen on him. “Because he knew Thanos would make a grab for all the Infinity Stones. And here’s the genius part: the second he moved the ones he’d already interacted with even a millimetre, he’d be fucked. Because billions of years later, that’s gonna mean the stones are so far apart they’re in different galaxies.” Tony licked his lips. "And that's how Loki tricked Thanos into paradoxing himself out of existence."

For a long moment Nebula sat still. "Good," she finally said.

Tony raised his drink. “Agreed.”

***

Loki wasn't entirely certain at which point he’d gotten sick of having to stare down at Tony from his higher up position on his chair and had decided to join him seated on the floor. He was leaning against a pipe that was uncomfortable against his spine but he had little desire to move.

Nebula had left shortly after discovering how they’d defeated Thanos and Loki and Tony had spent the following hours playing chess and then once they were no longer had enough patience for it, playing their game of truths and lies.

It had reached a point where the game was becoming too easy and neither of them was invested enough to see it through, causing a lull in the conversation.

“You seem calm,” Tony commented.

_Calm._

"I'm calm?"

Tony squinted at him. "Aren't you? This is the most chilled I've ever seen you."

Loki let his head fall back to rest against the wall, to rest against that damned pipe. The clunk was louder than he anticipated – his _head_ was heavier than he had anticipated. "Maybe it is."

Tony let out a laugh. "Stuck five years in the past and you've never been more relaxed. You know what would suck? If we made it this far and then we mess up and paradox ourselves as well.
Coming to think of it, it'll be pretty hard to fuck with our past-selves while we're stuck on the other side of the universe."

"That's good," Loki murmured. He was tired. Tired but content. More content that he had been a long time. More comfortable than he had any right to be given his position, given the aching in his chest.

Tony was sat so close that he could feel the heat radiating off him. He’d been feeling it for some time.

There was another soft clunk; Tony had followed suit and was resting his head against the wall.

“Ow,” Tony said.

Then a weight settled on one of Loki’s shoulders.

Tony's head.

Tony's head was on his shoulder.

Loki held still – not out discomfort but out of fear that if he moved it would only bring attention to it and Tony might find somewhere more practical to rest his head. An actual pillow, for instance. Their seats were only a few feet right in front of them.

"You're not actually that uncomfy," Tony said.

It took Loki a few seconds to decide on his response. "You sound surprised."

"No. It's just... all the metaphorical spikes."

"Ah." Loki tried to search for something witty to say. When that began to take too long, he settled for, "You mean you were expecting my prickly persona to manifest in how comfortable or otherwise my shoulders are."


"You have a very... intriguing mind."

"I'm a genius," Tony mumbled, resettling his cheek.

"Is that why you got yourself into this state?"

One of Tony's fingers poked his arm. "And you're— You're a genius too. Not in a sciency way. In a you way. And you're not sober either so you can't say anything."

"I’m still more eloquent."

"Who needs to talk that well after this many drinks?"

"Those of us with pride."

"Mm. Yeah. Nah. Screw pride. Anyway – what do you think of our new roomie?"

"Nebula? Nebula is... I don't know. I don't think she'll try to kill us anymore which is a good start."
Loki could feel Tony’s eyes on his face.

"Thought you’d get on more," Tony said.

"Why's that?"

"You've got a lot in common. Maybe too much. Maybe that's why you don't like each other."

"Thanos never called himself my father."

"Let’s face it – Nebula wins for the shittiest dad. Maybe we should invite her to our Shitty Fathers Club. She makes mine look like a saint."

"And mine like a kindly elderly gentleman."

When Tony closed his eyes, Loki’s eyes fell to the scrape on his temple.

"Loki?"

"Mm?"

Tony opened his eyes again. "What– What’s gonna happen to you? When we get back. However long that takes." Tony adjusted the angle of his head to look up at him. "Are the Asgardians still gonna be after you? Even after everything?"

Even after all the hours that had passed since they’d defeated Thanos, Loki still couldn't quite believe it.

The ache in Loki’s ribs worsened. "They'd have to find me first."

"But your invisibility–"

"I know, I know. I can’t– I don’t want to have to rely on disguising myself indefinitely. And I don’t want to stay in the Nine Realms long enough to see if Thor was telling the truth when he said he'd vouch for my honour."

When Tony swallowed, Loki could feel the movement of his throat. "So after you drop me off, you'll be leaving.

Loki’s mouth was dry. He reached for his drink and took another mouthful. "I expect so."

Tony’s eyes flickered between his face and throat. "Where you gonna go?"

Through the fog on his thoughts, there was a pang that had nothing to do with Loki’s injuries.

"I don't know. Anywhere. Nowhere. I– I don't belong in the Nine Realms. I have no place there. I don’t think I ever did. That much is clear."

A frown appeared on Tony’s face. "What about–” He cut himself off. “What about Thor?"

"I can't speak to Thor without risking Odin’s wrath."

"So you're just not gonna see him again? The one who you did all of this for?"

"I didn't do it just for him, I–" The look Tony gave him was enough to cause Loki’s sentence to come to a halt. "I’m glad Thor is alive. Very glad. I won't see him harmed again but I'm not going
to try to mould myself into being a permanent fixture of his."

"I get it."

The words were warm against the fabric of Loki’s clothing.

"Do you?"

"We’ve all got complicated relationships with golden boys." Tony’s eyes were gentle. Warm. Loki had to stop thinking about how warm Tony was. "Yours is probably more complicated than mine – yours has been building up for centuries. So er... kudos."

"Thank you?"

Tony let out a small laugh, and Loki could feel that too, the way it resonated from Tony's mouth, how Tony's chest moved along with it. Then the laughter stopped and the air grew thicker.

The way Tony glanced up at him was different to last time he had. More hesitant. Cautious. "It'll be weird without you."

Suddenly the pain in Loki’s chest was the sweetest thing.

"It will?"

"Yeah. I’ve– I've got used to you being around, you know. And we're buddies now. More than that. We’re partners. Like you said. And I'm not gonna stop you free-ranging across the universe, I just– You can come visit me, right?"

Loki’s throat was tight. "If that's... If that's what you want."

"It is."

"Then I'd like that."

Tony shuffled his weight. "Your shoulder is exactly the right height."

Loki snorted.

"I can feel it," Tony said. “When you snort."

“I blame you for that.”

"Are you trying to get me to back off?"

"No." Loki realised he had spoken too quickly. "It was little more than an observation."

"Good," Tony replied, his voice slightly muffled by the side of his face that was pressed into Loki’s shoulder. "Because there's no way in hell you'd let me get away with this if you were sober."

Isn't there?

"I'm not that opposed to you."

"Makes a change from most people who get stuck with me."

How Loki hated it when Tony sounded bitter.
"I’m not stuck with you. And if it makes you feel any better, I could throw you out of the ship any
time I felt the urge."

"You know what?" Tony's voice had brightened. "That makes me feel better. Weirdly."

"I am often known as the voice of reassurance," Loki said dryly.

“Makes a change.”

“It’s not my job to reassure—”

“No – I meant it makes a change when someone gets to know me and it turns out I don’t irritate the
hell out of them.”

There was another pang.

“Oh,” Loki said. Apparently he’d lost all use of his silvertongue.

For that, Loki received an elbow to the arm.

“The ‘voice of reassurance’,” Tony quoted back at him.

Tony still hadn't removed his elbow. It remained where it was, the heat seeping from it through
Loki’s layers.

Then Tony was quiet, so quiet Loki assumed he must have been drifting off.

"You'll drop by sometime then?" Tony asked. "It won’t be the end?"

Loki’s smile might have been a little too blatant. "I'll make a point of visiting."

Tony readjusted the position of his head, moving closer, the very tips of his hair tickling Loki’s
neck. “Good.”

Loki wondered if Tony could feel him breathing like he could feel Tony breathing.

“Though you might be a bit premature.”

“Hm?”

“We have to get back—”

“To the future,” Tony finished.

It was impressive, Loki vaguely thought, that he recognised a reference Tony made this time, even
if it was only because of the number of times Tony had brought it up before.

“it could be a long journey.”

“We’ll deal.”

“We don’t have either of the stones.”

“We’ll deal.”

“We could accidentally alter the decisions of our past-selves if we aren’t careful.”
“We’ll deal.”

“Is that optimism I hear?”

Tony stifled a yawn. “Yep.” The stifling of his yawn was ruined by the appearance of another yawn. “The whole watching each other’s backs thing is nice when it actually works. And I think it worked. Don’t think either of us saw that coming. And I uh– I have a ton of acquaintances – hundreds and thousands of them actually – but I can count my number of actual friends on one hand.”

"I'm not sure you should."

Tony pulled back. "Not sure I should what? Count on one hand?"

The loss of contact made Loki cold.

"I'm not sure you should trust me."

"Screw that. I'm a– I'm a rationalist. Or I'm supposed to be, you know, objective. You could've thrown me out the airlock the second I stopped being useful if you wanted. And that's not even getting started on everything you did against Thanos. And against everything you did before that. Even before me, you'd already died for Thor. Don't– Don't hate me for saying this but you're not that bad. Not anymore.” Tony bit his lip. “I'm not sure if you ever were.”

"I tried to destroy Jotunheim. I tried to kill Byleistr for the simple fact of being alive while I thought Thor wasn't."

Tony didn't flinch. "I know."

"You don't think that's monstrous – you don't think that–"

"If you're a monster, you're the most human monster I've ever met."

For once, Loki’s thoughts were silent, too shocked to make themselves heard.

"And anyway," Tony continued, "you're only the second stabbiest person on this ship."

Neither of them expected the laugh it brought out from Loki, not even Loki himself.

“I must be compromised,” Loki said when his amusement subsided.

"Pride wounded?"

Loki spared a glance down at Tony. "Something like that."

"Well… You'll live." Tony yawned again.

“I intend to.”

Tony closed his eyes and placed his head back on his shoulder, his lips still tilted upwards.

“Good.”

The angle meant that Loki could see the way the eyelashes from his lower and upper lids met, the stubble on his face and all the lines in his skin.

“Are you… Are you going to sleep?”
Tony motioned with a hand vaguely in the direction of his chair without opening his eyes. “My seat’s all the way over there.” His voice was deeper when he was that tired. “And you’re not supposed to move. For health reasons.”

This time when Tony fell silent, it stayed that way.
Sometime during the night, Loki's head must have started to loll to one side.

He'd woken up with the side of his face pressed against the top of Tony's head, his hair matted into his cheek, the scent of his shampoo beneath his nose.

It was quiet. Peaceful, even.

There was nothing to concern himself with but Tony.

Loki didn't dare move.

He didn't want to move.

This was enough. He got to be this close. So close he could feel each breath Tony took, so close the heat from Tony's skull was shared with his own, so close he could see the pores in Tony's skin as he glanced down.

Everything was still. The ship was moving, flying through space umpteen times faster than their pod was capable of doing, but everything was still.

Selfishly, atrociously, Loki found himself hoping they wouldn't find Midgard for years. Because if they did, if they found Midgard before long, there'd be no more of this. He'd have to give it up.

Tony had invited Loki to visit – and the thought of the invitation was still something which warmed him – but there wouldn't be anywhere near as many opportunities for... this.

Whatever this was.

Reasons to be close to Tony, he supposed.

Tony's hair was softer than it looked and his face was nestled in the crook of his neck, the tip of his nose resting against him, each even breath warming his skin. And further up, if Loki was not mistaken – he had no way of checking, not without having to move – there were the tips of Tony's eyelashes lightly brushing above the hollow of his throat.

Tony was so close it hurt. Or maybe that was Loki's ribs still aching – it was difficult to distinguish between the two.

Loki's throat was dry. How he longed for a drink. But for that he'd need to get up and he wasn't going to move anytime soon, not unless Tony wanted him to.

Tony had been the one to elect his shoulder as his choice of somewhere to sleep for the night; therefore Tony couldn't have been that opposed to touching him. He couldn't have disgusted Tony that thoroughly – or at least, Loki hoped he couldn't have. There had been many drinks involved and it wasn't uncommon for alcohol to be blamed for people making unwise decisions. But it was rare for those decisions to be wildly out of character, not when the person would so often be acting on their base desires, on what they'd want to do if their inhibitions were gone.

Not that Loki would class this as a sign that Tony–

No.
Tony had a past record of casual touches – slaps on the back, being unbothered when their hands came into accidental contact, when he'd held him after being injured, even the time when he'd forced his hand down the back of Loki’s throat to save him from Mimir – but that didn't mean it meant anything more than Tony had grown comfortable around him.

They were friends. Partners. Tony had said so himself, that was no delusion of Loki's.

Loki was aware enough of himself to know that internally celebrating because of someone happening to not be thoroughly disgusted by him wasn't a good sign. His past-self would be horrified if he knew. *And all of this for a mortal*, he'd think.

Regardless, he couldn't quite bring himself to regret it. Not when he got this.

He needed to stop thinking. Stop thinking and enjoy it while he still could, stop thinking and allow himself to revel in being the most content he'd been in years.

Everyone who mattered was still alive and he was closer to Tony than he'd ever thought he'd get to be and not just because he was injured or sick or because it was necessary to try to direct any magic or power.

Loki closed his eyes.

Maybe this was how he could stop thinking; maybe all he had to do was listen to the sound of Tony's breathing and allow his own to synchronise to it. The attempt he made was hindered – not because of any fault of his own but because Tony's breathing was no longer audible.

Tony was awake.

He must have been.

And yet Tony hadn't moved. And yet Tony gave no deliberate indication of it. And yet– And yet– "Loki?" His voice was hoarse.

Loki pretended to startle. "Mm?"

"Doesn't matter."

*Doesn't it?*

Tony still hadn't moved away. He knew what he had done and he knew Loki he knew and– "My throat's dying."

Ah, Loki thought, _and so it begins: the inevitable separation_. He'd enjoyed it while it lasted. Loki waited for Tony to leave, for him to unpeel and extract himself from him, and for a second he thought it'd happen, for a second the weight of Tony's started to lift off but then it fell back again and when Tony let out a tired groan and conceded trying to move Loki had no complaints.

***

Their morning had been quiet.

It was unusual for Tony to have such bleary eyes and for them to lack their usual alertness.

Tony had said nothing about the previous night and so Loki said nothing either.
They'd both exited the pod in unison and found Nebula in the navigation station. Her eyes glanced between the two of them and narrowed slightly as she waited for them to speak first.

Tony mumbled something that sounded like 'morning' and her eyes narrowed further.

"It's afternoon," she said.

"... Oh."

Nebula rolled her eyes, which was probably one of the most human things Loki had witnessed her do.

"Is there a reason you're both still here?"

"Just... Just thought we should check if everything is--"

"Everything's how it should be," Nebula interrupted. "With or without your help."

"Yeah – uh... Is there anything you need help with or--"

"No."

"Alright then. Guess we'll just--"

"Actually," Nebula cut in just as they turned around, "now I come to think of it there is something you can do."

***

The task was hardly a glamorous one.

"This is worse than being a janitor," Tony complained.

"I suppose it's a task that's only marginally above grave robbing."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Only because no one's bothered burying them."

Tony had a Chitauri body in his arms and was dragging it out along the corridor, its blood leaving a trail behind him on the floor.

All of the bodies had not, unfortunately, vanished from the ship. Loki supposed he was probably too used to either disappearing after causing a commotion or leaving the responsibility of taking care of the resulting mess to other people and it added slightly to the insult that most of the bodies he hadn't even killed – they'd killed each other without need for his assistance.

The corpse Loki carried – one of Ronan's guards – was clammy in his hands. And now that his thoughts had drifted to Ronan, he supposed he'd have to deal with him as well not too far ahead in the future. Somehow, Loki suspected he wouldn't have gone far.

The weight of the bodies Loki could handle. Having to bend to pick them up on the other hand, was proving difficult. His chest was not forgiving him and every so often the pain would be intense enough that it would cause him to go completely still, to not even let out a hiss of breath.

"You sure you're not making it worse?" Tony asked him on one such occasion.

Loki supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that, even while shovelling alien corpses, Tony
remained his usual conversational self.

"Not entirely."

"You know what? Just this once, I'll let it pass. I'll take on your chores. But only because you'll be useless for longer if I don't. Don't go thinking this is a long term deal."

"I don't need help."

"I never said you needed it."

"Then why--"

"To be honest," Tony said, "the face you're making every time you stand up is giving me a headache."

"May I suggest turning around if it bothers you that much?"

"I've got a vivid imagination. Turning around wouldn't help."

Loki rolled his eyes but there was no malice behind it. "Have it your way then."

His ribs might not be in the habit of thanking him but they'd be thanking Tony for this.

***

Ronan – was it fair to say it was Ronan, given his condition? – remained seated on the floor of the largest chamber and the rest of the wreckage remained along with him.

Loki didn't know why he was almost surprised to see everything was still exactly how they had left it: the pod Nebula had arrived in was broken beyond repair, the pile of metal shards he had picked out of Tony was still there, and so was Ronan.

Had Ronan moved from where he had been? Loki couldn't say for certain; he'd had other things to be more concerned with at the time than memorising his exact position.

Loki walked closer to the thing that used to be Ronan. It was a body now, nothing more. It was alive only by technicality, its organs still operating and its reflexes and motor functions still working. But without a soul, it was nothing better than an animal. Worse. Loki had seen animals with more soul than this.

In the end, there was little need to spill any blood. Loki took Ronan's head between his hands and gave it a decisive twist and then there was a sharp crack and Ronan's body wasn't alive anymore.

Tony would know he did it and Loki doubted that even he would object to a killing that was practically done out of mercy, but at least Loki had spared him the conflict of having to do it himself. Not that he would claim he did it for Tony, just that Ronan would have been an unwelcome reminder of what their fates could have been and someone had to ensure Ronan was no longer in the way. It made more sense for him to do it rather than anybody else.

***

It had been Nebula's idea for them to fit the bodies inside of one of the spare pods on board the ship. Ejecting the bodies would most likely attract unwanted attention and might have risked their ship being followed or traced either for justice or in case it was perceived as a sign that there was valuable cargo with no one to defend it.
As far as Loki was concerned, it seemed like a waste of an otherwise perfectly functioning pod. After he'd asked why stowing the bodies away somewhere else wasn't an option, Nebula had explained that if they were planning to travel far they'd need to be prepared to have to endure their ship having multiple security checks when entering or wanting to pass through certain regions. A discovery of corpses would most likely not gain them admittance.

Still, at least it wasn't the last of the spare pods they sent and since that task was dealt with, it left them free to explore the ship.

***

At some point, Loki would have to tell Tony about the hole that led to the void; it had been lingering in the back of his mind since he’d first caught sight of it in the far distance.

It had been a long time since they’d had the conversation where Tony had mentioned his theory about travelling through wormholes causing distortions in time but if he was correct then there was a distinct possibility that Loki had fallen through time when he’d let go of the Bifrost. And if Loki never mentioned it, they would never know how much of a possibility it was.

But it had given Loki an idea. Because if he fell through one side of the wormhole and came out in the past, did that mean entering through the other side would throw them into the future? Loki didn’t know. He had no way of knowing but Tony had managed to figure out far more complex things without having to exercise his mind too much.

Loki had promised he'd return Tony home. Admittedly, he'd never promised when he'd do it, only that he would after defeating Thanos. By those technicalities, Loki could get away with not mentioning it, could still keep his word by getting Tony back to Midgard without having to risk flying through the void.

The void.

The void held so many memories for him.

Loki wondered when he'd stop having to remind himself that Thanos was gone. Thanos was gone but the memories of him hadn't faded. But if Thanos was gone then what did he have to fear from the void aside from the residues of his own fear?

Even going off the assumption that the plan would work, they'd need to transport themselves five years into the future to pick up where they had left off. Five years... Could he have spent five years in the void? What about after? How long had it been?

Or worse yet – if it was less than five years and they appeared within the Nine Realms again then there'd be a much higher chance of them inadvertently altering their timelines and causing all sorts of trouble.

Loki would have to think it over.

It wouldn't be fair to suggest it as a possibility, to give Tony that false hope, without knowing for a certainty if he'd be able to hold true and actually go through with it.

The thought of it, of willingly flying through the void to reach Midgard of all places, was almost enough to make Loki laugh.

Idly, he wondered if the Norns were too far away to laugh at him too.
No. He was done thinking about the Norns – he'd gotten what he needed in the end. Thanos was gone. The Norns had played whatever small role they could while–

Loki frowned. The vial. They'd given him it for a reason. *You’ll want to use it eventually*, Skuld had told him. He still had little to no idea what they meant by that but kept it in his pocket dimension all the same. He'd criticise the Norns all he liked, but there was little sense in throwing away something that could become of value, given time.

***

Distractions were helpful. If he was distracted then he wasn’t thinking about how Tony had laid his head on his shoulder. If he was distracted then he wasn’t thinking about the Tesseract, about the faint residues of its power he could have sworn he still felt that must have only existed in his mind. He’d heard stories about amputees with phantom limbs; perhaps this was much the same.

With all the newfound extra space, they'd seen little point in remaining inside their pod.

Neither of them had wandered particularly far to search for a more comfortable and spacious place to sleep. Loki ruled out the rooms stocked with bunk beds and a lingering musk as soon as he entered them, the sight of all the piles of unclean clothing and various belongings being enough to deter him. Most of the rooms designed for sleeping in followed a similar pattern, ones he assumed would have been occupied by the lower ranking members of the crew of the Dark Aster. What he needed to find were the rooms designed for the higher ranking ship officials, the ones that would, presumably, be closer to resembling something pleasant.

Then again, Ronan had never exactly been the extravagant type. But it wasn't luxury Loki sought; it was comfort.

The search was twice as fast with Tony at his side, opening doors and peering in access the rooms as they hunted the corridors. They wound higher and higher, exploring floor upon floor, until Loki finally discovered a room that did not exclusively fall into the category of unpleasant.

*No odour*, was the first thing he thought when he entered it.

It was less dark than the other rooms were as well. There were portholes lined up on one of the walls that allowed a view of what was through them – a view of the interior of the ship's engine, its parts rotating and spiralling and moving up and down. How the parts fit together resembled what a far cruder version of Tony's technology might have looked like, though it lacked his personal stamp.

Loki decided he'd had enough of searching and sat down on one of the beds, of which there were four rather than the fifteen or so beds in the dormitories.

Tony entered the room only a few moments later, took in his surroundings, then gave Loki a quizzical look.

"What are you doing in my room?"

"*Your* room," Loki repeated. "I think you'll find I laid my claim here long before you did."

"Oh yeah?" Pointedly, he placed himself on another one of the beds. "I actually picked this one out right before I needed to find the nearest bathroom so..."

"Did you now?"
For a brief second, Tony visibly tightened, and Loki wondered how he had somehow managed to rattle him despite Tony being the one trying to deliberately provoke him. Or so he assumed.

"I liked the view, alright?"

*Maybe not,* Loki realised. Maybe Tony had been telling the truth after all, though that didn't explain why he'd almost sounded offended when Loki had expressed his doubts.

Loki let out a sigh and gathered himself up.

Tony waved a dismissive hand. "No biggie." Tony saw Loki’s confusion. "What? It's not like we're not used to sharing." And then when Loki's perplexion still hadn't disappeared, he added, "Who else am I supposed to have sleepover secrets with, anyway? Because something tells me Nebula wouldn't be up for it."

Loki paused.

"... Alright."

***

"Let's play a game," Tony declared.

Nebula scowled. "I told you – drinking isn't good for my system."

"Alright then." Tony shrugged. "Let's play a game not involving drinking." Tony hesitated, then his eyes met Loki’s from across the other side of the navigation station. "You in?"

"I have little else better to do."

"Awesome. The whole gang's here."

"All three of us," Loki responded dryly.

"Exactly."

"I don't remember agreeing," Nebula said.

"You didn't say you wouldn't play so I'm taking that as a yes."

"Are you." Her tone alone was enough to express her displeasure.

"Boy – I'm really stuck with the party animals, aren't I?"

There was a pause in which Loki and Nebula attempted to discern who should have been more offended.

"I'm not known as a god of celebrations for a reason."

"I don't need to be a god to not be enthusiastic."

Tony held up his hands. "Please – don't fight with each other on my account. I'm sure we can all come to an arrang–" Tony broke off when both Nebula and Loki’s glares reached him. "Ganging up on me is against the rules. That's cheating."

"Cheating would imply that there are rules. For there to be rules, we'd have to be playing a game
rather than conversing about doing so."

"So... A game..."

Silence.

"Nebula?"

"I don't like games." There was something in her tone that suggested her opinion on the matter was slightly more intense than that.

"All games? Come on – I'm not gonna sit us down and force us to play Monopoly here."

"Less than half of what you say makes any sense."

"We can pick a fun game. A game we'll all actually like."

"I don't know any fun games." Her voice was clipped.

"Uh... Alright, Loki?"

"There aren't many games designed with three players in mind."

"But there are some, right?"

"I have little desire to expend my energy maintaining an illusion of a board and pieces."

"Then pick one that doesn't need many pieces."

Loki thought some more. "There is one that might do..."

"My only other idea was gonna be tag so I'm listening."

"The game originates from Nidavellir, most commonly the cause of gamblers losing larger sums of money than they can afford to in taverns. It's called Liar's Dice."

"I'm in."

***

Apparently, the soldiers on board the ship used to play something along similar lines and so Nebula had acquired dice from their belongings while Tony fetched a mug for the dice.

Loki placed five slips of paper in front of each of them. "Each chip represents a life."

"Five lives," Tony said. "Got it."

Nebula remained stoic, perching on her chair as if she wanted to be able to escape at a moment’s notice, no thought in mind for her own comfort.

"This is how the game is played," Loki started. "It begins with the first player shaking the two dice inside the container." He placed the dice on the table and put the mug over the top of them to conceal them while he shook them. "And it’s important that you don’t let anyone else see what you have rolled. For the purposes of this demonstration, I’ll lift up the mug." He'd rolled a three and a five. "Once you have rolled, you figure out your score. Take the largest number and times it by ten, then add the smallest number. That would make my total here fifty-three."
"Woo," Tony said. "Math."

Loki ignored the interruption. "When you have your total, you either tell the person next to you what your number is or you bluff and make up a number to end your turn."

"With you so far."

Tony was the only person who he appeared to be receiving feedback from.

"The next player can either continue or call your bluff. If they lift the mug to check the dice and find you were bluffing, you lose a life. If you were falsely accused, they lose a life."

"Sounds simple enough."

"Oh, it is," Loki said. "It's a very simple game. There are a few more rules though. The first is that you must state a higher number than the player before you."

"Huh. So the highest score you get is sixty-six. Six times ten plus the other six, right?"

"Yes," Loki said. "And no. Sixty-six is the highest number you can naturally roll. But rolling a two and a one is considered to trump that. A total of twenty-one beats a sixty-six. A twenty-one is the Liar's Dice."

"Why the hell does twenty-one beat sixty-six?"

Loki waved a hand. "I don't pretend that it's logical."

"Good. Because twenty-one being higher than the highest number you can roll is questionable math."

"Shall we begin?"

"Trial round first."

Loki had been hoping for some sort of response from Nebula other than steel-eyed determination but he received nothing.

"Very well." Loki placed the two dice underneath the mug and shook it. A four and a one. Not a great roll but not a terrible one either. Tony was after Loki, therefore it would only be Tony who would be trying to discern if he was telling the truth or not. Tony would be more inclined to accuse Loki of lying straight away and so Loki decided to tell the truth. "Forty-one."

"Nah," Tony said and Loki couldn't help but feel a little smug. "So I'm calling you a liar. I lift up the mug and – hey, look at that – you were actually telling the truth."

"And so you would forfeit one of your lives and give it to me."

"Alright. My turn." Tony rattled the mug and peered underneath it. "Five times ten if fifty, plus four is fifty-four." He smiled. "Makes it your turn to guess whether that whole thing was a bluff, Nebula."

Her eyes went between Tony and the mug in a fashion that was almost defensive. "I don't trust you."

"Fair enough," Tony said. "I wouldn't trust me either."
Nebula lifted the mug. Tony had rolled a three and a one.

"Good call," Tony commented.

"That'd be another of your lives gone," Loki pointed out.

"This is what practice rounds are for."

Nebula reached out and shook the mug. "Liar's Dice," she announced.

"Ah," Loki said. "Good. What happens with Liar's Dice is that the next player has a choice: either forfeit a life without looking at the dice or risk calling the bluff. However this time if I am wrong, the forfeit is double. I could either lose two lives or, if I'm correct, Nebula would lose two of hers."

It was difficult to come to a conclusion when all Nebula's face revealed was her mild resentment of her taking part in the game at all.

On a whim, Loki lifted the mug. A two and a one.

"And I would have lost two lives." Loki took in the other two players, one willing, the other one somewhat less so. "Are we ready to begin?"

***

Loki went first and the rattle of the dice inside the mug was the noisiest thing in the room. He could feel Tony's eyes on him as he worked out his score, though what clue in his face Tony was seeking Loki did not know.

"Sixty-one," Loki announced, allowing one side of his mouth to resemble a smirk. A high score. Let Tony see in that what he liked.

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Hm." He reached out with one hand, his fingers hovering over the mug's handle. Loki made the barest of movements, the corner of his mouth falling. "Nah," Tony decided, his eyes still on his. "Nice attempt at a double-bluff though."

Oh, Tony had learned well.

Tony shook the mug, barely having to glance underneath it to calculate his total. "Sixty-four."

Nebula's eyes moved to him, the first time she'd stopped glowering since they'd first suggested playing something. She grabbed the mug and pulled it towards her but did not lift it. Loki wouldn't have done. He couldn't say why exactly, just that there was an expression on Tony's face that was forcibly more innocent than it should have been. Of course, there was always a chance that had been deliberate on Tony's part.

Nebula made her roll. "Sixty-six," she declared. There was very little in her eyes to read, or maybe Loki just wasn't familiar enough with her to be able to tell the difference. He was at a disadvantage in comparison to Tony but then again, he supposed Nebula was at a disadvantage compared to both of them.

Even if Loki rolled two sixes, that still wouldn't count because that'd be the same total as the previous person, not higher. He'd have to roll a two and a one – the Liar's Dice – and everyone knew it.

Loki took a gamble and lifted the mug. A five and a five. She'd been lying. Nebula flung one of her
tokens at him from across the table and the piece of paper fluttered miserably short of her intended target.

The next round lasted considerably longer.

They started off with lower rolls, many of which Loki suspected were fabricated, and once each of them started insisting their totals were in the high fifties and sixties each time, they all grew suspicious until Nebula finally earned one of Tony's lives by catching his lie. The minor victory almost caused her to smile.

The game progressed.

Loki noticed that Nebula's tell, if anything, was not having a tell. Her face became more controlled, more deliberation going into the intonation of her voice to mimic the same pitch it would naturally be. The changes were subtle, barely noticeable, and so minute that it became difficult to tell if his interpretations were correct or whether it was something he'd imagined because he was searching for it. He was wrong about her less than he was right about her, though he was not consistently right about her either.

As Loki was attempting to figure out Nebula, Tony was doing the same to him with varying results. Loki could feel Tony's scrutiny like a weight, the feel of Tony's eyes on him making him become almost uncomfortably aware of everything about himself: his posture, his expression, every movement he made and every word that left his mouth. The feeling of it didn't disappear when Loki's turn stopped, even when Loki checked and Tony was looking at Nebula rather than him.

Partly for revenge for Tony distracting him and partly due to being tired of the results meaning they were essentially exchanging lives with one another, Loki began advising Nebula about whether or not he deemed it likely that Tony was lying. Or maybe it was because he knew if Tony beat him at a game based on lies, he would be insufferably smug for hours. There was nothing in the rules against players advising each other and on those grounds, it was valid.

Nebula didn't know what to with Loki's advice at first, whether to try trusting him and risk losing more lives or to see if he'd make a useful ally while she had so few lives left. It reached a point when Loki thought it'd never happen and so he stopped giving his verdict but then, after he neglected to comment, Nebula turned to him.

"Go on then," she said. There was still defiance in her voice, as if she was daring him to cross her, but there was also tension there too. Tension because she didn't want to guess wrong, because she didn't want to forfeit her last life. She didn't want to be out of the game, Loki realised. Maybe all her previous apprehension about participating in a game with them had been for nothing.

"It's a lie," Loki told her. Tony had started to get a little complacent again after the lapse in Loki giving Nebula his verdicts and there had been a fraction of a second of hesitation before Tony had announced his number.

Nebula lifted up the mug. She must have been desperate enough to consider it a worthwhile risk and then she was no longer on her last life, forcing Tony to give her one of his instead.

Loki stopped advising purely to undermine Tony as soon as she started becoming a threat – which was alarmingly rapidly. She must have picked up on some of the tells that would sometimes give Tony away – how he stopped fidgeting with his fingers when he lied in an attempt to draw less attention to himself, how his blinking pattern because unnaturally regular, how he would do more than simply look at the person he was trying to fool – he would be analysing them to see if they'd noticed anything was amiss.
As the rounds continued, Tony was able to more accurately guess whether or not Loki was lying in return but Loki could not say what was giving him away. Fortunately, Tony was losing his own lives to Nebula faster than he was gaining Loki's and as a result, Tony was the first player out of the game, his demise brought about when he claimed to have rolled two sixes after Nebula had scored a sixty-five.

Then it was just Nebula and Loki.

Loki could still feel Tony's eyes on him. Maybe Tony was trying to learn more of his tells to benefit him in future games when they rivalled one another. Maybe–

*Odd.*

Strange that Tony would choose now of all times to start avoiding his gaze.

It didn't matter. Tony was a permanent distraction. It was Loki against Nebula now and Loki was on his last life.

Nebula shook the dice.

"Thirty-three."

Loki's turn.

"Forty-three." A lie. He'd had to bluff – he'd scored thirty-one.

There was a long moment in which Nebula examined him but then she gave a minute shake of her head.

"Fifty-four."

Loki had far more to lose than Nebula did. He'd have to either roll high or bluff well enough to not cause her to hesitate again.

The dice rattled in the mug.

Loki would have laughed in relief if it wouldn't have given him away.

"Sixty-six."

Nebula's hand lingered on the mug as she contemplated the next course of action. Even Tony, not even a player in the game anymore, was just as enraptured as she was.

"What do you think, Tony?"

Loki answered instead of him. "Tony is no longer a player in the game, you can't–"

"Have it your way then." She hadn't relented in trying to search Loki's face for clues. She lifted the mug and her face darkened as she handed over one of her lives.

A serious competitor indeed.

The next round started.

She shook the dice.
"Liar's Dice."

That caused Loki to pause. Liar's Dice, for the second time already? He supposed the odds weren't impossible but they were certainly against her. And the way she'd said it with absolutely no hesitation...

She wanted the life she had just paid as a forfeit returned to her. She wanted Loki to go back to playing only with one life left, she wanted to make sure his place in the game was no longer secure. She believed he was so thrilled to have two lives again that he'd never risk calling her bluff, that he'd much rather hand over one of his lives rather than taking any chances. And that made her overconfident, arrogant.

Loki lifted the mug.

A two and a one.

She'd played him. Him.

Nebula hadn't smiled like that when she learned Thanos was gone. Nebula hadn't smiled like that when they escaped the fleets of ships. But she had smiled then, smiled because she won, smiled because she'd earned the victory for herself.

"I want to play again," she declared.

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Later that evening, Loki eased himself onto his chosen bed and winced. He kept forgetting how much moving like that made his ribs protest. If he remained standing, they were tolerable. But turning, twisting, or otherwise adding pressure to him, and the flare burned him from the inside out.

Once he found a position he could bear, he remained lying in it, the thought of the pain of trying to find a new position enough to deter him from making the attempt to.

Tony returned from fixing the rat's cage and perched on the bed he had chosen, one that currently had an assortment of his clothes flung over it.

"Hey," Tony said.

"Evening." It was odd to address Tony lying staring straight up at the ceiling while Tony remained seated but Loki did not care enough to force himself to move. Tony still hadn't said anything else. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Nope."

Even from this angle, Tony did not appear too pleased.

"Then why..."

It wasn't displeasure, Loki noted, it was nervousness.

"I just--" Tony broke off. "I need to know how long this could take. This whole space-adventure point two thing. I need to know if it'll be years or decades or if we have a single hope in hell's chance." Tony's face might not have fully readable but his eyes were, and they told him everything he needed to know. This was fear guiding him. "Because" – his face had taken on a harder look now – "if there isn't one I--" The hard look broke and what was left was tinged with misery. "I need
to know. I need to know so I can stop thinking about it sooner. I need to know so I won't – so I can
try not to – think about seeing Pepp or Rhodey again. Hell, even buying an ice cream sundae or
waffles or just some decent coffee." Loki didn't know which was worse – the desperateness
reflected in his eyes or the premature mourning of the potential loss. "If there's no hope, you'd tell
me, right?" Loki supposed he deserved every inconvenience his ribs had been giving him – not
because he wasn't telling him there was no hope but because he wasn't telling him how much there
was. "Because that's– That's something I need to know. I need to know if I have to give up that
hope and start a new life."

"Tony."

"Earth is my home. I don't think it'll ever stop being my home. I don't think I'll ever stop wanting
to protect it. I don't think I'll ever want to leave it for good. I might not ever stop wanting to go
back there but if I can't go back then I need to know if I have to stop trying."

"Tony," Loki tried again. There was a churning in his gut. Was this guilt? Was this why his resolve
to keep it to himself was crumbling so rapidly? "I don't know where we are in relation to the Nine
Realms. I don't know how many years it would take us to fly back there. But that's not to say there
can't be... other ways."

"Like what?"

"Knowhere isn't too far from here. Odin himself managed to use his dark energy to send Sif and the
Warriors Three there and back."

"But Odin doesn't know we're here – even if he was dead-set on hunting you, why would he think
to look here?"

"I didn't tell you that to suggest Odin will solve this. I was trying to prove a point: that it can be
very quick to travel between any two given points in the universe."

"The Tesseract proved that."

"A great shame it is that Thanos took it with him when he vanished."

"Doesn’t mean it’s not still out there."

Loki stilled. “What?”

“I mean, he definitely still took the Tesseract with him. But I don’t know if it would’ve vanished
with him. Moving one of the original gems so much as a millimetre would cause a paradox but
here’s the problem with everything auto-updating: our memories would’ve done too. So as soon as
he did it, we’d be in the new universe where we wouldn't remember anything ever being any
different.”

“So we have no way of knowing, is that what you’re saying?”

“Well… If the gems he had on him didn’t vanish, then there’d be two versions of some of the
Infinity Stones before the universe even began."

"The newly born versions and the versions we came to know."

"Yup. Makes you wonder which one he moved though. Also makes it really frustrating we have no
way of knowing for sure."
"The Soul Stone?" Loki suggested. "The Power Stone? The Mind Stone? All of them he would have searched for himself or would have people seeking them out on his behalf. If he moved any of those, it might have caused changes to how they were found and how long it took, rather than it necessarily changing who found them."

"Maybe," Tony said. Then his mouth twitched.

"What?"

"Just had a thought. If we’re right, the universe decided Thanos was causing way too many problems – Thanos, but not the gems he had on him – so does that mean it didn't vanish anything else he had on him? You know what this means, right? From even before the universe started, there could've just been a pair of Thanos-pants floating around there somewhere." Tony feigned seriousness. "If you tell me the universe started with Thanos-pants, I swear to—"

"If it's any consolation, I refuse to acknowledge it as a possibility."

"Hm. Not that reassuring. Makes you wonder what else was out there though, doesn't it? What else was outside the universe. It's pretty impossible to imagine space without space."

"I find it more comforting not to."

"Maybe it's just a perception thing. Like how we can't see anything higher than the third dimension."

"I think we're getting away from the original point."

"Wouldn't be the first time. What was the point again? Don't look at me like that – I swear I was listening. Whatever you were saying was interesting and me not being able to remember what it was is irrelevant."

"As I recall, I was saying that there are other ways of travelling between two points in the universe. Magic is one, as we've established with Odin's dark energy and the Tesseract. But the other—"

There were times when Tony's mind being at work was practically visible and this was one of them.

"If it's not magic then it's science," Tony concluded. Then his eyes widened. "Hang on. Travelling between two points. You mean a wormhole."

Loki allowed a pause. "Possibly." He didn't want to give hope if it was unfounded after all. "It's a suggestion."

Tony unleashed a bark of laughter after that one. "There's not many people who'd suggest flying through a wormhole as a loose idea."

Loki pretended to lift a glass in a toast. "I am unique."

Tony pretended to clink his own imaginary glass against his. "That's one way of putting it." He turned thoughtful. "So how the hell are we supposed to find the right wormhole?"

Loki grimaced. He'd been anticipating this, having to explain himself. He wasn't reckless enough to suggest doing something so risky without having good reason to suspect it would pay off. And Tony knew him well enough to know that, to know that Loki would have to be acting on information with a solid foundation.
It didn't seem fair. But it would be even less fair to deny Tony the chance of returning to his home within a matter of days. Loki knew he must have known he'd have to explain himself the moment he proposed the idea.

"It just so happens that there is one a few days flight from here."

"Could lead anywhere."

"It could," Loki acknowledged. "But it doesn't."

Tony's eyebrows furrowed.

"I..." Loki's mouth had run dry, as had his thoughts along with it. "It leads to the Nine Realms."

And there it was, the cruel irony, the cruel irony that after starting to admit it, after finally beginning to acknowledge it out loud, Tony still didn't quite believe him.

"You sure?"

"Yes." The word was flat.

"How'd you know?"

"Because," Loki said, "I fell through it."

The lines around Tony's mouth tightened.

"Oh," Tony said quietly. He had gone completely still. "That's why." He did not clarify if he meant that was why Loki suggested it or why Loki had despised having to fly through open space or whether it was a combination of the two.

Loki supposed it didn't matter.

"It was no heroic gesture on my part," Loki found himself saying. He hadn't tried to sacrifice himself on behalf of his world; he'd done it to spare himself of the world instead.

"How long?" Tony asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "How long were you falling?"

Loki prized his fingers apart. He hadn't realised he'd been wringing them together. "Longer than you."

Silence.

"How much longer?"

"I... I don't know. I don't know much time I lost. For all I know it could have five years. Or it could have been fifteen years or five months."

"I remember that. After Afghanistan. Not knowing how long they'd had me. Not knowing how long I'd been trapped there." A half-smiled appeared, one that was neither happy nor miserable. "Kind of weird how the world just keeps ticking on without you."

Loki doubted Asgard missed him. If he was in its thoughts, it was only because of how much they wanted to serve Odin's justice. When he'd first fallen, he doubted Asgard would have thought of him at all.
"You might find your world has started to." If they travelled through the portal and found it spat them out more than five years, it would have done. It might not have been the most sensitive thing to say but it was something Tony needed to be prepared for.

"If it has, I'm gonna have to do a hell of a lot of grovelling," Tony admitted. "But I still think it's worth a shot."

“We’ll have to be careful. We’ll need to make sure the ship will remain intact while we fly through the wormhole.”

"Is Nebula--"

"Nebula travelled with Thanos. She might have prior experience with journeying through wormholes."

"Technically, we already have experience falling through holes in space."

It was rarer when Tony's jokes became so tinted with dark humour but Loki found he had a certain appreciation for it.

"Not deliberately." Not Tony, anyway.

"And then there'll be the time issues. Like if the wormhole only spews us out a year ahead instead of five."

"I can conceal us when we journey through for long enough to discover how many years we have travelled forward and for us to retreat if we must.’ Maybe if he was lucky – very lucky – they would need to wait another year until the time they arrived on the other side of the wormhole would match up with their timeline before they had used the portal gun. But perhaps that was in bad form.

“I could be going home.” The joy in Tony’s voice was a bitterly bitterly sweet thing to hear. “For good this time.”

And there was nothing Loki wanted to do to take that away from him.

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In Loki's dreams, the events replayed again and again: Thanos arriving, Ronan's soul leaving his body, the Orb choosing Thanos as its master and floating towards him of its own accord, Thanos's fingers around his throat, Thanos tearing Tony's armour apart. Thanos, Thanos, Thanos. Loki woke up before he reached the part where he caused Thanos's demise – it was only as he woke that he could remind himself that they'd done it.

Blue light filtered in through gaps in the curtains over the windows from the light that illuminated the ship’s engine, light that could easily have passed for moonlight.

Thanos is gone, Loki reminded himself again.

It still didn't feel completely real but it felt closer to being real every time he repeated it.

The room was far too open for Loki’s liking, only he hadn’t realised it until he’d woken up. If they were in their cabin, he could have analysed all his surroundings in one single glance, but here there were too many places to hide.
There's no one else on board this ship, Loki thought to himself. There was no one else he had to fear now. Only themselves, should they do something idiotic.

It was only as Loki was scanning the room that he noticed how Tony wasn't sleeping in his usual position. Tony usually slept on his side but now he was lying rigidly on his back, his arms stiff and his legs straight together.

Tony’s eyes were open. "You too, huh?"

"What?"

"You can't believe we've won yet." The smile he gave contained a tint of sadness. "Maybe you should try getting more used to winning."

Why? Loki wondered. Usually when he won it was in the worst way possible. Except this, he reminded himself. He couldn't regret this.

"Am I that transparent?"

"No." One of Tony's legs moved underneath his blanket. "I know because I don't fully believe it either."

Loki’s responding laughter sat somewhere between bitter and soft. "What a pair we are."

Tony rolled over to face him, one arm cushioning his head, the previous sadness defeated by sudden amusement.

"Bet Nebula thinks that's what we are too."

"Pardon?" It was only as the word passed Loki's lips that he regretted saying it, wished he could take back asking Tony to elaborate.

Tony knew full well that he'd heard every word.

"I mean – come on. She knows we're sharing a room. She knows we've been space pirating for a while. Bet she thinks we're fucking."

Loki’s breath stopped. Tony had said it so matter-of-factly, and yet the thought of it seemed to amuse him at the same time. Was Tony trying to have his fun teasing Loki’s supposed prudishness or was he merely being his usual brash self?

It was with a desperate fierce hope that Loki hoped his face wasn't giving anything away; he hadn't had an adequate amount of rest to be able to handle something like this competently.

"Why is it assumed that two people sharing a room will always eventually become entangled with... that?"

Tony's eyebrows raised. "Don't know about your track record but with mine..." Tony trailed off as his eyes left Loki's face. "Yeah, it kind of is."

The admission was not what had shocked Loki – he knew of Tony's history. What shocked Loki was how Tony had said it, how there was an undercurrent below the surface of the words: something that almost resembled guilt, except Tony had no record of regretting the promiscuousness of his past lifestyle before and Loki saw no reason why he'd start now. So what was that?
Tony was looking at him expectantly, waiting the reply Loki had been too preoccupied trying to figure out his meaning to give.

"I suspect you may find my track record not quite as... colourful as yours." And now Loki sounded as if he was announcing his long gone virginity. Either that or trying to shame Tony by comparison. "I don't--" Why was his mouth not cooperating? Why was he having such a difficult time conjuring words? "There aren't many people I've met who I've had any interest in." One handful, two handfuls at the most in all the centuries of his lifetime. That was far fewer than anyone else he knew of. And now he was giving away far too much personal information without being prompted. He needed to return to the root of the conversation, to return to what they'd been discussing before that had slipped out. "I don't understand why it seems so inevitable to the outside world." There. That was closer to addressing the topic and that, at least, was the truth. It wasn't sharing all this time with Tony that had affected him like this, it was Tony himself and the time they'd spent together only gave it the space to happen. If he'd had to spend so much time with almost anyone else, he severely doubted similar results would have occurred. Maybe the other person wouldn't even have been alive by the end of it.

"Sometimes the world is a dumb place," Tony said. His next sentence was quieter, sounding as exhausted as Loki felt. "Sometimes I'm dumb."

"You're one of the most clever people I've met." Loki hadn't intended to utter that sentence out loud. Was that too much? Too far? Tony didn't seem to mind – his eyes glowed brighter and he smiled the smile that made him ageless.

"You don't understand Earth-science or Earth-math fluently yet but you don't exactly lag behind me. Who needs PhDs when you've got... whatever you've got." Tony would normally have looked away by now. This surpassed the length of their usual sustained eye-contact and it was causing anticipation to build in the lining Loki's stomach, though for what he did not know.

"A functioning mind?" Loki suggested. Not that his mind always behaved.

It worked. It broke the suspense. It made Tony laugh.

"Yeah. One of those."

But afterwards, when the tension was supposed to have been defeated, it lived on. Loki could feel it rearing its head again the longer Tony's eyes were on him, like some kind of creature that wouldn't stay dead no matter how hard he fought it.

Why fight it?

The thought caused Loki to startle.

Why fight it, he thought again, if Tony is going to return to Midgard within a matter of days?

If they had years stretching ahead of them then yes, it would have become far more complicated with them having to remain together to return Tony to his home. But with only days left of each other's company...

The possibility that he wasn't delusional was almost as terrifying as the possibility that he was.

Because Tony was definitely staring at him. This was far more attention than Loki was used to receiving and Tony didn't even appear to be ashamed about it, didn't even appear to be trying to conceal or hide it.
But what to do about that? Acknowledge it or ignore it?

It wasn't the first time Loki found himself envying Tony's shamelessness.

If he did nothing, he may never know what opportunities he’d cause himself to miss. But if he acted too strongly, gave himself away far too easily without knowing what he’d get in return, then the humiliation alone—

The pain of turning over to one side to face Tony was enough to cause Loki to pull a face. He internally cursed. It wasn't the impression he'd wanted to give, one of suffering and strain.

He could see him more clearly now he didn't have to keep glancing out of the corner of his eyes or holding his neck at a stiff angle. There was a smile playing at the edge of Tony's lips that was far from mockery and the shadows that cascaded across his face were gentle.

In an act that was truly out of character, Tony said nothing.

How was Loki supposed to know what it meant when Tony wasn't talking? Usually either end of the extreme was a bad signifier for Tony, but he didn't appear to be worrying or in any pain – in fact, he appeared... content.

How long did he have to wait until Tony would say something? Was Tony even planning to say anything? Or was he testing him, waiting to see if Loki would be the one to speak first? How could Tony remain so calm?

Loki's mouth was dry enough to make him wish he had a drink by his bedside. He tried to clear his throat without making a noise before speaking.

“Tony…”

“Loki.”

Loki could see the exact forms Tony’s mouth made to say his name, how some of Tony’s teeth started showing behind his lips upon sounding the second syllable.

Waiting. Tony was waiting for him to follow up his name with something except Loki had not thought that far ahead. How was he supposed to think that far ahead when he had this – Tony looking at him like that? The last thing he wanted was for it to stop but he was so taken aback, so stunned by the development that maybe he wasn’t delusional after all, that his mind had little room for anything else.

And why was it now only after he’d told Tony how to get back home that–

Time. He needed time. Time to process and time to think and time to decide on… whatever it was he’d have to decide.

It was with equal measures regret and relief that Loki finally said, “Good night.”
Loki couldn't say how he managed to sleep but given that he woke up the next morning, evidence proved he must have done.

Hours of staring into the darkness, hours of deliberating with himself about whether his suspicions were founded or not, hours of wondering what he should do with that information, whichever way it happened to be.

And Tony. What to do about Tony...

Tony had looked at him and he'd looked back. No. It had been more than that. Tony had been staring – there was no way around it, no mode of interpretation that could have made it possible for it to be anything else. The question remained as to why.

There were no game of bluffs going on at the time; it wasn't as if Tony had a reason to be trying to figure him out and there was too much sentiment in the stare for it to be one of suspicion. Affection, then. Maintaining eye-contact between was friends was a standard thing to do, Loki knew. But that much? And for that long? Surely this was not yet another instance of Loki over-analysing something in which there was little to interpret.

At least he hoped it wasn't. Or maybe he didn't. It was… complicated.

For whatever reason, in that moment Tony had seemed to like looking at him. Was his face pleasing to his eyes, was that it? Or was it more than that? Loki had seen glimmers of a similar expression in Tony, only it was usually fleeting and never quite so blatantly and unapologetically directed at him.

On Asgard, he'd been informed a number of times – normally after the speaker had consumed copious amounts of ale – that his appearance was far too close to what often made the faces of women comely, that he was too lean, too pale, too angular, but perhaps Midgardians viewed things differently. Somewhat less rigidly, perhaps. And even if they didn’t, Loki wouldn't have expected Tony to pay much mind to strict conventions.

Maybe that was it, then. Maybe Tony considered his appearance to have a certain appeal. That in itself was more flattering than Loki would have been happy to admit, but if that was truly the case then why didn’t the realisation thrill him?

It didn’t bring him much pleasure but neither did it bring him dread. Foreboding was closer to what it had been, the initial hope sinking deep in his gut. And somehow tied into it all was how much it pleased him that he must have had a certain appeal, glad that despite everything he'd done Tony still saw something in him he liked, and yet... Why wasn't it making him happy?

He should have been happy.

Tony had been interested the night before – more than that, perhaps. Keen, even.

Oh. But it was only after Loki had figured out how to get Tony back to his home that Tony had given him that look and that couldn't have only been a coincidence. Gratitude. Gratitude must have been a part of it – some part of Tony so delighted by the prospect of returning to Midgard, some
part of Tony being so thankful that Loki had suggested a possibility that was open to them, that he’d gone above and beyond keeping his word to him.

Tony was not the sort of person who was accustomed to feeling gratitude.

Maybe it wasn’t impossible that Tony was struggling to distinguish between gratitude and... something other.

And then there was the matter of how Tony had only started behaving that way only now that they wouldn’t have to be around each other for much longer.

It shouldn’t have made it worse. It shouldn’t have diminished anything. It was still more than Loki deserved and yet the timing of it left him dissatisfied. And then, at odds with his own displeasure – dissatisfied, even, with his own dissatisfaction – he came to the conclusion that he couldn't afford to be so particular. This was the best he’d get.

The best he’d get, he thought, and only because there wasn’t a risk anymore. Loki had little else to give – he’d already defeated Thanos alongside Tony and now he’d most likely be flying through the void for Tony and how was he supposed to give anything more than that? If this was gratitude – if Tony admired him for the things he gave – then how was supposed to sustain anything if he could never beat what he’d already given?

Maybe I’m not supposed to, Loki thought miserably. Maybe the desire to sustain Tony's interest had been nothing short of a ridiculous notion to begin with. Maybe he was never supposed to so much as try.

But if he wasn't supposed to then this would be all he'd ever get from Tony, the closest he’d ever come. And who knew how many more centuries it'd be until–

He’d had one chance and somehow, he’d decided it wasn't good enough.

The utter stupidity of it, the sheer arrogance of it... It wasn’t an opportunity he could afford to throw away, it was beyond ridiculous to have done, and yet he had.

Maybe it was for the best that he had. Because if he had, against his own better judgement, only gotten more involved then it'd only make it worse in the long run.

But that look… All that admiration just because Loki had figured out how to get him home.

Loki didn't want his gratitude. He had little use for gratitude.

And that must have been all it was. Misplaced gratitude. The awe of Tony thinking he might never return home only to have a means of doing so delivered by someone he considered a friend.

Tony had never looked at him quite like that before, never so unabashedly, and then Loki had cut it short by bidding him a good night.

Maybe I should never have said anything, Loki thought but couldn't find the conviction to truly mean it one way or another. It'd certainly make things simpler if he hadn't.

No. Loki would do exactly what he did with the problems he'd faced that were of a similar nature: he’d put every ounce of effort into denying their existence while simultaneously never being more aware of them.

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Neither of them mentioned what had happened the previous night the following morning. What were either of them supposed to say, exactly? It had been a look that somehow managed to confirm everything and nothing at the same time.

The incident was yet another addition to their list of things not to talk about, along with how Tony had fallen asleep on his shoulder only the night before last.

Would it have been better for Loki to have never noticed, for him to not have observed the longing in Tony’s eyes only for it to come so close and yet fall so miserably short? Or if he had been able to choose, would he have voluntarily let himself believe for one single solitary night that there was even a possibility of Tony reciprocating his feelings?

Loki had a talent for deluding himself, for convincing himself of things that weren't true. Hadn't that always been the case? Loki was the least reliable person he knew and yet he didn’t allow himself to have this one thing, to live in the fantasy before it had to be shattered.

Tony… Tony was quiet. Uncharacteristically quiet. He'd barely said a word all morning and whenever he glanced at Loki it was always in short looks that never lingered.

At last, Tony spoke. “You busy today?”

The words were politely spoken, perfectly civil and cordial and yet there was something so impersonal about it, something so banal and phatic that it almost made Loki recoil.

"We’ll be arriving at Arawrath soon. Someone will need to make an inventory of all the supplies we have and the ones we’ll need."

Tony gave a nod. "I'm gonna be in the workshop."

What could there possibly have been to do in the workshop? There was nothing that needed to be done, nothing Tony had expressed wanting to do, nothing in there except for an escape.

Loki fought a grimace.

There was a heavy gap in which the coldness set in. It was an odd thing, how the coldness wasn’t emanating from either of them, but was more akin to the sensation of being accustomed to wearing something warm only for it to be taken away.

Loki had never been particularly fond of the cold, which he supposed had a certain irony.

"Very well."

The temperature dropped some more. The formality had not been intentional but it was something safe to slip back into.

"Okay," Tony said and Loki thought it'd be the last he'd hear from him for hours. "Are we gonna speak to Nebula about the wormhole thing today?"

We, Loki reminded himself. Tony said ‘we’.

Loki forced his lips to move upwards. "If you like."

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"Of course," Nebula replied, looking at the two of them as if they were idiots.
"So – just so we're clear – this ship can go through wormholes?"

She shrugged. "It's nothing new. The technology’s been around for years."

Tony blinked. "Huh."

"Where are you from, again?"

The smile Tony gave held a certain amount of wryness. "From somewhere where space-travel is... less everyday than here."

Nebula addressed both of them. "That explains a lot."

*Where I’m from, Loki considered saying, we have no need for ships, not when we have the Bifrost,* but the words sounded petulant enough in his own mind, never mind how they’d sound when spoken out loud.

"Have you travelled through many wormholes on this ship before?" Loki asked instead.

"A few."

"Why only a few?"

There was a slight delay before she responded, one in which her face tightened and she almost dropped her gaze before appearing to violently fight against it.

*Memories.*

"Ronan didn't need to go that far out very much."

"When you say that far out—" Tony interjected.

"I mean across to different sides of the universe, not within the same galaxy." She pulled a face. "It wouldn't be worth it for the same galaxy."

"Worth it?" Tony repeated. "Bad turbulence or something?"

"I have a stabiliser chip and it still makes me get nausea."

"So pack sick bags, got it."

"And then there's the steering..."

"Mind showing us the ropes?"

***

It was safer with Nebula between them, they’d discovered. There was someone else to serve as a distraction, to stand between them, to talk to when it became too quiet. They’d spent the better part of an afternoon being shown the various different mechanisms and functions of the ship before they’d separated ways – Loki to search for a room that would be appropriate for the rats, Nebula to pack her things and prepare her pod, and Tony to… Well, Tony never said what he was intending to do and it didn’t become apparent until he summoned them to the dining area.

The dining area seemed very large with only the three of them occupying one table.
"What," Nebula asked, her eyes on the bowl in front of her, "is this supposed to be?"

"Spag bol," Tony replied. "It's an Earth classic."

There were no forks on board the ship as Loki knew them, but the closest thing to them were long hand-held utensils with two prongs at one end. Only Loki managed to wield it well enough for the spaghetti to remain on it rather than uncoiling.

Nebula did not appear to realise she was supposed to wrap the spaghetti, instead attempting to spear each strand one at a time and failing.

"What's spag?" she asked.

"Spaghetti," Loki and Tony said in unison. They did not look at each other afterwards, both seemingly engrossed in their food.

"Why's it so long?"

"Gives you extra options," Tony answered. "Do you shovel it in at once, go for the wrap method, or go for the slurp?"

Nebula's eyes lit up at the last option and all of a sudden Loki was even more determined to avoid looking anywhere outside of his bowl – the sound effects alone were enough to deter him. In the end, it was the giggle that made him look. A giggle. He hadn't thought Nebula was capable of such a thing. And it was only after he looked that he realised Tony had joined her, though, admittedly, one strand at a time was better than her entire mouthful of them.

"Is there more?" Nebula asked, having no care for the food she revealed inside of her mouth as she spoke.

"There's another unravaged packet in our pod."

If Thanos being dead hadn't been enough to cause Nebula to smile, one of the last things Loki would have suspected would have been spaghetti.

"Are you sure you want more of Tony's cooking?" Loki cut in.

"His food is fun to eat."

Tony grinned at that and looked Loki in the eye for the first time that day. "See? Someone likes my food. First time for everything."

"Pasta should not be wet as it is served. Certainly not enough for there to be a small pond forming at the bottom of a bowl." Loki had learned more than a thing or two about pasta during his time spent on Midgard. "And I believe bolognese sauce should contain tomato, not--"

"Out of stock. We're in space. I used some red fruit I found in the kitchens. Figured it'd be close enough"

"No wonder the sauce tastes sour."

Tony – very much deliberately – slurped another strand of spaghetti. "This is the best thing I've ever cooked."

Loki welcomed another opportunity to lay waste in a mostly harmless way to Tony’s ego, to attempt to take things back to how they had been before the awkwardness of that morning.
He gave Tony a flat glare. “Bitter spaghetti bolognese. I'm not even Midgardian and even I know—”

"What are you then?" Nebula interrupted.

Loki had almost forgotten she was there. "Pardon?"

"If he's Midgardian, what's that make you?"

"It's only Loki and other alien assholes who call me Midgardian," Tony said.

Nebula turned her gaze to Loki. "The two of you aren't the same then."

"We're not," Loki confirmed. He did not wish to elaborate.

"Worlds apart," Tony said at the same time.

Her head tilted a fraction to the side. "Strange."

"Why?" Tony asked and Loki stiffened.

"You look the same."

Loki eyed Tony with scepticism. "I doubt that very much."

"You look like you're the same species. Happy?" Nebula wiped around her mouth with the back of her hand, succeeding only in smearing the sauce around her face rather than cleaning it. "So where you from then?"

She still hadn't relented. She didn’t seem much of one for relenting.

"Asgard. Jotunheim. Both. Neither." Loki placed the thing that wasn't a fork down. "It doesn't matter anymore."

She brought her head closer to her plate, about to take on another bout of spaghetti slurping. "If you say so."

Tony's eyes fell on Loki after she said that and if Loki had been in a more generous mood he might have said the look held concern. However, in his somewhat more bleak state, Loki did his best to convey the fact that he did not require to be watched over like a child with a look that bordered being a glare. Tony dropped his eyes and there was something in his features that might have registered as hurt. Loki found he suddenly had little desire to eat but blamed Nebula for bringing up the question of his origins.

"What about you?" Tony asked her. "Where you from?"

"You won't know it."

***

When night fell they were alone.

Their nights weren’t usually so tense. Their nights were usually the part where they could finally relax, where they could just talk. Their nights together used to be what Loki looked forward to the most.

Loki had never despised silence so much.
“I found gross space-jello in the kitchens.”

It was a clunky conversation starter but the fact that at least Tony was trying meant something – and the fact that Tony at least wanted to try meant more than that still.

“Should I attempt to imagine what that is?”

“I’ll one-up you.” Tony stood up. “Trust me, even someone with your imagination isn’t gonna come close to the real thing.”

***

“Dare you,” Tony said holding up a plate of gelatinous looking green cubes.

Tony’s stance lacked its usual naturalness and there was a certain degree of forced lightness and rigidity in how he held himself. He was careful to observe Loki without looking directly at him and his hands were tight as he waited for Loki’s response.

It was a peace offering, Loki concluded, a scheme to get them interacting again so they could return to normalcy.

After eyeing the food, Loki humoured him. “Are you certain that’s supposed to be edible?”

“You don’t have jello in magic-Viking land?”

“It looks plastic.”

“It was with all the other food so it must be good.” Tony seated himself on a pillow he’d placed on the floor between their beds. “Well. Not good. Edible.”

“Your confidence is inspiring.”

“I’m inspiring.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “This is your legacy?” He got down from his bed to take one of the cubes. “This?”

“Not the jello,” Tony said. “Your disgust. Your disgust is gonna be my legacy.”

“Again,” Loki said, “that doesn’t sound inspiring.”

“I’ll eat one another if you do.”

Loki hesitated for a moment. It was an undeniably childish tactic to challenge him to have a taste of something so supposedly disgusting, but on the other hand the prospect of it was marginally better than the alternative of the inevitably heavy silence.

And maybe it’d work. Maybe it’d make one of them laugh and then it would just become another evening spent where they could actually enjoy each other and if it didn’t work, at least it would be an effective distraction.

“Done,” Loki agreed.

Tony grabbed one of the cubes for himself and started bringing it towards his mouth. Loki followed suit.
His first thought was that Tony must have been exaggerating because while the taste wasn’t pleasant, it wasn’t terrible either. It wasn’t that dissimilar to mint leaves, except that it was slightly more bitter and had a hint of–

Loki chewed some more.

Citrus. That was the flavour. On its own it might not have been something he’d object to but combined with the flavour it had already left in his mouth…

“Your face,” Tony guffawed.

Even after forcing himself to swallow, the taste still hadn’t left Loki’s mouth. “Why was this your idea of an evening’s entertainment?”

“Because it’s entertaining.”

“For all the wrong possible reasons.”

“I should bring these back to Earth. Space-jello would be fun at parties.”

“I dread to think.”

“They’d go down worse than shots.” Tony settled the plate on the floor. “You remember that drinking game we played? The one where we’d make up truths and lies?”

“I do.”

“I was thinking… We could make a variation.”

“You’re suggesting we both voluntarily continue to eat these things?”

Tony’s smile might not have been a large one and it had too much mischief behind it to be a kind one, but it was the first sincere one he’d directed at Loki all day. “That’s not a no.”

“I don’t think the cubes will get better the more we eat.”

“Can’t get worse. Mostly because I’m pretty sure it’s not possible.”

“That’s still not very convincing.”

“But it’s a game where you get to lie combined with you getting the opportunity to make me eat something gross. What more could you want?”

“Well,” Loki sighed, “when you put it like that it sounds far too easy.”

“Allright then, I’ll make it harder for you. How about a game that revolves around truths instead?”

“That wouldn’t be my preferred option.”

“Scared you’ll lose?”

***

In preparation for the game, Loki had sat on the floor beside Tony, his back resting against his bed and the plate in between them. Beside him was better, Loki had decided, because if he was next to him rather than opposite him then it’d be easier not to look.
"Rules," Tony announced. "We take it in turns to ask each other a question. We have to answer honestly or not at all. If you don't answer, you eat a cube. If you do answer, I eat a cube. It'll be like an interviewer-interviewee type thing except without the whole twisted journalism thing going on."

"This sounds like a game for masochists." It was a game for masochists. Why would anyone design a game that rewarded such forthright honesty? "I suspect I may have to eat a lot more than you will."

"Maybe." Tony paused. "At least your alien constitution isn't gonna start factoring in. This tastes just as gross to you as it does to me."

"Wonderful." Loki had the sinking feeling he was going to lose. "Lies are more my forte."

"I know." Tony's smile appeared less forced. "Hey – I'll go first. You get to ask me something. We'll start lightish, see how it goes."

What changed? That was what Loki simultaneously did and didn't want to know. How could so much have changed with just one look? But he couldn't ask that. Something else, he'd have to ask something else. And if he was being opportunistic, he'd pick something he was curious about anyway, at least that way he'd get something out of having to endure the vile taste of the cubes.

"Can you feel it?" Loki asked.

"Feel what?"

"Your gem. Ever since Thanos left with our Infinity Stones."

"I can feel it's not there, sometimes."

"But there's nothing... else?"

Tony frowned. "No. Sometimes I notice it's not there. I don't have it to be fascinated with anymore and be kinda, I don't know, charged by it, I guess. It's the closest thing to a magic wand I've ever had and it was fun waving it and saying abracadabra and seeing what happens. Sometimes I think I only just started to tap into it, you know? But I don't want to think about the possibilities too much because... Well, you know why. It could be galaxies away."

Loki gave a nod and Tony pointed to the plate between them. The cube tasted as awful as Loki had been expecting.

Tony waited until he had swallowed. "What about you?"

"The Tesseract's absence is... difficult not to notice."

"Even if we weren't stuck in space?"

"I don't... I don't crave it, if that's what you're asking. I suppose I miss the convenience of it, the safety of knowing I could leave anywhere I wanted to with barely any notice time."

Tony took a cube, the taste causing his face to sour.

“Did you ever–” Loki began. “How adept were you at discerning the... mood of the gem, for a lack of a better term?"

"Not great. I could tell if I was pissing it off though."
“Sometimes,” Loki said, “it’s almost as if I can still feel its mood, the feeling of something external changing.”

"Weird," Tony said. "It's probably a wizard thing. You got so used to being able to detect it, now your brain’s filling in what’s missing."

"Maybe," Loki replied, though he didn’t like the explanation.

"Your turn."

And on the game went. The questions started as relatively harmless and Loki learned to saviour Tony’s disgust when he answered and Tony had to eat one of the cubes as a forfeit, sadistic though it was. But Tony started to grow wise to his strategy and bit by bit the questions grew into territory that made Loki hesitate to discuss. He’d asked about Loki’s friends – or lack of them – on Asgard, about Asgard’s opinion of Jotuns, and about Loki’s involvement in Thor’s banishment. And in turn, Loki had to ask Tony more difficult questions so he wouldn’t be the only one revealing more than what came easily. He started with Tony’s father, then the reactions of those that opposed him about the accords, and then there was a delay before his next question, one in which he tried to think of something that could be of more use to him.

"Why do you trust me?" Loki blurted out. "I'm responsible for the deaths of hundreds, I only care about those closest to me and even those people I have usually attempted to kill in the past and–"

"I know you. I know the best and worst you're capable of and... I know you.

Loki’s mouth was suddenly dry. He reached out to take another cube without needing to be prompted.

"And even now when you've got no ulterior motive, you're still taking me home." Tony’s fingers twitched. "Speaking of – I still don't get why. Why make the effort? You could send me off and take off on your own. You could even go with Nebula if you wanted. So why do it?"

If he was Tony, Loki knew what his answer would have been: his answer would have been because he was clearly and obviously *fucked*, but he couldn’t possibly reveal *that*. Another option would have been to take one of the cubes as a forfeit for not answering but that in itself would have given far too much away.

“A lack of resolution, I suppose.”

“You mean your unresolved family issues.”

That was better than the excuse Loki had been about to invent. “I could happily go for the rest of my days without seeing the Allfather again but if I’m going to be travelling far from the Nine Realms I think I might like to at least give Thor a temporary goodbye.” Apparently Tony was better at making up lies for him than he was, given that the ones Tony created turned out to be true. “And I’d prefer to avoid falsely getting accused of faking my death again.”

Tony gave a nod and when he ate the next cube he managed not to make a face.

Loki’s turn.

"What will you do?"

"When?"
"When you're home. What will change?"

Tony shrugged. "Me, I guess. In some ways, not others. I'm not gonna spend the rest of my life taking vacations."

Tony pressed his finger and thumb together and lifted them apart, then repeated the motion. His skin must have been sticky from the food.

"You would have earned it," Loki murmured.

"I know." For a moment, Tony looked as if he might have been about to say something else. "The worst part is everyone's gonna think I've finally cracked if I tell them. Pepp and Rhodey might come around eventually but there's no way in hell anyone else would believe me for a second. I would've saved all their lives – Steve's, Clint's, Maximoff's – and they'll have no idea. They'll still hate my guts." Tony reverted tactics and wiped his hands on his jeans instead. It was only through watching him that Loki realised there was a sticky residue on his fingers too.

"I doubt they resent you quite that much."

"You didn't see the way Clint glared at me."

"Barton has a surprising capacity for forgiveness."

Tony frowned. "How did you– Oh. Right. You were in his head."

"Yes. Long ago."

"My turn." Tony cleared his throat. "When you were... When you came to Earth the first time... How much of that was you?"

Why did it keep coming back to that?

"I don't know."

"Because you had the Sceptre that fucked with everyone – probably you included – and you'd just fallen through a wormhole and–"

"Some of it was me," Loki interrupted to stop Tony going further. "Maybe all of it."

"But Thanos–"

"Thanos didn't force me. I had a choice."

"Attack or die isn't much of a choice."

"He didn't have to threaten. I'd already agreed before The Other did the threatening on his behalf." There. Maybe that would finally deter Tony from bringing it up again. "Before that, I tried to slay an entire race, I tried to kill my own brother, I–"

"I know. You told me. Multiple times."

"Then why? Why are you so determined to believe it wasn't entirely my own doing, that it wasn't entirely my own fault?"

The next intake of Tony's breath wavered. "I'm not determined to."
Loki almost laughed. "Evidence to the contrary."

"No – I'm not determined to. It's what the evidence points to. If it swayed you, it swayed you. If it didn't, it didn't."

"Then why does it matter?"

Tony turned to face him. "It clearly matters to you. Why's that?"

"You're asking why being uncertain of how in control of my own actions I was might bother me?"

"No. Not that. I'm asking why me saying maybe you didn't decide all own your own gets to you so much."

"I've told you before – I don't need your pity. I have no use for pity."

Unflinching. Tony’s gaze remained perfectly level with him. "Too bad because you weren't gonna get any."

"Good," Loki snapped.

"Good." Tony had not retaliated hostilely but there was a trace of exasperation in his voice and in the set of his jaw. With his next exhale, the residues of it were gone. "Loki…" He said his name cautiously, as if wrestling with doubt. "What'll happen to you if you get caught? You know, when we get back. I know you said you can disguise yourself but how long are you gonna keep it up?"

"I told you before – there'd be a trial and I will no doubt be sentenced as guilty. I did commit treason against the Allfather, after all. Amongst other things."

"So why are you coming with me?"

"Would you prefer it if I didn't?" Loki hadn’t intended to voice that question and it sounded more accusatory than he’d intended.

"If you end up getting locked up or worse then yeah, I'd prefer it if you didn't."

Loki spoke more tentatively the next time. "And if I don't?"

"Then I'd want you here."

"Then I suppose I will continue endeavouring not to get caught."

For the first time since the previous night, Tony was looking at him – truly looking at him again. It wasn’t in the same way it had been but the attention was there with as much intensity as there had been before. Loki averted his eyes to the plate instead and it occurred to him that they’d forgotten to take their forfeits for all their questions multiple times now.

"You better not get caught," Tony said. "Or I’ll have to cross Asgard off the list of planets I’ve visited."

The statement made Loki turn to face him and blink in shock. "Do you mean that?"

"Well, yeah."

"And did you mean it before?" Loki was speaking almost without his own consent. "When you said you'd want me to visit after?"
"If I didn't want you to I wouldn't say it." Tony appeared to have finished speaking but then he opened his mouth and held up one finger. "Hang on – that's two."

"What?"

"That's two answers you got out of me in a row. There's gotta be some penalty for that – that's cheating. How about this – if you answer, I don't have to eat the next cube."

"As I recall, you also asked me questions without taking a forfeit so I suppose that makes us even."

"Screw it then. Let's carry on."

"Are you that eager for more of the cubes?"

"I don't think I can physically make myself eat another."

The game was over then. It might not have completely healed the cracks that had formed in the morning but at least they'd started talking properly again. And there was the advantage of not having to eat the remainder of the cubes.

"Can I ask you another question?" Tony asked. "Strictly off-record. No forfeits, I promise."

Loki paused to think. "I suppose you can ask," he finally said. "Though I won't guarantee you any answers."

Tony half-smiled at that comment before he grew more serious, turning and resting his head against the bar of his bed. "Why won't... Why won't you look at me?"

The directness was startling.

"I... am looking at you." Loki was almost impressed with how convinced he sounded, as if he believed his own words.

"No – you're looking in my direction, not at me."

Loki forced himself to do it then, to look Tony right in the eyes and pretend that it didn't affect him at all when he asked, "Satisfied?"

"Only because I just pointed it out, you– You didn't do that before."

Before what? Loki might have asked. Except he knew what. The answer was broaching the topic they had silently agreed not to speak of.

When Loki didn't answer, Tony continued, "Did I– Did I fuck up somewhere?"

"What?"

How was it that Tony had sounded so concerned, as if he had damaged Loki somehow?

"Because you weren't having this problem, not until--"

Dangerously close, Loki thought.

Tony must have thought along similar lines because he'd abruptly stopped himself from speaking. Then he asked with almost more gentleness than Loki could withstand, "Do you want me to stop?"
"Stop what?"

A part of him already knew the answer.

There was a pause.

"Looking," Tony answered, his voice the quietest volume it could be without becoming a whisper. And how odd it was that since Tony had first voiced that Loki had been avoiding it, Loki had been unable to make himself stop looking.

"I don't know." It was the most honest Loki could manage.

It was self-deprecation rather than humour or happiness that caused Tony’s lips to raise upwards. “Guess that’s not worse than a no.”

“... Tony?"

“Yeah?”

“Do you… Do you think you owe me something?”


"No."

"Then why–"

“I’m under no obligation to answer.”

“Well.” Tony gave the plate of cubes a push so that it skidded out of sight underneath another one of the beds. “Can I be extra pushy and ask you something else?"

Loki pressed his lips together. “The same rules apply,”

“No obligation, got it.” Tony hesitated, suddenly dropping his gaze and repositioning himself on his pillow. “Why– Why do you think I was looking at you?”

For a long moment, Loki could do nothing more than stare.

Now Tony wanted to talk about it. Now. They’d been doing an excellent job of avoiding the topic so far and Loki didn’t see why that had to change. He could live with the lingering doubt if it meant that nothing would fracture in attempting to come to some sort of resolution.

Loki swallowed. "I think you were very glad to hear that you might get to go home sooner than you expected."

Tony’s eyes met his again. "What if I told you that had nothing to do with it?"

Loki was at a loss for words.

Tony continued. “What if I told you I was looking at you because I don't think I've ever met someone who's so irritatingly pretty before?”

If Loki had been at a loss for words before, that was nothing in comparison to what he experienced after hearing that.
"And you know what?" Tony still wasn't finished. "I'll admit it – I kind of resent you for it. You can make eating *spaghetti* look classy and sophisticated and *no one* should get that kind of power."

There was a gap in which Loki realised Tony was probably waiting for a response.

"I'm... flattered?" Loki managed, despite the slightly backhanded compliment.

"Are you? Because you look kind of terrified to me and I– I don't know what's going on in your head right now. Not that I normally do but at least I can usually take a guess in sort of the right direction but now you've just gone into wall mode and I don't know what to do with just a wall in front of me. I can't read a blank wall."

"You want to know what I think?" The question was rhetorical. Loki’s voice had dropped in pitches. "I think you’re mistaken."

"About what?"

"Everything. What you think you–"

"I get the feeling you’re about to tell me how I'm feeling and why you know better than me."

"You're returning home and you're understandably glad for it. But there's a part of you that no doubt fears it as well. You've gotten used to this. To... us. And when you go back everything will be how it was all except for you and there's nothing that'll make you feel more alone than that. So what do you do? What do you do now a part of you knows that loneliness, that isolation is impending? You latch on. You latch on to the nearest thing – to the thing you think you can trust, to the only other person who knows exactly what happened, to the person you've been forced to come to rely on. It's no coincidence that you only started responding like that after I told you how you can get home. It's your mind, Tony, it's your mind knowing that this journey is coming to a close and the part of you always seeking a thrill and the next adventure not being completely certain how much you want it to end."

Tony’s mouth opened slightly and he shook his head. "You're wrong."

“I don’t believe I am.”

Loki watched Tony’s throat move as he swallowed.

“You’re so wrong.”

“But–"

"You think this is a wanting what you can't have type thing, right? But here's the thing: I wanted to look at you like that since before you told me anything about a wormhole."

Loki lost the sentence he had planned in his mind after hearing that. All he could do was blink, fully aware of how much of a fool he looked but unable to do anything to redeem himself.

"Still not convinced?" Tony continued. "Why the hell do you think Thanos said I wasn't sure what I wanted? Because this goes way back."

At last, Loki found words. "I thought he was referring to you not being sure if you wanted to carry on with the responsibilities that come with your suit of armour."

Tony stared.
Loki shifted. “It goes without saying that you would carry on being Iron Man given the chance, but how much you’d want to is debatable.”

“That’s not–” Tony uttered. “There’s a reason he said that after he said you–”

*After he said I what?* Then Loki remembered and grew very still. Coldness washed over his spine. Tony knew. He knew. Tony suspected Thanos’s claim that Loki liked him did not just refer to how he valued his company.

“You know what?” Tony announced, interrupting his thoughts. “Just so we’re clear – for once – I’m gonna spell it out for you. This– This thing – the not knowing, the pointlessness of trying to guess your thoughts – I’m done with it. So here goes: I happen to like you. A lot, actually. In spite of your snidiness and sometimes terrible life choices. Which – yeah – I’m a hypocrite, I know. And it’s fine. I’m glad it happened, actually. I’m so used to being proven wrong when I think I can trust someone it was nice to be proven right. And– And I’m glad we're friends. I wouldn't change that. I wouldn't want to change that. Except my stupid lizard brain happens to like your face. Or maybe just your whole...” Tony gesticulated with one hand at the entire length of Loki and Loki’s mind became utterly blank. ”But if you want me to back the hell off, I will. I can move to a different room or I can stop off on a different planet or–”

Loki’s mouth started functioning again quicker than his mind did. ”I don't want you to do that.”

"Wait – you don't?"

"No," Loki said. "Of that I'm certain."

"Huh. That's... good?"

"Is it?"

"I think it is. But I guess I'm biased."

"Tony," Loki said, and he tried to be gentle with his words, "this isn't– You don't..."

"I don't what?"

"I don’t believe it’s me you like. It's what I bring you. I'm you but worse. I'm the one that sunk low enough to commit the atrocities I have done. And you extending your hand for me is cathartic for you. I was part of bringing your friends back. I showed you worlds you never knew existed. I located the Time Gem for you and taught you how to feel magic. The two of us made the team you so desperately wanted to work and now it's coming to a close you are panicking.” Loki shook his head. “It's not me you’re after, Tony, it's my associations."

"I don’t–"

"I brought you wonder and now the wonder is going, you mistake it for being me." In the seconds that followed, Loki couldn’t stand to look at him. "It isn't me. It never was."

"I also associate you with being an asshole but that doesn't stop me wanting to be around you."

"You'd have to be blind not to associate me with being difficult to deal with."

"Agreed."

"But," Loki stressed, "that doesn't mean that would be enough to override–"
"Oh – and while we're on the topic, I'd really like it if you stopped telling me how I feel. Have I mentioned you're an asshole already?"

Loki bristled. "I didn't realise we were having this conversation just for you to insult me."

"You're even more of an asshole to yourself than you are to me."

"I'm not understanding the relevance."

There was a glimmer of frustration in Tony’s eyes when he next spoke. "Why are you so convinced I can't actually like you?"

"I am the only source of constant company you've had for almost a year now. You said it yourself: it's inevitable for you to spend so much time around one person without eventually wanting to..."

"So I can't keep it in my pants, is that what you're saying?"

Loki folded his arms. "I–"

"Because I'll be back to Earth in a few days. And you know what's on Earth, right? Plenty of people. Billions of them. And if I had it that bad why would I be making eyes at the difficult space-Viking prince instead of just waiting it out?"

"You're not the patient type."

Tony sat up straighter. "I can be plenty patient when it comes to the things that are worth it."

"And, as I’ve mentioned, I doubt it's a coincidence that you've only started behaving like this since I told you can get home."

"You're right," Tony admitted, much to Loki’s surprise. "It's not."

"So you’ve said it yourself, then. It's gratitude, gratitude and–"

"Not gratitude. We don't owe each other anything – that was the bargain we made."

"But you said--"

"Yeah, it's not a coincidence. But it's not what you think either. Do you have any idea how awkward it'd be if I said or did something that went south if we still had years of travelling in the same ship together?"

Loki took a moment to process that. Then another. His mouth opened then closed again.

Tony was still waiting for a response.

Right. Loki could do that. Loki was capable of forming coherent sentences. Silvertongue. That was what he was supposed to be. That was the name he had once earned.

He thought his ribs had healed earlier that day but then it was painful to look at Tony, like his chest was clenching.

“What are you saying, exactly?”

“I’m saying,” Tony said, "we're not gonna be cooped up together much longer… But maybe that's not a bad thing."
Loki would have been insulted if he’d been able to detect malice or relief in Tony’s voice.

"No?"

"No. Because it gives us the freedom to do whatever the hell we want."

Loki swallowed. It was almost enough to make him wish they’d played a drinking game instead. It would have been so much easier if they’d played a drinking game.

"And what is that?"

Tony's eyes flickered between Loki's and his mouth. The air felt very still. Dry, all of a sudden.

"Like you don't know."

"Maybe I don't."

Tony laughed, a laugh that didn’t feel as if was directed at Loki even if Loki wasn’t in on the joke. "Are you trying to play coy?"

He was far too aware of the weight of Tony’s eyes on him, far too aware of how fragile the exchange was, of how the wrong sentence could destroy any chances he might have had.

"What would you do if I was?"

“If it’s the flirting game you’re playing, I’m in. If it’s not… Well, I think you’d find a much more elegant way of telling me to get fucked if you wanted. Tell me if I’m wrong."

It was Loki's turn for his eyes to dart to Tony's mouth.

Loki’s next words were quiet but they penetrated the air between them all the same. "You're not wrong."

The sheer amount of smugness that appeared on Tony’s face caused what remained of Loki’s apprehension to crack.

"Louder for the ones at the back."

“You are an utterly self-satisfied egotist at times, do you know that?”

"A self-satisfied egotist you happen to like."

Loki found the amusement much easier to face than the tension.

"Don't make me regret it," he told Tony, his lips twisting upwards.

"You mean you don't already?"

“Not yet.”

Tony heard that – not just heard it but understood the underlying meaning; it was clear in how he refrained from laughing and appeared almost touched.

"Good."

Tony turned slightly sideways, his knees brushing his as he moved, the residue of their warmth lingering like static. If it wasn’t for how Loki was still trying to process it all – Tony’s confession,
how close Tony was, what he himself had chosen to reveal – he might have noticed how they had fallen back into silence.

Part of Tony’s cheek hollowed; he must have been biting the inside of his mouth. It made him appear uncertain, hesitant. Maybe he was.

"Loki," Tony finally said.

It took more concentration that it should have done to speak.

"Yes?" Loki managed.

"Can I ask you one last question?"

Loki didn’t know how long he’d been able to hear his own pulse for.

"Go on."

Then Tony gave him the look again, the one from the previous night, the one that wasn’t from when they were playing the game – the one that came after and Loki couldn’t look away, not this time, not even if he’d wanted to.

"What would you do if I kissed you?"

"I–" The sentence got stuck in Loki’s throat. He tried again. “I wouldn’t have any objections.”

Tony’s smile was oddly gentle. "Good."

Tony didn’t move suddenly but neither did he close the gap between them particularly slowly. Loki had enough time to see it coming, for the anticipation to cause his stomach to jolt in the most wonderful of ways, to fully realise that this wasn't a cosmic joke and that Tony actually intended to–

Warmth was the first thing Loki noticed. The warmth of Tony's mouth on his, the warmth that came from the closeness of his skin, and the warmth that came from no discernible source at all.

The unexpected softness of it was the second thing he noticed. The texture of Tony’s lips contrasted with the coarseness of the hair on his face and the tip of Tony’s nose just barely brushed against his cheek.

The angle was slightly awkward but delicacy, of all things, was not something he was accustomed to. It might have been a long time since Loki had last been with someone like that but the instinct was still there, the instinct to want more, to get closer.

Then Tony’s mouth left his but he remained there, his face only a matter of inches away.

Their eyes met.

Yes, Loki thought.

There was less caution the next time their lips met, less need for hesitance. The pressure was not as soft as it had been the first time and one of them – perhaps both, Loki couldn’t be certain – shifted closer until he could feel one of Tony’s legs against his. The angle was more comfortable but with Tony’s body still weighted off to one side it wasn’t as convenient as it could have been.

Loki’s hands were already at Tony’s waist, which was odd because he hadn’t recalled consciously
deciding to place them there, and then he started pulling him closer, exerting enough pressure to hint rather than force.

Tony obliged his request, shifting closer still, moving so their bodies were facing each other, his knees at either side of Loki’s legs. The weight of him was a solid thing, an anchoring thing, but Loki wasn’t used to being kissed like that, like Tony might have thought he was fragile.

"I’m not that delicate," Loki muttered.
The words caused Tony to grin. “I know.”

Loki kissed him without thinking, pulling him closer, pulling him tighter, and the softness started to lessen as Tony kissed him back. One of Tony’s hands was around the back of Loki’s neck, another over his collarbone, and the deeper the kiss got the more Tony’s hands clutched at him, pulling and pulling and urging them closer and closer together until his chest was pressed against his and Loki could feel Tony breathing, each movement of his lungs moving against his.

The taste of Tony was in his mouth, on his tongue, and the pressure of Tony’s lips against his, of his lips against Tony’s, grew more intense and Loki’s hands found their way to Tony’s thighs, encouraging him to move closer still.

Tony didn’t appear to have any objections.

There was a moment where their mouths weren’t touching, a moment in which they paused and just looked at each other and then, keeping his eyes steadily on his and them somehow looking molten despite the darkness of the room, Tony repositioned himself. It was painfully slow, how he dragged himself upwards so his knees were at either side of the top of Loki’s thighs, and Loki could have cursed him for it, cursed him or thanked him or both.

If he’d thought Tony had been warm before, the heat of him, the solid tangible weight, was nothing compared to what it was now.

Then they were kissing again, harder and wetter and messier than before and he could both hear and feel it, the sounds their mouths were making against one another, how Tony’s breath hitched when his hands stationed themselves above Tony’s hips and ever so slightly pressed him downwards.

For a second, Loki wondered if Tony noticed his breathing stutter as well. Probably. But he didn’t linger on that thought for long, not when he was so thoroughly distracted.

Tony wants this, he couldn’t help but think. Except it was better than that because Tony wanted him.

Loki almost objected when Tony broke the kiss but then his lips were at his throat and the things his mouth did to him…

Anyone else and Loki might have had some shame in how ragged his breathing had become, but with Tony it only seemed to please him more and he seemed oh so eager to coax his pulse into beating harder, into beating faster, and his enthusiasm only made it easier to forget about anything Loki was supposed to be.

Tony left his throat and gave a very deliberate look downwards and Loki could feel the blood starting to rush to his cheeks as well.

Tony’s eyes sparkled. “Looks like you’re not that alien after all.”
“Has anyone ever told you,” Loki said, “that you can be outrageously forthright?”

There was a definite smirk on Tony’s face, one Loki couldn’t tell whether it was annoying or arousing or both at the same time. Probably the latter.

“Oh yeah? If I don’t play it straight, how am I supposed to stay in the same game as you?”

Loki gave him a very pointed look.

He’d never felt Tony’s laughter so vividly before - his air on his cheeks, the way his body shook, the unbridled joy taking up most of his vision.

“Point taken. Being on top of you is no position to be in if I’m claiming I’m playing it straight.”

“Playing implies there’s a game,” Loki pointed out. “I thought the whole point was to finally stop playing.”

Tony waited.

There was that smirk again but his eyes – his eyes were burning with heat.

With the same maddening slowness from earlier, Tony pressed his hips against his, the raw friction sending a jolt up Loki’s spine and causing his mouth to fall open the slightest of degrees.

Loki waited for him to start moving but Tony remained still, his eyes searching his, looking for evidence that Loki wanted it. And of course Loki wanted it, of course he did – how much more evidence did Tony need? How could it not be obvious how much he wanted it?

Oh, Loki realised. Tony already knew. Tony knew and he was teasing him with it, making him long for it, making him need to do something, to show him or tell him or start moving himself and it was almost enough to make him resent Tony’s self-control. Almost.

Tony leaned forward, his lips by Loki’s ear, the words hot against his skin. “There’s no point playing if we’ve already won.”

It was certainly beginning to feel like winning.

Chapter End Notes

You would not believe the amount of rewrites and cringing this chapter made me do. I'm still cringing posting this and it's not even that smutty (pre-smut? Is that a thing?). So yeah, I have a whole new appreciation for writers who post smut. I have squinted at this far too much already and enough’s enough so here it is... Being completely honest, I wasn’t expecting it to take 260K+ words for them to get to this point either so yes, the slow burn has been very... slow.

Edit: Both myself and you readers are blessed by the incredibly talented imyergoldfish's wonderful fanart based on this chapter. Take a look at it here.
Remarkable, Loki thought.

His thoughts had been idle, his mind quiet for some time. How unlike him.

Remarkable, he thought once more.

Then again, he supposed, Tony had always been an excellent distraction. It should not have been surprising that it applied here as well.

Loki shifted and Tony stirred the slightest amount next to him.

Even while he was asleep, Tony was proving to still be a distraction.

For utterly inexplicable reasons, Tony had chosen him. For utterly inexplicable reasons, Tony had wanted him.

There was no denying it, not after what had happened. There was no other possible explanation. The memory kept repeating itself in his mind: how the confession had left Tony's mouth and then how Tony's mouth had been on his and afterwards when Tony had been on him and he'd experienced Tony's breath on his face and the taste of him and the feel of his weight on his body.

He still wasn't entirely convinced it had happened but even his imagination wasn't vivid enough to conjure such solid and detailed flights of fantasy.

He'd had the opportunity to learn other things too: how Tony liked to kiss, how Tony liked to move against him, the way his breath went ragged and how certain furrows appeared if he touched him in a certain way, how much deeper his voice got.

Tony wanted him. Tony knew exactly who he was and he still...

For a rationalist, Tony made some questionable decisions, but, Loki decided, he was glad that Tony had made this one.

Very glad.

As unspeakably glad as Tony was unspeakably warm. He'd always felt warm, but this had been something more – something that was shared with him rather than something to burn him.

The heat emanating from him was enough that Loki could feel it even though they were lying inches apart. The distance between them was like companionable silence: comfortable but not cold. The constant continual heat had been enough that Loki had become too warm, the bedsheets sticking to him and his skin in turn sticking to Tony's while Tony slept on, pressed against his back, oblivious.

They may not have been touching but they were still lying together. They'd been sleeping next to one another for months but it wasn't the distance between them that made the distinction. The distinction was in the choice: the choice to remain close without being forced into close proximity, the choice to share the same sheets and pillows rather than have their own set each, the choice to
do this thing together and treat it as a shared activity rather than a necessity.

Loki might have woken up prematurely but it wasn't due to a lack of comfort. He wanted this – to savour it, to fully come to terms with how real it was and to enjoy the physical tangible proof that lay next to him.

He didn't want to look away but for the first time, he had no reason to. He had no reason to pretend otherwise anymore, not when Tony knew and he didn't just know, he must have felt… something not too wildly dissimilar.

There was a circular scar in the centre of Tony's chest, one with a diameter of a few inches across, and one that was very neat in comparison to Loki's, perfectly round and perfectly aligned with the middle of his ribcage. The sight of it exposed by the sheets that had slipped down made Loki remember how Tony's fingers had briefly traced over his own scar, then how they'd travelled lower. And lower.

Tony had struggled slightly with the removal of Loki's clothing – something Loki found delightfully entertaining, given Tony's previous almost over-abundance of confidence – before his patience ran thin and he had taken care of the matter himself.

And it was worth it to finally be skin to skin, to finally have Tony – all of Tony – touching him. He'd never been so acutely aware of how long it had been since he's last done this – until Tony touched him there that was, and he forgot entirely about it.

He'd ended up forgetting about a lot of things.

He’d forgotten to think about having to mask himself, of how vulnerable it was making him, of how Tony could surely see how weak he was for him and how much he didn't want it to stop.

There was a moment when it came back, when Tony's fingers were inside him and his eyes were on his face and Loki had to wonder if how much he'd craved it, if how desperately he'd needed it, was written all over his features. If it was, he'd been in no state to deny it. There was no mockery from Tony that time, not even gentle teasing. And there was something in Tony's expression too, something that was reflective and filling at the same time and seeing it – fully seeing it – felt like the most captivating kind of burn, only it was a burn that had no sting, only intensity.

It was previously existing knowledge to Loki that when Tony concentrated – truly concentrated – there was nothing that could shake or break him, nothing that could come between him and the object of his focus until he solved a problem or come to a conclusion. But if he was the focus of Tony's attention then what was he trying to solve or conclude? All Tony's attention on him, the sheer amount of it and the intensity of it made him unable to look away and it left his nerves raw, exposed, naked, and far far too visible, but there was nowhere to hide. More than that – he didn't want to. He had grown tired of it and – in this instance, at least – the benefits were outweighing the costs.

And Tony...

He'd discovered that if he touched Tony in certain places his eyes would widen, how if he applied just enough pressure Tony's mouth would part, what it took to make him twitch, what made his breath quiver with anticipation, what made him lose his patience from the anticipation, and – above all else – that even in a situation such as the one they'd been in, Tony never stopped talking. Even when Loki was kissing him, it was as if Tony started talking with his hands while his mouth was occupied.
“Ulterior motives,” Tony answered when Loki had questioned whether he was usually so talkative during such activities. “Your voice,” he’d said after a beat had passed. "It does things to me."

"My voice?"

"Mm. You've a– you've got this purr like, I don’t know, a panther or something."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. And it has this– this rich tone where you sound like you’re voicing a dark velvet chocolate ad even when you're being a snidey little shit."

And then Loki was done, laughing as if they hadn't just been a tangled mass of limbs, breaking into hysterics as his laughter threw Tony off him.

Horrendously inappropriate was something Tony was accustomed to. Maybe that explained a lot.

Loki’s laughter had cut off when Tony started at his throat again. It was far less elegant that time, more tongue and mouth and saliva rather than lips and when Tony climbed over him again it was Loki’s turn to twitch when their–

Loki turned himself over so he was lying flat on his back instead of on his side. Even remembering it was enough to make his blood start to flow faster again.

Some of the memories from the previous night he could recall in what would have been painstakingly precise detail if remembering them couldn't have brought him anything but pleasure, whereas other recollections were... more blurred.

He'd been so far gone he hadn't remembered to care how dishevelled he was, how the sweat had built up in his hair, how he was sprawled so hopelessly and inelegantly. And Tony – he'd felt the exact shape of him, the way he liked to access him, the pace of him.

It had started slowly. Slow enough for it to be almost agonisingly slow but there was enough pressure for Loki to feel it, for there to be the most enjoyable of burns.

It had been some time since he'd last been opened up like that. Since he'd last allowed someone else to enter him.

It was better than he remembered. Far better.

He'd had to urge Tony on to finally get across the message that he was ready, that he was wanting, that he wanted more, more, more–

He wished he'd been coherent enough to recall with perfect clarity Tony’s precise expression at the moment he finished.

It wasn't too optimistic of him – or so he hoped – to believe there was a reasonable chance of getting another opportunity to witness it.

***

For the second time in a row, Loki woke up on account of being far warmer than he was accustomed to being. Tony must have rolled over in his sleep because he'd ended up a combination of sprawled both against and on him, one arm wrapped underneath his and a leg flung over one of his calves.
"Not a cuddler?" Tony mumbled, half opening his eyes when Loki started to shift away – not enough that they weren't touching at all, just enough to ensure he wouldn't be swamped by heat.

"You're too warm for me to withstand, sometimes." Loki hadn't intended for his admission to come out sounding the way they did – with that much underlying sorrow and uncomfortable amount of sincerity bleeding into the words.

Abruptly, Tony was fully awake, his eyes taking on a new sharpness as they focused on him. For once, he appeared to be struggling for something to say and it was at that moment that Loki became certain he had been mistaken to speak so openly.

The reply Tony gave was initially in the form of a half-smile, not one forged out of joy or true amusement, but one that was intended to be alleviating.

"Too hot, you mean," Tony finally said. His joke lacked the conviction it otherwise would have contained.

Loki played along. "Frost Giant," he muttered, pointing a finger at himself. "By comparison, anything above freezing is warm."

Tony swallowed; Loki watched his throat move as he did it.

"You don't feel cold though."

Loki couldn't help but stare back, caught in momentary confusion. "Don't I?"

"You feel less warm than me but you're still not cold."

"Oh," Loki replied quietly.

"Loki?" Tony's voice was soft, as if he was trying to avoid waking him up despite the fact that they were already in the middle of a conversation and he'd been able to see he was awake for some time now. "I'm glad we had that talk. The one last night."

"You mean the horrifyingly tense one."

"Yup. That's the one." He caught a lock of Loki's hair between his forefinger and thumb. "The one that led to this."

And his hair – Tony was fondling his hair. Fondling it. And Loki had no objections to it, only the pressing matter of trying to figure out what he was supposed to do about it. Was he supposed to accept it with grace or reciprocate? And if he was supposed to reciprocate was it supposed to be at the same time or was he supposed to wait until Tony was finished?

It wasn't as if Loki was new to this. The last time he'd had the tender touches that came afterwards had been even longer than the part that came beforehand, but it wasn't as if he'd never done something like this when he was younger and more naive.

It was almost painful, how aware he was that he should be responding.

"Makes it almost worth it," Loki finally said. He'd spoken without a hint of amusement in his voice but he was certain Tony would understand he was teasing, attempting to continue the flow of the conversation in the most honest way he was capable of without causing it to stall or crash.

"Almost?" Tony repeated. His eyes narrowed in a caricature of indignance. "What'd make it
actually worth it then, Reindeer Games?"

Loki supposed he deserved that nickname after how he'd responded.

It was difficult to conjure a witty response while Tony stared at him in the manner he did, all that mischief and invitation.

"It was," Loki began, "a particularly... long conversation. I don't quite feel that the reward for the two of us having pushed through that conversation quite matched the... duration of it."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Oh? You want a round two?"

Loki’s retort came far less ashamedly and quicker than he’d expected. "I feel that I put it somewhat more delicately than you did."

Tony pretended to think. "Yeah... Hm... I’d be all for it if it wasn't for the part where, you know, you told me the first round didn't make it worth it."

Loki almost laughed then, laughed at how Tony had managed to turn it all around and created the trap where Loki would have to admit something. "God of lies," he said. There. That was an admission in itself; Tony would be able to piece together the statement and compare it with Loki's comment about it only almost being worth it. Because of course it was worth it.

"Thought so." The amusement sitting in Tony’s eyes was practically vicious. "I mean, you'd have to be. Even by my standards, that was a pretty good fuck."

"Only pretty good?"

Tony grinned. "Don't worry Reindeer games, I'll show you the ropes. Uh – not literally. Unless that's something you're into."

"Just when I think you've reached your peak of arrogance, you never fail to surprise me."

"You know me – I hate to be predictable."

"Does your unpredictability make you predictable?"

"Alright, Socrates." And then, "I can't believe I slept with Socrates."

"Try sleeping with yourself and maybe you'd gain a little sympathy for me." The moment the sentence had left Loki’s mouth, he realised the wide-open invitation he'd given.

"I have. It's called masturbation."

Loki was torn between rolling his eyes or refusing to acknowledge it so instead he chose a third option: "Mortal idiot."

"Hm – I gotta tell you, all this talk of mortality isn't really doing anything for me right now."

"Has it occurred to you that I didn't say it for your benefit?"

"What for, then?"

"My own personal relief, Tony." And speaking of relief, he did enjoy it when he didn't have to concern himself with whether Tony knew he wasn't being serious, when he didn't have to question whether Tony would be able to keep up with him.
"Well if it's relief you want..." Tony shot a glance downwards that – even despite there being a sheet in the way – was somehow still ludicrously suggestive. Again. That appeared to be a reoccurring theme with Tony.

"You are ridiculous."

"Is that a no?"

"Oh, not at all."

"Not so ridiculous yourself."

Loki laughed. "Perhaps so."

Tony's eyes had started to darken and it caused Loki's stomach to tighten.

"Yes," Loki found himself saying despite Tony not having asked him anything.

"You sure? I don't want this to be another case of it making our little talk only almost worth the effort."

"I don't want this effort to be dubbed only as a mere pretty good."

Tony raised his chin. "Sounds like we're both gonna have to step up our game then."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

It was slightly disorientating, to have Tony's teeth so close to his face as he grinned.

"By improvising."

Loki took in the ruffled hair, the wide smile, and the utterly shameless flirtation and found himself replying, "Improvising it is."

What he hadn't anticipated was for Tony to wait, not when Tony had no issues with making the first move and breaking the boundaries of the space between them. Loki gave it a few more seconds and Tony watched, his face full of false innocence.

Ah. So this was to be his punishment. For Tony to do nothing until Loki would have no choice but to force himself to reach out and touch him, as if sending out an invitation rather than receiving one. And Tony knew exactly what he was doing, Loki was certain of it.

If Tony was teasing him, attempting to dangle him on a string, then Loki would cooperate only if the same could be true in reverse. It'd be the ultimate revenge, one that they'd both enjoy.

He positioned himself closer, shifting on his knees. Tony remained still, watching him with forced passive disinterest. He wasn't unresponsive, and there was that familiar poorly disguised smirk just about visible at the corners of his mouth and then when Tony saw that Loki had caught it, it grew.

Loki leant forward then, his nose close enough to be millimetres away from skimming against his, his breath hovering above Tony's mouth.

He didn't close his eyes; he wanted to know what Tony would do – he wanted to see it right in front of him.

Any pretences from Tony were gone. The heat was back in his eyes and–
Was that eager anticipation?

Loki could already imagine it, how fiercely Tony would kiss back, how Tony, despite Loki’s efforts, would still take that as a victory.

But if he didn’t progress then they’d both miss out and Loki was too proud to concede after being challenged – and, more than that, he didn’t want to because he wanted this – but, despite how much they’d both enjoy it, there was still the stubborn part of him that didn’t want to admit defeat. It would be a pathetic thing, to be too afraid to do something so simple as to touch his mouth to Tony’s. Either way, he’d lose. If he refused then they’d both lose. If he accepted the challenge then they’d both enjoy it but he was reluctant to contribute to feeding Tony’s arrogance if he succeeding in manipulating him so easily.

The decision to kiss Tony as softly as he did was not one that amounted to anything that could be called revenge. It was slow and there was barely any pressure and any of the lust they might have roused during the conversation leading up to it had diminished and there was only the way Tony’s mouth moved against his and how Tony tried to pull him closer to the point where if Loki allowed him to, it would result in the loss of his balance, and when he failed to move closer Tony moved into him instead.

The gentleness provided an odd contrast to what had triggered it. It was earnest even, and Loki found himself faltering. He was supposed to have been playing along with Tony's game, making a move of his own, not getting swept along the way of the pieces.

It was probably for the best that he wasn't competitive about this, not truly, regardless of what the words that left his mouth might have said about it almost being worth it.

Even if it hadn't gone according to plan, even if he hadn't succeeded in tormenting Tony more than himself, he still couldn't count this as a loss.

Maybe that was part of the fun of the game... If he could call it a game at all. A cooperative game, one in which they were working towards a mutual goal. At least, that's what he presumed it was in the short term. The long term was something he had no desire to concern himself with just yet and Tony’s lips were so wonderfully distracting.

It was odd how something so physically based could occupy the majority of his mind so utterly, how it could consume and quell it so simultaneously, how it rendered his thoughts into little more than pleasant quiet sounds.

Tony broke off then. "Uh – you know I haven't brushed my teeth yet, my breath isn't gonna be–"

"I," Loki said, and he meant every word of it, "am past caring."

"In that case..." Tony reached forward and anchored one hand to his shoulder. For all how quickly he had grabbed it and the eagerness in his eyes, Loki had been anticipating – not entirely unpleasantly – being yanked forward, not a pull that was practically delicate by contrast.

So startling it was, that he found himself asking, "What are you doing?" What are you doing? he'd asked, as if he hadn't tried the same debilitating tactic only moments earlier.

"Improvising," Tony said. Loki caught a glimpse of his tongue at the corner of his mouth. "I want to know what you feel like on me," Tony continued and Loki struggled to swallow. "If you're up for it."

Loki managed a nod then, and Tony's hands moved their way further up–
His neck – again.

Tony appeared to have a certain fondness for his neck; it had never been given quite so much attention before. Not that he had any objections – far from it.

What was it that he'd told Tony the previous night? Ah yes – *I'm not that delicate*. If either of the two of them were, it was Tony with his mortal body and frame that would have been far too easy to break if Loki could have been able to stand doing it. Maybe he'd have to show him that Tony didn't have to concern himself with thoughts of breaking *him* and that if he was pushed too far he'd push back.

Loki kissed him then and it wasn't soft. There were a couple of seconds in which Tony appeared to have been taken by surprise – an intake of breath and a sudden tightening of fingers – but then he started pushing back with just as much intensity and that was much better.

Loki didn't quite know what to do with his tenderness. His desire on the other hand...

Desire was far easier to accept.

Tony's mouth was warm and wet and it moved against his with such enthusiasm it became difficult to recall why he'd had doubts and there was that scratch of his facial hair that would have made Loki wonder how long it'd take to get used to the feeling of it if he hadn't been so distracted.

Then Tony's mouth wasn't on his anymore; his whole body had shifted, going from being sat upright with his back against the headboard to sat on his knees. His hands travelled down to just above Loki's hips and that tug was just about as subtle as anything else Tony did.

When Loki followed the pull of his hands, he was over Tony in a mirror of how they had found themselves the previous night, only given slightly more dignity by being on a bed rather than the floor by it this time, and when he no longer had to readjust himself, Tony's fingers still applied enough pressure to ensure all he could think about was how much he wanted him to be there.

He didn't know what Tony was talking about when he had voiced his concern about the taste of his breath. Apparently, his own couldn't have been bad either because Tony certainly wasn't hesitating or holding back and there was no doubt about whether he would have been able to taste it, given their current situation.

Tony kissed him like there was nothing more fascinating in the world than kissing him – not magic or scientific mysteries or inventions to be designed – and Loki blamed the encouragement for causing him to become slightly overambitious, attempting to shift closer so Tony's chest was pressed flatter against his, causing their teeth to briefly clash against each other.

Loki grimaced.

It had been a long time, hadn't it?

He was almost surprised when Tony didn't tease him about his minor blunder.

Maybe this was why he preferred it when Tony took charge instead of the responsibility being shifted to him. Except that, in a way, Tony had taken charge by encouraging him so much in the first place. It was Tony's hands that held him in place, Tony's hands that guided him, Tony's mouth that was so insistent that he stayed there and didn't move, not unless it was to–
“Tony,” a voice said over the intercom, which was strange because Loki hadn't realised they'd even had an intercom.

“Are those Nebula’s dulcet tones I detect?”

“Mfft,” Tony mumbled from next to him.

“We’re here,” Nebula announced. “Can you get up?”

Tony let out a loud groan in response.

"Are you getting up?" she asked.

"Where's the– Where's the thing?" Tony wandered the room until he located the speaker.

There was a quiet sigh. "I asked if you’re getting up."

Tony pressed a button and a light came to life as he spoke. "Ugh."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Yeah, yeah, we're getting up."

"You’ve had all day. Again."

“Again?” Tony repeated. “What do you mean ‘again’?”

“Whatever, Tony.” The pause she left spoke volumes for her exasperation. “We’ve almost landed. If you want to actually buy stuff you’ll have to actually get up.”

"We're at Arawrath?"

"Yes. I'm leaving the ship in fifteen minutes."

***

The knock came only shortly after they'd redressed.

"Why," Nebula said disdainfully, staring at the plate on the floor, "are there cleaner cubes up here?"

"Er," Tony responded. "Cleaner cubes?"

"Yes."

"So they're not... for eating."

Her face was a mixture of morbid fascination and horror. "No."

"Guess that explains a lot."

Loki turned to accuse Tony. "You informed me they were a dessert food."

"Actually, I said I found them with all the other stuff in the kitchens."

"Of course they were in the kitchens," Nebula cut in. "They're for getting oil off the bottom of pans. Where else would they be?"
"So these cleaner cubes... Er– How edible are they?"

"Do I want to know why you're asking?"

Loki thought the fact that they were on a plate rather gave it away.

"I ate some, duh."

Loki was slightly impressed that she did not appear unfazed, merely disbelieving.

"They're not toxic. Just... unpleasant tasting."

"Great. No side effects then."

"No."

"Awesome."

"Are you ready to go yet?"

"Gimme a minute, I just need to brush my–"

"One minute only. Don't forget who has all the units."

Tony waited until she had the room. "Units – real imaginative name for a currency."

***

One minute had definitely been overly optimistic.

The look Nebula gave them when they reached the docking bay was not an impressed one.

"About time," she said.

"I know," Tony replied.

Loki almost laughed at that one, at how Tony had twisted her meaning to refer to the two of them, a private joke, one that would surely be missed by any outsider.

"You’ve had how long already?"

Maybe not. Loki almost stumbled in his stride.

"Not long enough," Tony said brightly.

"You’ve had months and months to–"

"Enough," Loki cut in. He did not snap but his voice was terse enough to imply he might not restrain himself for much longer if the topic was not left well alone. He didn't need anyone else reminding him how much time he'd wasted fretting all of things.

"I don't care what you get up to," Nebula replied. "Not unless it affects me – like you being late."

"You sure you don't wanna long chat over a hot mug of coffee about all the details?"

It was one of those moments in which Loki found himself very grateful to be certain that would never happen.
"No." She didn't have to think about it. "You're both idiots and I don't want to sit and listen to stories of you being bigger idiots."

"And grosser idiots," Tony added which earned him varying degrees of derogatory looks from both of them.

"Yes," Loki sighed, "thank you, Tony."

***

Loki didn't know what it was about Arawrath exactly, that demanded its populace wanted to be seen so clearly. Its people were obsessed with glass: glass instead of brick or stone or metal, glass walls and ceilings, glass vehicles, glass everywhere. The only parts of the buildings he couldn't directly see through were the ones that were either tinted too darkly or had been deliberately grown over with ivy or suchlike.

If the sun had been high in the sky, Loki imagined it would have been dazzling, all that light reflecting off all the glass.

None of their buildings were formed out of regular shapes. Instead, there were slants and leans and intersecting angles that distorted the overall structure. Nestled in between the segments of glass were gardens of shrubbery and flowers, thousands and thousands of them all contained within the town.

"Don't lose me," was the only warning Nebula gave them before she led them further down one of the main street paths.

"I want that one," Tony said, pointing at the building with the most obscene angles.

***

Not that Loki particularly wanted to admit it but, contrary to the almost menacing connotations of its name, Arawrath held a certain degree of tranquillity and was a pleasing planet to the eye. And to the nose, which was, even to himself, an odd observation. Most of the places they'd visited outside of the Nine Realms were incredibly densely populated, overloaded with fumes and fuels and man-made chemicals. But Arawrath was different. The air was crisp, lighter. Cleaner. Far more pleasant to breathe in than the air inside the ship or on Taradaxia or Knowhere.

He inhaled and exhaled.

"So this is what happens when a planet finally goes green," Tony muttered.

And it was green. Very green. Apart from all the glass.

They’d paused their journey on foot to sit and sample a drink that was a speciality of the planet’s, one that was cold and refreshing and energising all at once.

Neither Loki nor Tony had asked Nebula where her units came from. Some of them might have been from leftovers on the ship, some of them might have been what she’d earned herself beforehand, or all of it might not have swung entirely one way or the other. It seemed almost rude not to ask but it seemed ruder still to demand to know where she’d gotten the units required to pay for the supplies. They’d already made certain she did not mind parting with whatever small portion was needed for fueling and stocking the Dark Aster and so no further discussion was needed.

Tony stood, eyes closed, arms out.
"What are you doing?" Loki asked.

"Sunlight," Tony replied. "I'm enjoying the sun. What? I've missed actually being able to feel the sun – a sun, I mean – on me."

Nebula did not have her eyes closed but she appeared far more content than Loki had seen her before, sat on the ground with her legs folded and idly watching passersby.

The grass underneath them more closely resembled a matted carpet of ferns, but the ferns were soft and dry and so short they were no more than a few inches long each.

Loki pulled at one of the plants by one of his boots, allowing the seeds to scatter in the wind and Nebula watched as the wind dispersed them.

"You still sure about this?" Tony asked. "Just... giving away a massive ship like that to us?"

She nodded. "I don't want the Dark Aster. Not after everything that's happened." Too many memories, Loki concluded. "And I've spent longer on it than I ever wanted to anyway," she finished.

"You don't even want to sell it?"

"I have enough units for what I want. I need food, fuel, and a small vessel to get me where I want to go."

"Your sister," Loki recalled.

Nebula shrugged. It was a modest shrug by her standards, one that involved little movement. "To start with."

"It's kind of a scary thought there's another blue assassiny alien running wild somewhere out there."

"Green," Nebula corrected, her voice quieter than its usual volume and her eyes far ahead. "Gamora is green."

"Green? Like a Wicked Witch of the West shade green?"

Nebula looked blank.

"Hulk-green?" Tony suggested despite knowing full well that Nebula had no familiarity with the beast.

"Ignore him," Loki recommended.

"Hang on a sec – if she's your sister, does that mean Thanos was her–"

Nebula interrupted him before he could finish his sentence. "She already betrayed Thanos by trying to sell the Orb instead of taking it back to him." Her jaw set. "She should be glad he's gone." Her jaw set even harder. "She would've finally lost if he wasn't."

"Should?" Tony repeated.

"Siblings are rarely reasonable people," Loki offered. If he wasn't careful, he'd come across as sounding far too wistful. It had been simpler, before.

"We're all better off without him, it's just she... She was his favourite. She knew it even if she
wouldn't admit it. She liked to please him. I thought it'd stop when we stopped being kids but it never did."

Tony gave Loki a rather pointed look behind her back and Loki couldn't help but get the feeling he'd been vastly overestimated if Tony thought he'd be competent enough to be some source of comfort or reassurance.

After a moment of deliberating, Loki spoke. "I used to think my father would never be angry with my brother." It had been an almost fatal miscalculation that resulted in more than just him stalling Thor's inevitable coronation. "Nor my brother angry with my father." He'd only seen fleeting hints of it, back with the fiasco with Jane and the Aether, but it had been there, lurking under the surface and beginning to explode outwards with Thor's words. Enough for Thor to once again defy the Allfather's commands but not enough for Thor to stand head to head and fight against him, not enough to feel true hatred or to take up arms against him.

"My father would be angry with anyone who earned it. Even Gamora, sometimes. Not enough to… Never enough to upgrade her."

Loki met Tony's eyes. At least the look of urging him to speak had stopped.

"Thanos gave you..." Tony gestured to all her metal parts. "...those?"

"One part for every time I lost."

Even Tony looked as if he had no words.

"Head of Shitty Fathers Club is yours if you want it. Open offer."

"You don't know what it was like," she said, and her voice was slightly unsteady even though her eyes were dry and dark. "Every time I lost I'd wake up not knowing which organs I'd be missing, which limbs would never feel the same again, whether someone added something inside my head or whether they stole something from it." She threw a fistful of the ferns she'd ended up grasping. "There was nothing worse than losing."

"And your sister?" Tony asked. "Did she–"

"She–" Nebula hesitated. "She never watched."

"Did she try to stop it?"

Nebula almost laughed. "She couldn't stop it."

"So she didn't try."

"I never wanted her to try, I just wanted her to–" When she next spoke, her voice sounded smaller. "We were supposed to be on the same side."

There was a long silence after that.

Then Tony was giving him that look again, the same one he'd given earlier. It was slightly exasperating, how Tony seemed to have suddenly started concerning himself with meddling in other people's affairs. He usually was wise enough – or not interested enough – to stay well clear, though not always wise enough to avoid provoking the issue further.

What was Loki supposed to do with a look like that? There was nothing he could have said to make
it any better – it wasn't as if he knew Nebula's sister in any capacity or Nebula well enough to know what she'd want to hear.

"My brother was the reason why I ended up imprisoned in one of Asgard's own dungeons." He was one of the reasons, but she didn't need to know that technicality. "He brought me back from... another planet. Then he brought me to court." And Loki couldn't so much as hate him for it, though he'd long since stopped wishing he could. "He fought me every step of the way." With just as much equal ferocity as Loki had fought him in return. "He didn't even question why we were fighting." Not until years after, not until it shouldn't have mattered anymore. Strangely it had been the other brother who'd asked more questions than Thor had, but Loki didn't like to dwell on him for too long. Not after how he'd left him.

"It sounds like your brother and my sister have a lot in common." The words were stiff.


He pulled out another stem from the ground and methodically began to pick off its seeds one at a time.

The quiet that followed was far more companionable, one in which Loki began to enjoy the simplicity of it all: the rays from the sun and the light breeze and even the sound of the traffic from the not so far away distance because at least it meant theirs wasn’t the only vehicle out there.

"Kinda makes me wish I had a sibling to bitch about," Tony commented.

Loki snorted.

***

They left their spot at some point during the midafternoon when they'd started to tire of sitting in the same place and wanted to have the freedom of moving again.

The sun had gently warmed the fabric of Loki’s clothing and the light wind had ruffled his hair ever so slightly. There were things he hadn't anticipated missing: the natural elements of a world, being able to walk somewhere that wasn't a ship, the sight of a horizon, being able to see for himself that there were people outside of himself and Tony who existed... and Nebula too, he supposed.

The port town was not an especially crowded one but neither was it quiet. The inhabitants of the planet were varied and many – species with dragonfly-like wings and species with brilliantly coloured beetle shells, species with bushy tails and species with long tubular beaks – but there weren't so many that it became difficult to navigate without bumping into one of them.

Nebula stayed metres ahead of them, clearing the path to where they were heading by staring straight ahead.

"It's almost insulting," Loki remarked to Tony as they walked.

"Think we're a public embarrassment?"

"You, maybe."

"Right. Because you've never ended up causing a scene. Not when we got caught by that elf. Or when Rhodey first found you. Or when you argued with that door."

"It's not as if I often intend to cause such scenes. The chaos just... seems to occur where I happen to
"Ooh – ooh – is that me? Did I occur around you as well?"

Loki huffed a laugh. "That's not quite what I meant. But causing a scene and becoming an embarrassment are not one and the same thing."

"You know, if she's that embarrassed to be seen with us we could make ourselves worth it. Step up our game. Make her never want to go out in public with us again. Well, she'll probably never have to again but that's not the point."

"I know that by your standards, you're speaking quietly," Loki said, "but that doesn't mean she can't hear you."

"Cyborgs. Never know where they've got implants. Is it rude to ask?"

"I don't know what the etiquette is either."

"Doesn't matter. Point is – and coming to think of it, this only gets better if she can't avoid it just by closing her eyes because of X-ray vision or some shit – we could do one hell of a good job of making her cringe." He paused. "Wait – can she cringe? I don't think I've ever seen her face change colour. Would she get more blue? Is that a thing? I don't know. Point is – we could totally gross her out."

"We?"

"Come on. You're basically the god of pranks."

"... Interesting choice of priorities. And just when it starts seeming as if she doesn't despise us."

"Despise us? Nah. She just thinks we're idiots – which, okay, is kinda fair. But hey, if she's gonna act like a teenager who can't stand to be seen with her mom or dad, we could amp up the PDA, see how far—"

"What?"

"PDA."

"What does—"

"Public displays of affection. If we wanna prove we're embarrassing to be around..."

Oh no. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"It's not my idea of enjoying myself. It's humiliating."

"Do you say that to every person you've just hooked up with?"

"I didn’t mean because it’s you—"

Tony waved a hand. “I know. And I wasn’t saying we should actually go all PDA. Just have fun coming up with different ways of—” Tony shook his head. " Doesn’t matter. We’re here now anyway."
When they entered the first shop Nebula led them in, they discovered it was no different to the rest of the town, as if it was cut from the same set of blueprints: glass, oblong angles, and various flora. There were tubes filled with liquid that stood like tall thin columns stretching from ceiling to floor, each containing tens and tens of floating decorative coloured bulbs.

As they stepped closer, a cloud moved from the sun and the brightness of the room intensified, causing the bulbs to float upwards and give off a slight glow.

Whatever they were, Tony certainly seemed to be giving them an appreciative glance. "Galilean thermometers... Neat," came his verdict.

The rest of the shops they visited appeared almost as indistinguishable from one another, the main differences mostly being the types of plants and the hues of the glass. The language Loki could not understand but Nebula had some sort of chip installed that allowed her to converse fluently with the merchants. Once she had finished, they received word that their items would be delivered to their ship rather than them having to arrange transporting them by themselves.

By the time they had taken care of all the items on their checklist, the sun had mostly sunk, leaving cool evening air to greet them as they made their way back towards the ship.

Loki found he much preferred the view of the stars when he was anchored to a planet rather than when he was flying through them.

"So..." Tony addressed Nebula. "How long you sticking around?"

"The deliveries are due within the next few hours. I'll go after then."

It was strange how Nebula didn't appear to be particularly pleased by the prospect of leaving. It was stranger still how Loki didn't feel particularly pleased by the prospect of her leaving either. He wasn't directly opposed to it exactly, the strangeness was more to do with how considering the fact that himself and Tony would get to be alone, he would have assumed he'd feel somewhat more... enthusiastic about it.

Not that he had any qualms about being alone with Tony – he was used to it by now, after all. The only thing that had changed since they'd last been travelling alone and now was that they'd started sharing the same bed. That, and Thanos was gone. But in the grand scheme of things, sharing a bed didn't alter their relationship all that much; it only added a number of activities to their repertoire that weren't already there beforehand. And even with Nebula there, it wasn't as if she'd been at risk of hearing them, not with the amount of space between them, and it wasn't as if they would have struggled to get any moments alone.

"If you're sure," Tony said.

Her resolve held firm. "I need to see her."

Loki hoped he was right about nothing changing too drastically between himself and Tony. He didn't think he could stand it if he was suddenly expected to start making romantic declarations or demonstrating his affection in public. No, he decided, Tony knew him well enough to have some inkling as to what he was getting himself into. He supposed they'd both know for sure how much or how little had changed soon enough.

And then they'd have to see what it was like when they reached the other side of the void too. Getting back onboard the Dark Aster only reminded him of where their next journey would take them.
"Alright. Looks like there’s a few hours for us to kill." Tony clapped his hands together. "Wanna try a cleaning cube?"

The amusement was faint but was definitely there as Nebula shook her head. "What would I do that for?"

"Uh – forfeit for Liar's Dice? You liked that game, right? You lose a life, you gotta eat. Who's game?"

Once was enough. As the thought passed through his mind, Nebula caught his eye and her own mixture of faintly amused exasperation and resignation reflected is own.

"Come on – it'll be like our own little last supper. Only less bread, more jello."

"Fine," Loki sighed. "I'll humour you."

"Awesome. And you, Nebs?"

"Promise to never call me that again and I'll play."

***

"Well…” Tony began. “Thanks, I guess. For the ship and supplies and everything.”

Nebula’s stare turned harder; not hostile but far less friendly. “I didn’t do it for you.”

Half of Tony’s mouth rose upwards and he cast a pointed glance between Nebula and Loki. “You sure you’re not related?”

“Definitely not,” Nebula asserted before Loki could deny it for himself.

“It’s almost certainly for the best that we’re not.”

“That’s one thing we can agree on.”

That comment caused Loki to smile, at least a little. How rare it was for him to stumble across people he bore no ill will towards, let alone two of them.

“I get the feeling if I tried to work out who’d the stabbiest younger sibling, you'd gang up and I’d end up being your first victim.”

“Is there any point to comparing us?” Loki asked.

“Not really,” Nebula interrupted.

He would have preferred it if she hadn’t just proved Tony's point by making the exact same underlying implication and insult he had.

“Is originality not one of your finer poi–”

“Quiet in the back.” If Tony was surprised with his tactic of suddenly demanding authority actually working, he did not show it. “You’re both the stabbiest little shits of younger siblings – happy?”

Claiming ‘no’ would have been more on the petty side than Loki’s pride would allow so he settled for a roll of the eyes instead, though that motion was not entirely conducive towards not appearing
petulant either.

They’d reached Nebula’s pod and came to a standstill.

Nebula gave Tony half a nod and turned to be on her way.

“Nice knowing you,” Tony called after her. Loki was very familiar with that brand of fond annoyance in Tony’s voice.

With the utmost wariness, she turned herself back around.

Was it? Loki might have asked in her position.

Her mouth partially opened as if she was on the brink of saying something.

“... Thanks,” she eventually settled for.

“And hey – if you ever find yourself near Earth, feel free to drop by.”

She frowned then, not so much in anger but more so in confusion. “How would I even find you?”

“I’m Tony Stark.” He grinned. “Everyone’s heard of me. Everyone knows where to find me.”

“On your tiny planet, maybe.”

Tony shrugged. “Planet, galaxy... It’s all relative.”

Nebula paused on the steps to access the pod door.

“Bye then.” For a generous gesture by her standards, she gave Loki a nod of acknowledgement.

“And you.”

“And you,” Loki echoed.

Her expression grew slightly disdainful. “Don’t let that one die,” she said, inclining her head at Tony.

That was the second time someone had requested that of him. Did they think him the sort to stand back and allow him to die? If they thought it’d be himself who was the threat then Loki might have been able to sympathise, but for him to be perceived as so passive...

“If I didn’t let Thanos kill him, I don’t understand why I would allow anyone else to get the opportunity to.”

“Hey – if I can just interrupt for a second here – I’m not gonna let anyone kill me either. Just thought it’s worth mentioning.”

“Bye, Tony.” Then Nebula slid open the door and stepped through it, but not before casting another glance at Loki. “And don’t forget.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update, it’s been a weird past couple of weeks (and maybe next few
weeks too so there's a chance the next chapter might end up being late as well so fair warning).

But but but buuuuuut - I've finalised the playlist and am excited about getting to share that with you all eventually. (pssst – there's Queen)
By the time both Loki and Tony had retreated to the gallery, Nebula's pod had already left its station and they watched as it soared outwards, pivoted, then disappeared out of view.

And then it was just the two of them.

They were nearing the gaping black hole that led to the void. The hole that was an empty space in the centre of a mass of nebula clouds and the more Loki stared at it, the more it appeared to be glaring down at them like a fiery dark eye.

It wasn't as if Loki wasn’t aware of what was coming, of how it was waiting for them, but he hadn't felt it with as much certainty until it was no longer an item further down on their list of tasks. It was the task they were attempting to execute and it still came as a surprise that they were going to do it and that they would – voluntarily, no less – choose to do it of their own volition.

He knew he was being ridiculous when he was hit with the conviction that the void was watching them. The void was not alive. The void was only a place; it had no thoughts or opinions of its own.

Looking at it made the back of his neck start to prickle, a cold sweat beginning to accumulate.

He could do this. He had to do this. If only he could deceive himself into not behaving so ridiculously. The sight of something was nothing anyone should fear, let alone himself. Sights only communicated things that could be inferred and it was the confirmations that it would be more rational to fear, not the sights themselves. Being an illusionist had taught him as much, and yet he'd still feared seeing Thor's supposed death again and seeing the vision he'd created of Thanos.

Reason didn't always travel hand in hand with logic. Sometimes neither of them were present but as time had passed since his fall, their voices had slowly been getting... steadier. That couldn't have been a terrible sign, though it was a difficult thing to retain a degree of optimism while staring the void in the eye, knowing what they'd have to do.

And to think it had all been his idea. He could have done the sensible thing and kept quiet and would have happily avoided any void-related complications, but for reasons he didn't like to put names to, he'd volunteered it as a viable option.

The presence of the void was louder than Tony's presence as he stood in the periphery of Loki's vision.

"I meant it, you know," Tony said. "You don't have to."

"I know." The sight of what was waiting for them caused the tone of his voice to become more restrained, close to snippish. He took a moment and then, softer, he added, "But I meant what I said too."

Tony was observing him from the corner of his eye even though he appeared to be looking out through the glass, Loki could feel it.

It took Tony a long moment to respond. "Thank you." The sincerity in his voice bled. And then, "I know you don't like being thanked but I want you to know I mean it and now I'm gonna
skip this part before I start making you regret anything. So... Next destination: wormhole." Tony paused. "Wait. Is it a place or a mode of transport?"

In any other circumstance, Loki might have at least been slightly interested in the debate. "I don't think the two are mutually exclusive."

Tony rocked back and forth on his heels. On a child, it might have appeared as if there were bundles of excitement contained inside him, but on a less childish figure it only made him appear restless, caged, like there was no vent for his energy. "Looks like we'll reach it in a couple hours."

The words sounded distant when all of Loki's attention was on the entrance to the wormhole. There. Wormhole. *Wormhole* was a far gentler term than *the void*.

"Is that all?" Idly, Loki wondered if his own dismay was audible.

"Yup. Well. Not unless we do something first. I kind of liked Arawrath. We never got to try their food, maybe we could--"

"Stalling won't change anything." Loki couldn't ascertain whether the delay would be for Tony’s benefit or his own. "Stalling won't make it any easier."

"We'll fly into the dragon's mouth then. Well... eye. Make it a minotaur, not a dragon."

Tony turned to take his leave but paused when he noticed Loki had yet to move. "You coming?"

It took Loki some time to turn his back on the glass. "Where else would I go?"

"With me." After the words came out, Tony's eyes shifted. "I mean, there's no point standing here and watching it get closer and closer." He nodded outside. "Kind of has the same vibe as sitting and staring at the sun as it dies. Except, you know, we won't end up going through the whole having to die part. I hope. Nebula seemed pretty sure we'd be fine, didn't she? Apart from when she asked you not to let me die. And that," he said, holding up one finger, "is pretty insulting. I've missed every death I've ever almost had and I think I've done alright. That's gotta count for something. I've been good at this whole not dying thing so far."

"I do hope you're not deliberately attempting to tempt fate."

***

Inexplicably, the ship felt far emptier than it should have done as they began making their way towards the navigation station.

"I moved the cage, by the way," Tony announced.

"You did?"

Tony nodded. "To the room next to ours. It's pretty much exactly the same. Same size, same furniture. Oh – and no wires. So they can roam around the room and nibble whatever the hell they want."

"I'm sure they'll appreciate it."

"They better do. Those little shits."

"Tony."
"What? They are. And you know the worst thing about them? You can't even be angry with them. I'm not an animal person and even I..."

"They do have a certain charm, don't they?"

"Splinter peed on my hand while I was busy upgrading their living space. How's that for gratitude? I fix them up a new space that's how many times bigger than their cage and she decides to leave her pissy drops of thanks all over my hand. Not cool."

"She wants you to smell like her."

"I don't want me to smell like her but I don't think she's gonna start listening to what I want."

Loki didn't class himself as overly fond of their tendency to scent mark but it was rare that it happened.

“Either that or she’s marking you in case she gets lost.”

“Great plan. Mark the mobile object.”

“Or,” Loki added, “it’s a display of dominance.” He paused. “Another option is that perhaps she’s in heat.”

“Yeah, none of these options are making me feel more forgiving.” Tony paused when they reached a fork in the corridor. “You wanna go see them?”

"Oh, I thought you were currently holding a grudge against them."

***

The rats, as it had turned out, were delighted with their new accommodation. It was more maintenance in terms of cleaning but, for the most part, they still used their litter tray and so the cage was kept open for them to access their food and water.

Splinter skittered across one of the bars of the bunk beds and settled into a pounce to leap from one bed to another and landed the jump – successfully, Loki was pleased to note. Ratty – Loki had protested when Tony had offered that name but, once again, somehow it had stuck – followed Loki as he walked through the room and seated herself on his foot when he came to a standstill, her tail hooking itself around his ankle while she stood on her two hind legs to better sniff the air. And Remi began licking his hand when he offered it to her, thinking she’d wish to step onto it in order to be picked up.

A couple of hours. Less, now. That was all they’d have until they’d reach the void. Loki wished he could be as blissfully unaware of it as the rats were, but it was in part slightly reassuring to see such displays of normalcy, of curiosity and exploration and playfulness. Or fiendishness, he thought to himself as he spotted Rizzo sneaking up behind Remi and startling her with a tackle.

“Is there anything we can secure the cage with?” Loki asked.

Tony frowned. “Hm?” The frown disappeared. “Oh. Yeah, rats plus turbulence probably isn’t gonna be a good combo. I think there’s rope somewhere.”

“And something to line the metal of the cage?” Then Loki realised they were in a room with at least a dozen pillows. “Ah.”
“Is this the part where we start the rat round-up?”

“Yes,” Loki said, “it is.”

***

I wasn't wise for Loki to station himself at the gallery. The gallery should have been the last place to decide to stand at, the last place to take his watch, but he had to watch from somewhere. He'd rather know what was happening than remain ignorant and be taken by surprise.

The growing anticipation was only making it worse, the sight of the opening getting closer and closer only feeling as if he was watching an hourglass slowly depleting.

This was just like it had been when they'd first stolen the pod: him remaining staring stubbornly out of the glass at the stars and planets and all the gaps in between despite there being the option of retreating through to other places, rooms that concealed the view from sight.

Logically, he was perfectly aware that staring into the void would only make his experience of it more unpleasant. So why do it then? Stubbornness? Spite? To prove something? Maybe, Loki concluded, I just enjoy suffering. That seemed more likely than any other convoluted reason he could think of.

"Should've known you'd be here."

The sound of Tony speaking caused him to startle. "Should you have?" Loki asked. His voice was quiet.

"If I had to pick the worst place to stand while we fly through a wormhole..."

As if Loki wasn't already aware.

"I do have something of a knack for placing myself in the worst possible position to be in."

Tony held up a finger. "I'm gonna be an adult here and not make that joke."

"Then I congratulate you on your show of self-restraint." It wasn't the strongest of retorts, but he supposed the situation required some degree of leniency.

"Years of practice."

Against the quiet of the gallery, the sound of Tony's fingertips drumming on the glass was incredibly loud. The clicking was making Loki more on edge, as if the drumming was encouraging his heart to beat faster and faster, as if it was a clock cantering a countdown that was too fast and out of rhythm.

"Is there a reason for you being here?"

Tony's fingers stilled and he hesitated.

Maybe Loki shouldn't have been that blunt. If his words had, despite his intentions, been cutting enough to cause even Tony to be taken aback...

"Hey – we're... Uh, I don't know what we are exactly. But it's not that weird for me to actually, you know, be in the same room as you."

An apology, Loki thought. An apology to Tony would be appropriate here. Instead, what he said
was, "I doubt your timing is merely a coincidence."
"Alright. Fine. You got me." Tony held up his hands. "I was gonna ask if you're helping me steer this thing."

"Steer?" Loki echoed despite knowing exactly what he meant.

"Well, yeah. We're gonna have to switch over to manual to get through the wormhole and sometimes even people as great as I am with tech need assistance. Blame it on your long arms. You've got good reach."

"I doubt my help will be necessary."

Tony shrugged. "Might not be. But we were both there when Nebula showed us the ropes. We’re gonna need to turn all the lights off soon and if something goes wrong I don't wanna be waiting for you to stumble your way from the other side of the ship."

"Why – are you anticipating something going wrong?"

"We've both got a track record of tremendous fuck-ups. So maybe I am."

"Is now an ideal time for such pessimism?" The look Loki received in response to that statement coming from his own lips was enough to make him feel something close to dark amusement. If he hadn't been facing the entrance to the void, he was certain he'd be, if not laughing, then at least chuckling.

"Eh." Tony waved a hand. "Pessimism, preparation... Not much difference between the two sometimes. So. Not that I want to give you an ultimatum between brooding or co-captaining, but are you coming or not?"

***

There was still a view of space from the navigator's station through three small port windows lined up on the front-facing wall, so Loki supposed there was nothing stopping him both brooding and putting himself to good use at the same time.

It might have helped, even a little, to have had something to do to keep him occupied, which was something he suspected Tony’d most likely already identified before he'd requested help. Clever of him to phrase it in such a way, to make it seem as if it was *him* in need of assistance rather than Loki. It was done so well that if he'd attempted the same tactic only a few weeks prior, Loki might not have noticed.

Not that he needed help.

Of course he didn't need help.

But assistance in the form Tony had given it wasn't horrendous. Maybe he'd go so far as to describe it as alleviating. But no further. Definitely not any further.

Tony did most of the work. It was as if he was fluent in the language of technology, all technology, and that did not exclude computers or machinery that was alien to him, the only difficulties it presenting being that they might have been a different dialect of the same language and would only take slightly longer for him to grasp.

Every so often Tony would have to stop himself. It took a few observations of watching it reoccur
again and again before Loki realised Tony was having to remind himself that he'd requested his assistance and if Tony wanted to remain the slightest bit convincing, he'd have to actually let him do something rather than doing it before him.

It could have been flattering, the extent to which Tony was going out of his way to make it seem as if he needed him for this, all because he knew precisely how Loki would feel about it. Loki had made his feelings about how much he detested pity and shows of charity quite clear, and they had not been missed. It didn't mean that a small part of him was still searching for any signs of it, though. Or that another part of him was wondering if Tony humouring his hatred of pity was in fact another form of pity.

For a brief few minutes, he'd managed to avoid thinking of the void. Presumably Tony's goal of keeping him occupied had worked, if only through means he had not anticipated.

They'd activated the manual flight when they were closer to the void and had a brief test to check whether they both still knew what they were doing. And they did. The mechanisms were far more logically placed than they had been on the pod, and the integration of multiple instruments and modes were far smoother too. It took marginally longer for the changes they altered to make themselves known, something Loki put down to the ship being of a considerably larger size than the pod had been, and the lag had taken some getting used to.

They had estimated a length of half an hour's flight until they reach the void.

There were things Loki needed to be doing, tasks Tony had requested he’d complete even if he didn’t strictly need him to do it, that were made far more difficult by the way the windows kept pulling his eyes towards them.

The illusion of the iris had dissipated and it was becoming clear that the reds and yellows were in fact clouds of nebulae far behind the eye's pupil rather than surrounding it.

Their ship sailed through space smoothly, the internal engines in perfect harmony with the surrounding environment. The speed was too smooth and too fast for Loki's liking, and he still had to endure more of this waiting all while they were steadily getting closer and closer and if his nerves were this frayed now, how much more frayed would they get when they’d be inside?

"The hell?" Tony squinted at one of the screens. "We got incoming."

Loki forgot all about the windows when he realised whatever it was must have been was coming from somewhere behind them.

"How many?"

"Ten. Twenty. Forty. I don’t know. All these dots just came in at the edge of the screen."

"Why?" As if it mattered why they were being pursued. As if it was their primary concern rather than getting the end of their next destination.

Tony did not answer. "Put everything you've got into the accelerators."

Loki wrenched forward the lever. The ship started to vibrate, the floor trembling beneath his feet.

"Are they still--"

"They're still following."
"But why?" And there it was again, the same question, the one whose answer would be futile in whatever form it came.

"Probably something to do with us being on Ronan's ship. Something tells me wasn't the type to make new buddies wherever he went."

Either that or they'd been betrayed. Was it just a coincidence that only hours after they had seen the last of Nebula, they'd come into close proximity of an unknown fleet? Under normal circumstances Loki wouldn't have any doubt that it was a betrayal, but he knew of her history and surely if she'd contacted any authorities, she'd be in considerably more trouble than they would be… Unless they offered her a deal. But if that was the case, was it feasible to assume a bargain could have been struck in less than a matter of hours? Loki knew how slow bureaucracy was and thought it unlikely. And, some part of him reminded him, she had seemed, in her own uniquely resenting way, to almost like them by the end. She wasn't a terrible liar but neither was she that great a liar, not unless she'd deceived them both about everything about her since the very beginning.

Tony pulled down another screen from above them, one that displayed the view from the gallery.

The ships were matching, star-shaped and a mix of gold and metallic blue, each one too small to hold more than a couple of passengers or pilots per ship. They were agile and travelled faster than The Dark Aster and the formation they flew in was reminiscent of a swarm of wasps honing in on their next victim.

"Is there a plan?" Loki asked. He had to fight with his pulse to get his voice out of his throat. The existence of the fleet was little in comparison to how they would no doubt cause them to hurry their entrance into the void.

"Sure: fly."

There was no strategy other than to attempt to reach the void before the ships caught up with them then. Surely no one would follow them into the void – surely no one was that desperate.

There was a bright streak of light that flew past the window.

"Was that–"

When Tony grinned, there was something disconcertingly manic about it. "A laser beam? Probably."

"They're firing at us."

"Then you can be grateful I'm used to people firing at me every other day."

They couldn't dodge every single one of the shots fired at them, not with the bulk of their ship. But what their ship lacked in agility it made up for in how much of a solid hulking mass it was, though that did not prevent the occasional clangs when something collided with the ship’s outer shell.

“Alright,” Tony announced, his fingers over a panel of buttons, “I’m done with this.”

Then they accelerated.

The speed was causing Loki’s stomach to surge and they both clung on to the nearest control panel and then the ship was violently shaking and shaking and the entrance to the void was getting closer and closer and–
The world was a blur of technicolour and light, all speed and sound and motion, and then there was nothing.

Nothing was not entirely accurate. Loki had seen true nothingness when he'd peered over the edge of the plane of the dead and this was not nothing. If it was truly nothing they would not have been able to travel through it. If it was truly nothing there wouldn't be complete darkness because there wouldn't be anything for them to perceive as darkness. If it was truly nothing they wouldn't be able to hear the sudden silence that echoed like a scream because there wouldn't be any noise at all, even sound defined by the absence of itself.

They were there. The void.

It almost didn't make sense that the ship continued as normal. It almost didn't make sense that everything on board remained the same.

If he looked out of the windows, the sight waiting for him could have easily been mistaken for a dark night, a night so cloudy that there were no moons or stars or planets to be seen. But this was the void. The void held far worse terrors than anything that came out at night.

Loki didn't know whether he should have been relieved that the fleet had not pursued them into the void. The immediate threat was gone but if experienced pilots baulked at the thought of going where they were then it did not bode well. *It does not bode well,* Loki’s thoughts echoed with derision, *as if anything else about travelling through the void does.*

Thanos was gone. Thanos was gone and he'd been the worst thing – the only thing – the void had subjected him to. What could be worse than him?

Loki hoped he'd never know an answer.

If Thanos was the only thing lurking in the depths of the void and the Chitauri were too lost to be found, as irreverent as a drop of water in an ocean, that meant Loki was only afraid of nothing, though being afraid of nothing and not being afraid of anything were not the same thing. He knew that well, particularly now he was so surrounded by nothingness that he was drowning it.

What if there was something else out there, waiting for them? What if it was metres away from their ship and they couldn't see because it was too dark? What if it had some way of avoiding being detected by the ship? What if by trying to bring Tony home, he'd only brought him a far worse fate?

How ironic it would be if they'd come this far – if they'd travelled across worlds, across the universe, through time and space itself – only to be slain by a different kind of beast altogether.

And to think that Nebula's last words to them would be requesting that he wouldn't allow Tony to die.

Fitting.

“Hey – Loki? Can you check the engine pressure for me?”

The meter that Loki could see. The meter that was illuminated.

*Illuminated.*

“No,” Loki whispered.
“Are you o–”

“Tony…” There must have been some urgency in his voice because upon hearing it, Tony became completely still. “The lights,” Loki uttered. We didn’t turn off the lights.”

***

It was the same instinct that had guided Loki as a child to avoid staring at his reflection for too long at night if the room wasn’t lit. It was the same instinct that made him detest it whenever Thor dared him to sit with his back against a door with a hand through the crack behind him and do nothing but wait in the darkness. Loki could have – would have – chosen any other dare apart from that one, would have gladly humiliated himself in other more numerous or more dangerous ways, but to be left at the mercy of his own imagination had been a cruel thing to endure as a child.

And, he discovered, it was a cruel thing to have to endure as an adult too. Except this time, no one was forcing his hand. He had chosen to stand there, nothing separating himself from the void but the layers of the ship’s shell, and as he stared into the darkness he could only imagine what lay within it.

There was no light ahead, nothing to distinguish one area of darkness from another, nothing to signify how much further there was left to go.

Complete darkness.

He must have fallen so far.

He’d fallen for days and days and maybe even weeks before he’d been found. He’d been able to feel it, the consuming expanse of nothingness and the pressure of it trying to pull the air from his lungs. It would have succeeded if he’d had a weaker form.

To have been alone with nothing but his thoughts and the last sight of the Allfather's disappointment was a crueler punishment than anything the Allfather could have devised himself.

The ship would be faster than his drifting body had been, though how much faster he could not say. The journey would not – or should not, he corrected himself – be able to last longer than a day or two at the very most. If they were lucky, it may not last much longer than a handful of hours.

Maybe it had been idiotic to so much as contemplate being so lucky. The hope that maybe he'd be so fortunate to survive Thanos and save Thor and somehow get to be this close to Tony and live afterwards was a stretch. Of course something had to go wrong and now they’d entered the void with the lights on inside the ship and all because of some fleet he didn’t even know the name of.

In a place as dark as the void, their light would have shone like a beacon. Anything could have seen them.

Maybe this was his punishment. Maybe dying hadn’t been enough. Maybe everything Thanos had put him through hadn’t been enough. Because even after those things, he still hadn't been sorry. He still hadn't regretted what he’d done to Thor, what he’d done to Midgard, what atrocities he’d committed against the Jotuns. Even after he’d died he'd still slain as many Jotuns as he could. He'd even gone another step further and–

Whether it was poison or a curse, he’d still inflicted it. The Jotun in question might have deserved a retaliation for his presumptuousness but perhaps the punishment was... extreme. He didn't even know how mild or severe the effects would have been, he’d just wanted to have the power to inflict something, to strike out with whatever weapon he could, to have the ability to hurt someone who's
very presence reminded him of just how much Thor's absence of a presence hurt.

Maybe this was self-punishment. Because who knew better than Loki what would be the worst kind of punishment for him? To have nothing to think of but the worst memories his mind could conjure, of the memories he'd worked so hard to keep hidden from himself, of one of the few things capable of giving him nightmares anymore. And the rest of the time he wasn't spending with his worst memories, he had his imagination to fill in the possibilities of what might be waiting for them out there. Of what might have noticed them.

Them.

_He_ might have earned this fate but Tony hadn't.

Tony, who'd been prepared to sacrifice everything to ensure that none of Thanos's victims died. Tony, who only needed to use his mind to make the impossible possible. Tony, who would have been stranded from his home and would have eventually accepted it if only it meant those he cared for were safe.

A sacrifice play was noble, admirable even, but it meant little in the grand scheme of things unless the person doing it could be certain it could work. And Tony would have done it if he'd had to, even for people he'd never known existed. Only Tony did better than that. Because they'd fixed it, fixed everything without the sacrifice being necessary. It was not the desire to fix everything alone but his initiative and versatility that made Tony into the person his realm called as a hero.

Loki would never be the same. Loki would never be a hero; he lacked the desire. And surely the desire to change people's lives for the better was an essential requirement, if not at least a prerequisite.

Heroic deeds did not make heroic people.

Loki was not heroic.

Heroic was something he'd been raised to aspire to be. Asgard's king should have been heroic and strong and noble and just and wise. Asgard's king should have been everything Thor was, only wiser.

Though Thor was not as unwise than he used to be. Maybe that was one of the reasons why Loki was no longer needed by his side, whether that was to counsel or to oppose him.

He'd only stopped thinking of Thor as his brother when he'd no longer wanted him to be his brother, and even then, he'd had his inconsistencies. It was easier to reject Thor as a brother of his own volition rather than have Thor denounce him first. It was easier to reject his entire family, to let go of them all, rather than wait for it to happen when he had no choice about how it would happen. It was easier to let go of Asgard and everything it meant by releasing his fingers and allowing himself to fall rather than wait for Asgard to cast him out. It was easier to convince himself he didn't want it, all of it and all of them, rather than wait for the consequences. Waiting for the consequences would be gambling with his heart, and if there was anything he held dear and allowed others to feel what little warmth he had to give with nothing but extreme caution...

"... Not much of a view," Tony finally said.

Loki thought he probably should respond but the tension making his muscles rigid and the alarm pulsing throughout his skull made it difficult. "It's too dark for that."

The only thing he could distinguish inside of the ship were the buttons and mechanisms of the
ship’s navigation that only had the dimmest of glows, so muted they could only be perceived by being squinted at.

There was the sound of one footstep, then another. Tony’s steps were even and measured, nothing too startling or disconcerting.

It wasn’t his proximity that Loki found disconcerting; it was the lack of a response. Surely they would have seen something by now if something had noticed them, wouldn’t they? And if they hadn’t, what was it waiting for?

Tony took another step, one that caused the fabric of his clothing to brush against Loki’s.

“Makes me wish the suit didn’t get torn to pieces.”

“Your suit would do little in the way of protecting you if something was to attack us now.”

“I meant because seeing in the dark wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Oh,” Loki said. Tony’s arm was a pleasant temperature against his own. He would have preferred to be able to see Tony but he’d settle for being able to feel him instead. Tony was something in the darkness he was familiar with, comfortable with, and it was better to have at least one thing he knew for a certainty was there.

Loki only knew Tony gestured to the surrounding blackness because he could feel it.

“Guess not knowing can be worse than knowing. Imaginations can run pretty wild, huh.”

Loki pressed his lips together. "Mm."

There was little tension he could feel in the way that Tony shrugged and how Loki envied him for it. Tony had despised the sight of space almost as much as he had once; it seemed almost unfair that he was perfectly able to cope with the void whereas Loki was… struggling.

"Maybe the only thing worse than seeing the Chitauri through the portal would’ve been seeing nothing."

Seconds passed.

"Or both," Loki found himself saying.

"Both?"

"Both is worse." He paused, his fingers fidgeting with each other. "I received both." There was nothing to see in the void, nothing to distinguish its darkness from the darkness of the interior of the ship, and yet Loki could not tear his eyes from it. "Only being able to imagine what was there and then finding out what one of those things was."

"Thanos."

"Yes. He's gone but... it has caused me to wonder whether there is anything else here that we don't know of."

"Giant space-tortoises."

The absurdity of the suggestion and the absolute seriousness in which Tony had stated it caused Loki to snort.
Tony eased closer, his arm no longer next to his but pressing into it. "I always thought the inside of a wormhole would be less..."

"Less what?"

"Don't get me wrong. The science is awesome. But the view is boring."

"Boring," Loki repeated, his voice flat. How he wished he had the liberty of being bored. "I didn’t think to warn you that most ship manufacturers are rarely quite as fond of entertainment as the ones on Midgard."

"I know. Thought you might want some entertainment."

Loki stiffened. "And you came to offer yourself, is that the way of it?"

"Not like that. Unless you're up for it."

"No." The bluntness of his own answer startled him. He hadn't intended to offend or to drive Tony away but this... This thing between them was still new, still fragile. It would be a shame to spoil it while it was still being forged. "There are other things on my mind at this second."

"How about a different kind of distraction then?"

Tony had still not moved away, and there weren't any traces of resentment or hurt in the way he held himself or spoke. Maybe Loki hadn't ruined anything just yet.

"That would depend on what you have in mind."

"Stellar conversation."

Loki almost laughed. "I might not be the best of conversationalists at the present moment."

"I can make up for you. I won’t even steamroll the entire conversation. Prompts. Those are supposed to be useful, right? What you planning on doing when we get out of here?"

How he hoped that wasn't the sound of Tony being overly optimistic.

"I have no other plans than saying my farewell to Thor." And there was Tony’s previous suggestion of visiting him on Midgard, but that still left him with large stretches of time in which he had little idea what he would do with himself. Aimlessly travel, he supposed.

"How— How you gonna get to Thor? Don't you guys have that all-seeing guard guy? You can make this ship invisible but someone's gonna notice if they walk face-first into it."

"There are... other ways. Other ways of travelling between realms besides the Bifrost or the Tesseract or a ship."

"Like what?"

"The paths between the realms. The paths that descend into the roots of the Yggdrasil and rise out of the ground to meet another world."

"So you'll go shooting down a tree root."

"It would be more accurate to say I would be travelling on a root rather than through it but, yes, essentially."
"So where's the one to Asgard?"

"Every realm is connected to the others, though each entry is different. I don't believe anyone in history knows where all of them are. Even I only know of a few select ones."

"And you're avoiding my question because...?"

Loki sighed. "The one to Asgard... is on Jotunheim."

"Oh."

"Indeed. Though I suppose Jotunheim will be a convenient realm to hide such a large ship. No one would think to look for it – or me – there. Asgard has a tendency to turn a blind eye to Jotunheim."

If they troubled themselves to search for him at all. Maybe it would be more convenient if he was presumed dead, though the thought of doing that to Thor yet another time – and once again, not deliberately – did not hold much appeal.

"Jotunheim," Tony said, something in his voice implying knew something Loki didn't. "Bet they'll be happy to see you. Didn't they banish you last time you were there?"

"That's irrelevant if they don't know I'm there. And they won't be seeing me. Not if I can help it."

"Not even B--"

"No." The interruption was emphatic. Loki decided to make a tangent of his own. "And you?"

"Huh?"

"What will be the first thing you'll do once you return home?"

"Get an earful, probably. And a cheeseburger is tradition now. I miss food. Proper food. Food that isn't space-food and food that's made by people who can actually cook. Restaurant food and diner food and fast food. I'll get to walk on solid ground again – ground, not floor tiles – and I won't be the only member of my species within a million miles and I can watch TV and use a decent workshop and fly my suit and actually call people."

Once again, Loki found himself wishing they did not have to be in darkness.

"You missing flying is strange, given the circumstances."

"Flying in the suit’s different. It just is. When you fly the suit, you are the control; there's no pushing buttons or turning wheels, you just move and make it fly. Beats flying a spaceship, which is something I never thought I'd get to say. Might even invest in a space tech project but I don't have any plans to get higher than the sky for, I don't know, at least a few months. The sky's the limit. Literally."

"And what about after?"

"You want long term plans, is that it? Because I'm not so great at those. I'll do what I've always done: make more things, piss the wrong people off – and the right people too, now I think about it. I'll need to make up some reason why I've been missing for so long. The public will miss me. I was the most interesting thing on the news. And, you know, I was thinking about something else. A new project."

The way Tony introduced the topic had been with borderline tentativeness made Loki wonder for
whose sake it was truly for.

"Oh?"

"Yeah... About getting more recruits."

"I thought you said you were done with teams."

"Not for me. They wouldn't be on my team. I meant what I said: I'm done with teams. Not partnerships, but I'm done with trying to find a team that works for me. With me, I mean. Huh. You know what they say about Freudian slips." Loki didn't but Tony carried on regardless. "But there's nothing stopping the recruits being on someone else's team. Turns out when your A-team breaks up, a B-team's useful. And hey – guess what? We didn't have one. No reserves, no backups. Just the rest of the world depending on one single team being able to keep their shit together. No wonder everything got so fucked up."

It seemed odd that while Loki might be traversing across space more alone than ever with a minimal amount of revisits to the Nine Realms, Tony would be forging new connections, ensuring he'd be less alone than he'd been in a long time. After that realisation, it was difficult to know which words to utter.

If he stared too hard into the darkness, shapes began to move.

"You'll be searching for young impressionable recruits then."

"They don't have to be young. Or impressionable. But yeah. I'll pick 'em and send them Rhodey's way if he's game. Also – turns out I'm not that great at reading people. I'm not bad, I just... I end up getting nasty surprises, that's all. Seems to be a recurring thing. Shame I don't know anyone who's better than me at figuring people out."

For a moment, Loki almost thought of Midgard's spider, until he remembered that she and Tony were no longer in contact.

*Oh.*

Him. Was that–

Yes. It was.

An invitation.

"Selecting budding heroes is hardly my area of expertise. Neither is it something that I would class myself as qualified for or particularly interested in."

"By the sound of it, you saw Thor's flaws even when no one else did."

"He's my brother. I was at his side for centuries. It would be difficult not to notice his flaws after spending so much time together."

"They don't have to be heroes, anyway. Not yet. We just need people who aren't gonna go turn on us who can get the job done and do it right. Students. Trainees."

And Tony sounded so desperately hopeful in that moment that Loki had to tell him.

"I don't know how long I could remain on Midgard."
A hand touched his elbow.

"You could stay as long as you want. You could stay with me or I could buy you your own place. Hell, I bet you'd have no problem getting your own place with all the tricks up your sleeves."

"It's not those logistics that bring me concern."

"What then?"

"I'd have to be permanently disguised, else risk Heimdall seeing me. It becomes… draining."

"Alright." There was a pause. "Screw just visiting though. Not when you could vacation here. You don't– You don't have to leave our section of the universe for that long, right? You could keep coming back. Days, weeks, months – it's an open invite."

Loki hesitated. He hadn't thought the invitation would be quite that extended; he'd assumed it would be little more than a few days at the most and the very deliberate degree of casualness in which Tony had made the offer made him pause and question whether such an arrangement could ever come to fruition.

"... I could."

"You could if you wanted to."

Loki wished it would be that simple. "I want to."

***

Loki didn't know how much time had passed. He had no measure of how far they'd travelled, not when the void was skewing the ship's readings, and how much further they still had to go was even more of a wild guess.

Then there was a noise so faint he might have mistaken it for wind, if only the void was capable of containing currents of wind. The noise grew louder and louder, the sound morphing into four long drawn out notes of a haunting melody, a crescendo like ice down his spine.

Not now, he couldn't help but think. Not while they were trapped in the middle of the void and had no choice but to advance.

The noise resonated in such a way that left him hollow, a symphony of mourning and grief.

Tony heard it too; his eyes darting from one window to the next in search of its origin.

The scanners showed nothing there. No object or ship, no creature or being.

"Er--" Tony uttered.

"We must remain undetectable."

The lights were already off. The only thing left was the sound of the engine, which was little in comparison to the melody.

Once the engine was off and everything was still, there was nothing to do but wait for the sound to disappear.

Only it didn't.
It grew louder and louder, so loud Loki was certain the floor should have been vibrating with the sheer volume of it. And then, with one sudden act, it happened.

When he was so accustomed to darkness, the barest amount of light became very noticeable. It wasn’t much, that flash of light from somewhere far from their ship, but it was enough to immediately draw his attention.

The light flashed again, only it lasted longer and pulsed this time, quaking with colour.

With the second flash, Loki saw more of it. How there was a silhouette of a dark shape left behind, how the shape was so huge it could have been larger than a planet, how there was something gaping in the centre of it that sat like an empty hole of a mouth, how there were tens and tens and tens of lines that splayed outwards from it, appendages that floated like string in water.

No no no no no–

It was one thing to realise they weren’t the only ones in the void and another to directly observe another life form.

The four notes rang again and then there was another shot of colour, phosphorescent and glowing blue and green.

The creature was far away enough that they stood a good chance of it being too large for their ship to be noticeable and given a choice between waiting indefinitely or taking their chances, Loki knew which one they’d both pick.

"Turn the engine on." Loki hadn't realised he'd given the command until Tony obeyed. "You're a better pilot than me."

A second passed and there was the sound of Tony’s hand slamming on the lever.

They were off.

There was no looking back. Only forwards. And they accelerated immediately and quickly and without hesitation. They kept going, gaining more and more speed and gaining more and more distance until the melody the creature was singing started to fade and there were no more flashes of colour through the port windows.

Tony eased the acceleration and Loki hadn’t realised how much noise the ship was making until it grew quieter.

Whatever the creature was, they'd evaded it.

They could only hope the thing hadn't attracted the attention of anything else, anything larger or hungrier or tougher to evade.

***

The next time Loki saw light was under much more pleasant circumstances.

It began as a glimmer that had so little contrast against the darkness that it was impossible to tell by sight alone whether it was his eyes playing tricks on him or whether it was real.

It was the ship's monitor confirmed it was not his imagination or an illusion: it was the end of the void, the barest amount of light beginning to make itself known.
The light barely amounted to more than a speck in a sea of sand but it meant more than that, was more significant than that. It meant the void had an end, that they weren't lost or deceived or doomed to have to roam through the darkness until they ran out of fuel or worse.

It meant there was a way out. An escape.

*We might actually*– Loki cut himself off but then he allowed himself to dare to think of the possibility: *We might actually do it.*

It was a possibility, nothing set in stone.

Loki closed his eyes and allowed himself to breathe before opening them again.

It was easier if he pretended this wasn't the void, that this was no different to lying in a darkened room with his eyes closed.

But the light was the right kind of light, the kind that appeared gradually and organically rather than the kind that came in flashes or pulses.

The radius of light had grown from nothing larger than the head of a pin to the size of a plate. It wasn’t much but it was enough that he could make out Tony’s figure and how there was no hesitation when Tony joined him at the port window, his head pressing against the glass in an attempt to get a closer look.

"Would you look at that?" Tony breathed, his breath causing mist to form on the window. "Light at the end of the tunnel. And I'm not speaking in metaphors here – we're looking right at it."

"It certainly seems so." Loki waited. The light got closer. And closer. Something familiar touched his shoulder: Tony's hand.

The light was large enough to illuminate the navigation station, to finally allow him to see Tony in full again.

"Ready?" Tony asked.

Loki rendered the ship invisible. Tony gripped the control stick. Enough seconds passed to cause Loki to tighten, to make him suspect that something disastrous would happen at the last second, that another creature would–

His thoughts stopped short when all the colours hit them.

They were out of the void.

There were stars and constellations again, planets again – no, not planets – realms. And the colour, such *colour*. They'd only been in the void for a handful of hours and suddenly the entire spectrum of hues across the expanse of the Nine Realms was the most exquisite thing he'd ever seen.

The void. They'd survived the void. There was nothing to stop them now, nothing to prevent Tony from returning to Midgard.

Without appearing to be aware he was doing it, Tony activated the controls to put the ship back into its automatic mode.

A beat passed. Then two.

A sound was starting, a splutter of laughter Tony was letting out, and it was growing louder.
His smile was an exhilarating thing to behold.

Loki would miss that when he'd be... away. *Not permanently though*, he reminded himself. Tony placed a hand on his shoulder and Loki allowed himself to lean into the touch, to have the left side of his body in line against Tony's as his laughter trailed off and they took in the familiar sight of the worlds they knew. Just because Loki might have been undeserving of it didn't mean that he any intentions of giving it up or letting it go to waste. He wasn't that much of an altruist and neither was he quite that much of a masochist.

"You got us home," Tony breathed.

*To his home*, Loki corrected, though there was little bitterness to it and after the thought had passed, he might even have felt something close to satisfaction.

"I did." Loki sounded more astounded than Tony.

"Course you did." Tony nudged him in the side. "I knew you would."

Chapter End Notes

Not sure exactly how many chapters are left because every time I try to estimate, it changes. Somewhere between 4-7 is likely but the ending is definitely not that far off.
"Pretty," Tony said.

With the ship being able to fly in automatic mode again, they'd returned to the gallery and it was the first time in a long while that Loki could say he had genuine enjoyment of the view of space with its landscape of rich colours and stars and planets, and even the gaps between them felt like nothing in comparison to the void.

He'd seen the Nine Realms from many angles – from the edges of Asgard and from a number of other realms too – but he'd never seen it quite like this; not from this angle with it all stretching above him as if it was waiting to greet him and the darkness of the void fading like a shadow. And he certainly hadn't seen experienced sharing a view like it with Tony – not that they hadn't witnessed a view like it before, but they'd never sat and watched something together for the sake of it, and certainly not with how they were sat now: Tony's body seated in between his thighs and the side of Loki's face pressed against his ear.

"I meant the view when I said it was pretty," Tony added. And then, "Not you."

"Thank you for the clarification, Tony. I don't know what dangerous ideas I would have gotten without it."

"Didn't want you getting the wrong idea. We're not stuck in some romance movie. Didn't want you to think we're having" – Tony forced a shudder – "a moment."

Tony's voice resonated slightly differently when he was sat this close and Loki could feel the vibrations of it as he spoke, the way that the muscles in his cheek moved as his jaw did.


"Completely." Tony adjusted his head to look at him out of the corner of his eye. His laughter was soft but the sound was rich and Loki hadn't realised he'd closed his eyes to listen to it more intently until Tony remarked, "Don't fall asleep on me now."

"I am not falling asleep – I am content." Loki hadn't intended to reveal quite that much honesty and the realisation that the words had left his mouth made him stiffen. Maybe it had been too much. Loki wouldn't describe himself as particularly prone to romantic fantasies and neither was Tony but if he'd taken it a step too far–

"Maybe I'll let it slip then," Tony replied, returning his gaze to the window, the corners of lips raised upwards. "I'm content too."

And then when Loki was finally able to relax again, he glanced down at Tony, the word good on the tip of his tongue but he didn't want to disturb the peace, not when Tony was far too active to have many moments of stillness and when he himself attracted far too much disaster to get many opportunities for tranquillity.

He didn't how long they sat like that, sat in silence because they didn't need to say anything, because they were sat so close it was almost as if they could feel each other's thoughts anyway. They were awake but it was restful, their breathing synchronised to the slow even rhythm of sleep as they stared ahead, the view ahead of them as distant and immersive as a landscape in a dream – only it was better because it was tangible and real and it meant they survived the void. And, also like sleep, time became distorted, each moment lasting for both an eternity and a second at once.
Eventually, Tony moved, slowly, tentatively, drawing back and turning to fully face him.

Loki found he did not mind the disturbance, not when Tony was looking at him like with that expression. It was a look that made him realise that they'd only kissed twice before – in actuality it had been far more than that but it had all been on the same two occasions – and it made him swallow because he could see Tony's intentions written visibly on his face and of course Loki had no objections. His own lack of objections came as no surprise, though it still came as some surprise that Tony still wanted to even now they were back in the Nine Realms and there was little else Loki was useful for anymore. Maybe the surprise would never fully pass regardless of how many kisses they shared, but he supposed that wouldn't necessarily be a terrible thing.

Tony didn't need to ask that time, he could see it just as clearly as Loki had seen what he was planning to do.

If there was one thing Loki hadn't been prepared for, it was the idleness of it, how it didn't have the same momentum as it had the first time because it wasn't aiming to progress to anything, it was just aiming to exist and he could lose himself in it all the same.

He'd never made a display that was so open and yet so hidden before, sat right there in front of the entirety of the Nine Realms but with no one to see them, not when they wouldn't be able to see their ship or anything onboard.

Loki was the one to pull his lips from Tony's but he didn't pull away, not fully, their foreheads resting together.

"Kissing underneath the stars is a strange course of action for someone who just raised their concerns about anything being interpreted as overtly romantic."

Tony drew back to grin at him. "Technically, we're kissing in the stars, not under them." There were dots of light reflected in Tony's eyes as he spoke that made them appear as if they were sparkling. "So it doesn't count."

"I'm not quite sure that's how it works."

"I'm totally right. And I'm gonna be using that loophole for all it's worth."

A laugh escaped Loki and he nodded to the view outside. "You may not be able to use that loophole for very much longer now." Not if by some stroke of luck they had come out of the void at a point in time that wouldn't cause any further paradox-related complications.

"We better make the most of it then."

***

What Loki couldn't quite understand was why Tony was causing such a fuss about his planet's moon. Tony had visited plenty of both planets and realms before and Midgard's moon was among the least impressive of them.

"But it's the moon, Loki," Tony informed him when Loki had voiced as much. "And you just see it as a parking lot for our ship."

"Is there anywhere else you can discreetly store such a large vessel?"

Tony sighed. "I'm not arguing against that – I'm saying you're missing the point."
"And which point is that?"

"That it's the moon."

"Yes," Loki agreed, "it is. I'm not disputing that either."

"The moon, Loki, the moon."

"Plenty of planets have a moon. I fail to see what makes yours so unique."

"I don't know, maybe because I've been able to see it hovering up there every night for pretty much my entire life without ever thinking I'd end up actually going there. Least of all to park a spaceship that I sort of ended up falling into owning half of."

"You won't be able to explore your moon."

"I know. No suit. Doesn't mean I can't roam around in a pod though."

***

After moving their belongings as well as the rats to The Planet Express – somebody had insisted – they drifted to a stop somewhere in Midgard's atmosphere, Tony muttering something about how at least their ship would be able to detect incoming planes, even if those planes wouldn't be able to do the same in return.

Loki struggled to believe he'd almost forgotten about that revelation; it had paled as insignificant in comparison to the memory of beating Thanos when he'd created an illusion of the Sceptre that hadn't disappeared when Thanos touched it, all without having the Tesseract within his possession.

It was difficult to know what to make of it. Being able to render something invisible was nothing new but for it to remain undetectable and intact when touched was something that had only come about with the extra power the Tesseract had lent him. At least at the time he'd assumed it was borrowed, but the fact that those abilities remained – intact illusions, invisible objects that weren't detectable by the eyes of machines – suggested that perhaps it wasn't a loan but a gift. A gift he was in equal parts grateful for and taken by surprise with. A most useful tool within his arsenal that was considerably shorter without the gems or the technological counterparts Tony had created.

The air around them was grey as they nestled in the clouds, a gradient of crisp blue fading into blackness stretching above them.

"Alright. Let's turn this baby on." Tony brought out a phone with a Stark logo on the back of it.

"What? Turns out past-me planned ahead. Wait. Not past-me. Me-me but in the past." There was a pause. "I can't believe I just said that."

"There is very little that comes out of your mouth that could surprise me anymore." Loki tried, with honest effort he tried, to maintain the most disdainful look he could but his lip twitched and gave him away.

"Lights are on. Come on, come on... Oooh. Homescreen. Loading services..." Tony drummed his fingertips against the surface of the control panel. "C'mon, c'mon, you're probably the closest to a satellite you're ever gonna get," he told the phone. "And you're Stark tech." He gave it a small shake. "You're supposed to be better than this. Faster than this. Aha. Gotcha. Alright. Just let me--" Tony made a flicking gesture and began tapping away at the holographic buttons that appeared where he had aimed at. Then he went still. "2021," Tony uttered, his mouth slack. "We're three years ahead than we're supposed to be."
"Oh," Loki said. "Is that all?"

"Is that all?" Tony repeated. "I've been gone three years."

"It was the void that spat us out, Tony. It could have spat us back out before 2018, in which case there'd be nothing you could do but wait, or it could have just as easily spat us out years later, in which case--"

"Yeah. I get it. I can go home and it could be worse. But three years... Just give me a moment to get my head around it." He looked up sharply. "And my tower? What's happened to my tower? What if I got presumed dead? All my stuff could be gone – my house, my cars, my tech, my suits. Oh, fuck no. Not the suits. Or if DUM–E ended up being donated I swear I'll--"

"You'll what, Tony?"

"Shit. I'll actually miss the bot. Huh. Didn't see that coming." He ran a hand through his hair. "I've gotta... I've gotta tell Pepper and Rhodey I'm back. I just-- Three years. This isn't gonna be pretty. They're gonna be so pissed." He stilled. "That, or they'll have finally moved on without me."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"You really think that, huh?"

"You have people who have already demonstrated unwavering loyalty towards you." And how much of an affirming thing that must have been, even if a proportion of the people Tony had chosen to associate himself with happened to choose to do otherwise. "Don't do them a disservice by underestimating them."

And maybe something must have been present in Loki’s voice because Tony then murmured, "You could too, you know."

Loki hoped he didn’t mean what he suspected. "I could what?"

"You could have it." Loyalty. Unwavering earned loyalty. "If you tried."

"Perhaps if I wanted that it would be a better idea to travel somewhere where people's memories are far shorter."

"Try being a celebrity and you'll learn how short people's memories are here."

"I don't..." Loki trailed off. "I don't think I'll ever receive it. Even when the line of succession fell to me, I still never had loyalty."

"No one can say you've not earned it here. Not after the ruin this city would be in if you never bothered to come back."

"They don't know that." Not to mention that Loki himself had been the reason for the city being in ruins before Thanos took his turn.

"And you want it to stay that way?"

"I don't want acceptance somewhere solely because the person who vouches for me happens to be well-liked amongst the population."

Tony nodded but did not appear eager to do so, something approaching sadness sitting at the corners of his mouth. "When you go on your adventures I bet you could meet people. All kinds of
people. People you hate, people who irritate the hell out of you. Statistically, if you meet so many people, you're bound to meet at least some you actually like."

Loko unleashed a huff of breath. "I did."

Some of the sadness disappeared as Tony winked. "Course you did." He tapped one of the controller sticks and their descent began to slow. "But you could have more. Wait a second – I'm not saying you should leave me for some smarter talking alien. I'm just saying you could, I don't know, slowly start acquiring a bunch of people you want to be around who like you for you."

"I have been..." Loki paused to think. "...out of sorts. The past few years have not held a great many opportunities for forging friendships."

"And look at you now – you got me, you got pretty far with Nebula and she's about as prickly as you are. Thor--"

"Thor is an inconsistency."

"He tries."

"For the most part. Often in the wrong ways."

"Most of his muscle is in his biceps, not his brain. But at least he genuinely gives a shit."

"He did not question why I led the attack on Midgard once. Not until after it was too late."

"Did you ever ask why he didn't?"

Loki shot him a look. "There was little need. I am able to make my own deductions adequately enough."

"Sure. In plenty of circumstances. But in others you can be painfully blind. Not because you're dumb – because you're not – you're one of the smartest people I've ever met. But it took me sitting in front of you and telling you word for word that I wanted to kiss you for you to get the hint. Maybe you've got a blind spot when it comes to people who give a shit. Actually, I'm telling you that you do. And it doesn't help when you let Thor think the worst--"

"I care little for what Thor thinks of me," Loki cut in and Tony raised an eyebrow. "Fine," Loki amended, "I care a little when it leads to false conclusions. I can accept the resentment I have earned but I am not happy to accept resentment for actions I did not commit."

Tony shrugged. "Sounds fair."

***

They kept their landing discreet this time, no sudden appearances of portals or visible ships or pods in the sky.

Tony couldn't keep his hands still, rotating between drumming his fingers or idly fiddling with controls and mechanisms. Even when he was standing, his feet would be tapping against the floor or pacing the short length of the pod.

"What the--" Tony got out as he got a glimpse through the glass of the view of New York. "Why's it look like someone Jackson Pollocked all over the sidewalk? Don't get me wrong – I'm glad the tower's still standing. But what the hell is that?"
Loki took his own look. "I believe," he replied, "those are flowers."

"Flowers," Tony repeated. "Did someone get hit by a cab or something? Actually, by the look of it, it'd have to be a whole line of people. Dominoes gone badly?"

"You've been gone for three years, Tony." The reminder was not spoken without gentleness.

Tony swallowed, his hands no longer moving. "That's gonna take some getting used to." He pulled the final lever and the bottom of the pod came to rest on the roof of the tower.

Loki’s eyes lingered on Tony’s hand and he grimaced. Maybe this would be when they’d part ways, though if he was fortunate, it would not be for very long that he’d be venturing off on his own.

There was no hesitation when Tony opened the door, but just before he disappeared through it, Tony called behind him, “Coming?”

***

As per Tony's recommendation, Loki stayed well clear while he reacquainted himself with his friends.

Stark Tower had many more luxuries to offer than either of their ships had – heated flooring and food that could be cooked and brought to them, mattresses that gave way underneath weight rather than lying like a stone, daylight that flooded in through all the large windows – and the only thing out of place was him.

Wearing a false skin was not something Loki enjoyed for long periods of time. It was a useful skill to have, but rarely was it pleasant. The last time he'd endured it was when he was posing as Odin, but that felt like so long ago now.

The disguise Loki had fashioned himself was not all that different from his true form. His hair was shorter though it didn't go past his shoulders and he was still pale and clean-shaven. The nose he had chosen for himself was more pointed than his own and there was more softness in the lines of his face and jaw.

Loki assumed the lack of audible voices meant Rhodey and Pepper had left and made his way from the same quarters he'd previously been staying in to the shared living space only to discover there were multiple pairs of in the room that were not completely dry.

"Long story short," Tony was saying, "I'm not dead. Very not dead."

Pepper's laugh was slightly wet. "I've missed you." One of her hands lingered around Tony's wrist as if she was still trying to convince herself that he was solid and the eyes of James Rhodes did not leave Tony's face, not even when Loki entered the room.

Upon hearing the noise, Pepper withdrew her grip to wipe at her eyes despite the tears no longer flowing. "Sorry," she addressed Loki, shaking her head. "I'm--" The tissue went back in its packet and she took in his new face. She squinted at him. "You don't work here."

A look was exchanged between Tony and Loki. In amongst the chaos of everything else, they hadn't accounted for what their story would be and who Loki wanted to share the secret of his existence with.

"I'm a friend," Loki said, after a small amount of hesitation.
"A friend of Tony's?"

"Yup," Tony confirmed.

"Wait." It was Rhodes who spoke, his eyes on Loki. "Before you left, you were with..."

It was only when Loki began to smirk that he saw understanding dawn in both of their eyes.

"He's the one who got me home," Tony finally clarified.

There was a moment in which Tony's friends did not appear to be capable of saying anything.

"He did?" Colonel Rhodes still appeared to be processing it. He turned to Loki. "Tony's back because of you?"

Tony had also left because of him, but Loki wasn't going to point that out, not when he wasn't being accused of doing anything untoward. "I was the one who suggested... an alternative route when we became stranded."

"I asked you to look out for him," Pepper said, her eyes on him. "Looks like you did more than that."

The pause was laden with awkwardness; Loki was never certain what to do with words of thanks. Except, he supposed, the situation hadn't become quite so drastic just yet.

"I'm well aware."

There was nothing but utter incomprehension on Rhodes's face but then he broke into a startled laugh. "How you two didn't end up killing each other is something I can't understand." Loki supposed they were bound to head towards one extreme or the other and judging from the look Tony gave him, his thoughts were along similar lines, only more suggestive. Of course they would be. "But thanks." And there it was, the unwanted gratitude. "I mean it," Rhodes continued, laying a hand on Tony's shoulder. "I missed the guy responsible for 99% of my stress." He patted him twice, fingers light. "It's not been the same without you, Tone."

The softness in Tony's lips was different from the softness in his smile when it was directed at Loki, but there was great affection in it all the same. "The world must've got a whole lot more boring without me in it."

"Boring," Pepper repeated. "Boring doesn't cover it. I've never hated being able to get on with my job so much in my life. Then I started hating how efficient everything was so much it started distracting me more than you would if you'd been here. See? I like distractions." And then, quieter, she added, "And I'm glad you're back. You wouldn't believe how much."

"Yeah." Rhodes scratched the back of his head. "For a– For a while I thought we'd never see you again. And then you just turn up out the blue and–"

"Raise your blood pressure high enough to give you a heart attack?"

"Yeah." Half a smile appeared on his face. "In the best way possible."

***

When Tony returned with the paper packages of food, he was closer to bounding than walking.

The hardness of the furniture on the Dark Aster had made Loki appreciate the comfort of
Midgard's settees, as terribly domestic as they were.

Tony lacked anything remotely resembling grace when he threw himself at one end and allowed himself to be partially swallowed by the cushions as Rhodes and Pepper pulled seats up to the coffee table to sit on the opposite side.

"Oh my god," Tony said after pulling something out of one of the bags and taking a mouthful. "This— This cheeseburger is the best thing I’ve ever tasted. It's greasy and chewy and way too salty and... I'm gonna quit while I'm ahead. Don't wanna get too emotional. If there was ever food worth crying over, it's this cheeseburger. I'd freeze it to preserve it except this thing is art for the tastebuds and sticking it in a freezer would be like setting fire to the Mona Lisa.” He took another bite, keeping it in his mouth to savour it before chewing. "Friday – hunt down the artist who made this and give 'em a month worth of wages in tips."

"Your cards need reactivating, boss."

"Oh. Guess that happens after three years, huh." He frowned. "Actually – why the hell is all my furniture still here? It's been three years. That's more than enough to—"

"Tony." Pepper's voice cut through his despite the exhaustion it held.

"What? I'm thinking of company efficiency here – no point locking away whole floors when there's no one using them."

"It was nothing Stark Industries couldn't afford."

That got Tony's interest. "So it was you."

Rhodes lifted his jaw. "Not just Pepper."

Tony's eyes moved between them. "You both conspired against me?"

"Conspired for you," Pepper corrected.

"No one thought you'd be coming back. Not after three years. Everyone thought you'd be back after a few months but then a few months passed and no one heard anything. Then a year passed and you still hadn't shown up. They were gonna declare you officially dead."

Tony placed the rest of the paper bags of food on the table. "Who's they?"

"The government. And the general consensus of the population. But you wouldn't believe all the conspiracy nuts out there."

"Let me guess," Tony said. "Abducted by aliens. Except this time, it's not so far off the truth."

"The other popular one is that you transferred your brain into an AI and that's why no one's been able to find you."

"That'd be batshit crazy. Even for me."

Since Loki had no desire for the company Tony kept to drive him away or into silence, he decided to make his voice heard. "I can see the advantage of being able to silence you from time to time."

"Thanks, asshole. I'd be a better AI than you anyway."

One of Loki's eyebrows raised of its own accord. "Is that something to be proud of?"
Tony's grin was a smug thing. "I'd be more efficient."

"Oh, would you?"

"Yup. And I'd make better playlists, faster comebacks, and I'd come with a fuck-ton of pop-culture references."

"You would be the most fundamentally irritating AI."

Tony held a hand to his heart. "Baby don't hurt me."

"If you are trying to disprove my point, you are failing. Whoever you’d serve would spend more time arguing with you than working with you."

"Yeah, but can you imagine you as an AI? You'd be this sarcastic snotty British—"

"As I recall," Loki interrupted, "you weren't so impartial to those."

"Alright, fine. If JARVIS was here, you'd give him a run for his money in the snark department, that's for sure."

"So now we've got the important stuff out the way," Rhodes interjected. "How've you been, Tony? Sounds like you had one hell of a three years."

"It was just a few months for me, actually." Tony took a sip of his drink. "Oh. By the way. We saved the universe. Thought it might be worth mentioning at some point."

Rhodes stared. "You did what?"

"Remember the thing where we thought everyone died but it turned out they hadn't?"

Rhodes frowned. "Yeah?"

"Turns out they didn't die because we'd already saved them."

"You want some?"

"What? No."

Tony leapt up from his seat. "Okay so here's the clever part: we saw it happen because we made ourselves see it happen."

"Er—"

"Wait." Tony paused, delighting in the tension it caused as they waited for more. "Did I tell you we made the time machine?"

"Er... No."

"Well, we did."

A choking sound was emitted from Pepper.

Rhodey looked at him flatly. "Tony – only you could just drop something like that. Oh. By the way. We made a time machine. You know, that thing of sci-fi lore no one's ever been able to make before. Yeah – that."
The grin it prized from Tony was more than pride and more than relief: it was Tony basking in the delight of having his friends teasing him again.

“Tony,” Pepper got out, “you’ve really outdone yourself this time. How on Earth–”

Tony rubbed his hands together. "Okay – recap time.”

While he was giving a much more condensed version of the events, Loki reached to help himself to some of the food on the table. The things they called fries were far too salty for his liking but after the atrocities with their attempts at cooking with alien ingredients, he’d found himself becoming much more lenient.

"Tony,” Rhodes uttered while Tony reached for more food, “your story is batshit insane. I get the feeling I'm never gonna hear it in chronological order – it's way too convoluted for that.”

"You don't say." Tony wiped the grease from the food off his fingers. "And I know how crazy it sounds but I promise it happened and I'm not insane and I wasn't sleeping or hallucinating or–"

"I know. I believe you.”

“I’ve dealt with you after you’ve hallucinated,” Pepper said with a wry smile. “This isn’t the kind of thing your brain makes up. So I believe you too, Tony. Of course I do.”

"You do?"

It was Rhodes who spoke next. "I know what your brain's like. Your brain doesn't make stuff up based on nothing, it fixes stuff based on what needs fixing.”

"Mechanic," Tony muttered without thinking. “Wait. I haven’t told you the best part yet. After we paradoxed Thanos out of existence we sorta ended up stuck on the opposite side of the universe. Not just the galaxy – the universe.”

Rhodey's mouth had fallen open and he leant forward. "How did you–"

Tony grinned. "Wormholes.”

Rhodey shook his head. "You can't– You've got to be kidding me.”

"Me? If I brag about cool sci-fi things, it's because I'm doing them, not because I–"

"Were you out of your mind?” Pepper interrupted.

"Hey. Don't insult my brain. It did its fair share of saving the universe.” And then as an afterthought he added, "And our asses.” He grabbed another fistful of fries. "And just so you know, the wormhole thing wasn't even my idea.”

Rhodey's eyes travelled over to Loki. "Are you–” He stopped himself short. "I was going to ask if you're even more out of your mind than he is but I think I know the answer.”

Loki hadn't even intended for his returning smile to be quite so vicious. "You must be glad for it.”

If he found Loki's sudden directness startling, he showed no signs of it. "You know what? If Tony's back then yeah, I am.”

Tony opened his mouth to say something but when Loki caught his eye, it fell shut again. Loki would rather his promise to return Tony to his home be kept between as few people as possible;
they already knew he'd gotten Tony back, but they didn't need to know about how he'd vowed he would to Tony or about how much of a toll travelling through the void had been.

"I forgot to mention the android we sorta friended," Tony announced. "And the reptile-people we teleported to another planet and left outside a bar. And the rats. Speaking of – Friday, I need you to order us a plaque. A ratty plaque for Jingles."

"Will do, boss," Friday intoned through the walls.

"Jingles?" Rhodes repeated.

"Yeah, Jingles. If it wasn't for Jingles we probably wouldn't have been able to save the universe at all. She probably deserves something better than a plaque but I'm out of ideas."

"I think there's a lot we still need to catch up on," Rhodes said.

"You think? So what about you? What's new with you guys?"

***

"Loki?" Pepper asked. Her voice was tentative and she made sure to close the kitchen door behind her gently, barely making a sound.

"You're seeking me out?"

"Yeah." She bit her lip. "I am."

This could only be about Tony; she had no reason to want to speak to him alone otherwise.

Loki put down his drink. "If I once again assert that I have no intention of letting Tony die, will that satisfy you?"

She gave him an odd look before it morphed into a polite smile. "I'm not here about that." Maybe Loki was wrong about that politeness as he noticed, far too late, the traces of amusement in her eyes.

Loki cocked his head. "What then?"

"I came to wish you luck."

Loki blinked. "Luck?"

"With Tony."

Loki blinked again. "What do you--"

“Oh, come on. I saw you. Both of you. I know the difference between Tony flirting and Tony flirting. I could tell you were friends – sort of, anyway – before you left. And now you're... closer."

"Astute of you." And he meant it, though he wasn't particularly enthusiastic about it. There must have been reasons why Tony had grown so attached to her and he supposed he shouldn't have been so taken aback when her ability to take initiative and read people went above the norm.

"I don't know you but I know Tony and he doesn't – especially now – trust people without good reason. I don't know what you did but whatever it was worked."
Saved the universe, Loki thought. *Or flew through the void. Maybe a combination of the two.*

She was waiting for an answer.

"I don't understand what point you're trying to make."

Faint exasperation appeared on her features. "I'm trying to tell you if Tony approves then so do I."

"I never sought your approval."

She frowned. "I wasn't done. Anyone around Tony tends to get pulled into his orbit. I love Tony but I didn't love his orbit. I couldn't do that forever. It was... exhausting. Feeling like I was being dragged around even when I wasn't moving, never knowing what was going to happen, never knowing if one day he'd fly off and never come back home. But you – I think you've got an orbit of your own. You and Tony can run in circles around each other. Maybe you're someone he stands a chance of reaching an equilibrium with."

It was Loki's turn to frown, though his was due to confusion rather than annoyance. "... Oh?"

"That's all I wanted to say." She took a few steps and placed a hand on the doorknob. "Oh – and in case you're wondering, your secret's safe with me."

"Wait," Loki called after her. "Which one?"

She turned to look at him over her shoulder with a small grin. "Both."

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Whatever Pepper was saying in private to Tony, Loki could not give much insight into. He assumed the speech would differ to the one he’d received but was not happy that its supposed necessity left him alone in the living space with no one but one other person in the room.

The silence was thick.

Loki helped himself to another fry despite having no intentions of eating it and could feel the stare from Rhodes as he watched him do it.

"What's the deal with you and Tony?" Rhodes finally asked.

Loki's stare was flat. "What do you mean?"

"You seem..." He did not appear as certain as Pepper had when she'd taken it upon herself to speak to him. "Close."

Perhaps he had more in common with Pepper than Loki initially thought.

"We discovered that we get along."

"Yeah, I get that. But that's more than getting along. You're actually" – Loki braced himself for the conclusion to be made but it didn't come – "friends."

"Contrary to popular belief, I am capable of forming those from time to time." Loki neglected to mention the rarity of the occurrence.

Rhodes sat up straighter. "Tony trusts you?"
"You would have to ask him about that if you want a source you can believe."

"Maybe I will. But I know he's not just trying to figure you out – he likes you. He thinks you're funny."

"There were times," Loki replied, "when I don't feel the urge to fling Tony off our ship." Umpteen times more often than not, as it happened, but he didn’t need to disclose that information.

The man almost laughed at that, and for the first time since he'd been in his presence, there wasn't that wound up tension in his posture, as if he was prepared to have to spring to action. "I'll tell you this about Tony – you'll never be bored when he's around. Nothing stays the same with him."

It wasn't a branch of friendship that was being offered but it was at the very least a truce. Maybe even more than that. Maybe an attempt at a civil conversation. Rhodes's previous wariness had not entirely faded, but he'd never attempted to talk to him and just him alone, and considering how it had been Rhodes’s fault that BARF had been inflicted on him, Loki had never been particularly interested in conversing with him either.

"Believe me, I would love to once again be in a position where boredom is a large concern." Most of the barbs from Loki’s previous tone were no longer present.

For the second time, it almost brought out a laugh.

"Another chaos magnet? No wonder you and Tony had such a hard time."

"Chaos god," Loki corrected, but he was smiling ever so slightly as he did it.

Rhodes rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever. My bad. Chaos god, then. Because god knows we need anyone else with grandiose illusions about themselves around here."

"I don't require illusions to be grandiose."

That earned a chuckle. "Yeah," Rhodes said. "Maybe I'm starting to see why you and Tony get on."

That was... quick. Then again, Loki supposed that from Rhodes's perspective, three years had passed since their last meeting and more than that, Loki had brought Tony back to them, even if it was partially – or maybe even mostly – his fault that Tony had been taken away in the first place.

There was something disconcertingly steady about James Rhodes as he remained seated there, staring into the face of a god who could kill him without running short of breath. Three years truly must have been a long time to a Midgardian; the last Loki could recall, it had been a fun sport to attempt to unnerve him.

"How long you stopping?" Rhodes asked. He'd poised himself very carefully, picking out a selection of fries to make it appear as if he wasn't particularly invested in the answer.

"I don't know yet."

Rhodes nodded.

If this was a truce, it was an odd one. Rhodes showed no outward signs of disappointment or disapproval and Loki wondered how easily that might change.

"How long do you think it would take for me to overstay my welcome?"
There was a shrug. "You're Tony's guest, not mine. However long he wants you around, I guess."

Loki frowned. "And you mean that?"

Rhodes stared. "If it wasn't for you, millions of us could be dead. So, no, I'm not gonna attempt to drive you out of my best friend's house."

"I didn't do it for any of you and I don't recall you being quite so lenient when we first met."

"You get why I had to check. You get why BARF was necessary. I needed to know you weren't messing with Tony's head. Turns out you didn't so we're cool. Sort of. But if you ever..."

"Betray him then you'll kill me," Loki finished. "Or you'll try, anyway. I might receive a moderate bruise."

"Actually," Rhodes corrected, "I was gonna tell you if you need a safe place I can..." He laid his hands flat on the table and started again. "I'm military. I know how they find people, okay? I can help, so long as you're not hurting anyone."

"It's not your military that concerns me."

"Who's then?"

It seemed that Pepper was most definitely not the only astute friend of Tony’s and Loki hesitated before answering. "They are a force that won't be fooled by any of your technology or hiding places." And what stunned him, what truly shocked him, was how the man in front of him actually appeared to be sincerely disheartened to learn he was of no help. And then, with a gesture to the illusion he wore, Loki clarified, "I have my own means of remaining hidden."

***

"You know when I said I'd make a better AI than you?" Tony began. It was later – much later – by the time Tony’s Midgardian friends had seen fit to leave them alone, long into the early hours of the morning. Loki was painfully aware of how exhausted he should have been but his mind was more alert than ever as he stood against one wall, observing Tony finish his attempt to mix drinks together. "There's one exception."

"Go on."

"You'd be a way better sex bot than me."

"Is that supposed to be flattering?"

"No. Yes. Maybe? I dunno. Think of the millions they could make out of your voice. There's a massive gap in the market for porn targeted for women – you'd be a hit. And you wouldn't even need to do anything, you'd just say a few lines and follow the script and you'd get them all hot and bothered. Plus the men if they heard, I bet."

"I don't know what you expect me to say in response to that."

Tony shrugged. "Neither do I. Figured you'd surprise me. It's not fair. You could bring a guy – fine, me, I'll admit it – to my knees with nothing but your voice but if I tried the other way round..."

"It's your accent," Loki replied, holding in a laugh. "It's rather grating."
"Hey." Tony pointed a finger at him. "Uncalled for."

"I assume that is one of the main reasons why you wouldn't make a good AI. That, and you'd teach yourself an alarming amount within a short period of time. Given tools, I’d imagine you'd have little difficulty building yourself a new body without your owner's knowledge."

"Sounds familiar."

"You'd be more likely to blackmail your owner into releasing you than keeping their information safe."

Tony pretended to ponder that for a moment. "Okay, fair."

"And not to mention your complete inability to resist running inappropriate commentary."

"If there's a mute function, I might as well see what it takes to make them use it."

"I'm sure you'd find a way of rendering it useless before long." Loki shook his head. "There is very little that can keep you quiet for long."

“Oh yeah?” Tony walked closer. "Tell me more about that. More about what can keep me quiet." The way in which Tony walked could not accurately be described as a saunter, but neither was it that far off being one.

"Mathematics, science, inventing... Also me, on occasion."

There was that familiar dark glint in Tony’s eyes, the one that was frequently paired with half a smirk and perhaps even—

Yes. There it was. The barest glimpse of his tongue as he ran it across his teeth.

"How'd you like to keep me quiet?"

Loki had definitely not misinterpreted that look.

It had been a long day and they’d survived the void – the void – and perhaps that made him bolder than he otherwise would have been. "I," Loki said, "want you to be so thoroughly occupied with pressing me into this wall that you forget about speaking."

Tony's mortal form wasn't stronger than his but he could exert enough pressure that it still gave the feeling of being held in place, Loki’s back firmly against the wall behind him and Tony's chest lining with his.

And they were there, so close and yet so far from the pressure Loki wanted. He took a moment to savour it: the sheer amount of heat radiating from Tony’s eyes, the scent of him, the way he remained poised there, testing just to see what Loki would do.

Once, Loki might have waited. Once, he might have remained there out of stubbornness or as a protest against being experimented upon, or because when it came to admitting what he wanted, he didn’t have the best record.

How was it that they’d only lain together one time?

Loki placed his hands on Tony’s hips and pulled him closer, trying to encourage him to stand higher so their faces were level.
"Hey." Tony tapped one of his arms. "I'm not that tall. You're gonna have to–" 

Not level then, Loki decided.

Tony might have had the advantage in the position but it was Loki who brought their mouths together, Loki who drew Tony in tighter, Loki who encouraged Tony to stand not just next to him but also into him as close as was humanly possible.

Perhaps there was an advantage to Tony not being Asgardian; if he was, they'd have to factor in all the accidental breakage of furniture and such like, whereas this way Loki could tune it all out to the solidarity of the flesh and bones trying to meld with his.

And then Tony’s attention was fully on him and his fingers were at his lacing and then his hands were inside his trousers and his warmth was the best kind of warmth, the kind of warmth that made him arch back against the wall when he began moving his grip around him.

"Tony–" Loki managed.

"Am I gonna have to try harder if we’re both playing this keeping each other quiet game?"

"Tony – no."

Tony released him, confusion written over his face. "I thought you were enjoying it."

"I was," Loki said from behind gritted teeth. "That was the problem."

Tony withdrew his hand. "Uh – that’s a new one."

"My illusions," Loki got out. "Do you recall how easily they vanish when I am taken by surprise?" He didn't wait for an answer – Tony had witnessed it first hand, after all, all that time ago when it had led to the Jotuns capturing them. "The same applies to this. I need presence of mind to be able to maintain it."

There was no disappointment, only discernment. "How much presence of mind?"

Loki tilted his head to one side. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm taking it your illusion is gonna disappear when you're cumming."

"Crass, Tony."

"Prude." One of Tony's fingers poked him in the chest. "So am I right? About the cumming part, not the prude part. Because I know I'm right about that bit."

Loki sighed. "Yes."

"Wait – you've tested that?"

It was with great reluctance that Loki revealed, "It was a long time ago and my partner had a very specific role they wanted me to play."

"Ah, gotcha. Bet you got the best makeup and costume team, right?"

The resulting roll of the eyes was not without affection. "You could say they're magical."

"Is it like this for all Asgardians? Or do you just get used to the thought that your watcher guy
could be checking up on you while you're fucking? He sounds like Santa but pervier."

"We prefer not to think about it. Though Heimdall appears to have little interest in such activities. And I'm sure many would argue that I have forfeited my right to privacy."

Tony shrugged. "How's his eyesight work, anyway? I know he can see far but can he look through objects?"

"He can see inside of buildings, yes."

"So like X-ray vision then."

"From what I have gleaned, it is more of a case of him being able to place himself inside of his mind anywhere within the Nine Realms and it is as if he is looking out from that perspective."

"So he can't see through clothes."

"No."

Tony grinned. "Problem solved then. Just wear a bag over your head and--"

"A bag, Tony? A bag?"

"Alright, doesn't have to be a bag. It can be whatever you want, I'm not that picky."

"While you may not be, I am. And are you asking whether it would more humiliating to wear a bag or any other article of clothing over my face?"

"I won't laugh at you, honest."

Loki gave him a look.

"Okay, fine, I'll try not to laugh at you. I have limits. If you wear a lampshade on your head it's gonna be hard to keep the giggles in."

"Most other people would refuse on principle if their partner decided to don a lampshade."

"I'd still fuck you if you wore a lampshade."

"I..." Loki trailed off. "Should I be flattered or concerned?"

"Told you I'm not that picky."

"Limits exist for a reason."

"Fine, fine, no lampshade. Uh..." Tony trailed off as he glanced around the rest of the room. He appeared to be considering the curtains for a moment, though Loki could not say why for certain, and then his eyes moved to the bed and his grin widened. "Got it."

"If you suggest that I wrap my face in a blanket--"

"Nope. Got a better idea."

Loki waited. Then waited some more. "And are you going to share that idea with me?"

Tony leant closer, the tip of his nose grazing over the skin of Loki's cheek as he made his way towards his ear. "I suggest you make good use of my pillows." For all Loki's previous insincere
comments about Tony's accent being grating, his voice at such proximity was... something. "I want you. On my bed. Facedown."

The vibrations from Tony's voice were reverberating strangely in his bones in a way that made it difficult to think. "That works," Loki managed.

Tony's eyes were dark this close up, so very dark. Loki could see every eyelash, every line in his skin, every hair and blemish and trace of stubble. His mouth was open by a few millimetres and there was a wet line across his lips from where his tongue had been and the look Tony gave him was impossible to look away from.

It happened too quickly for him to be able to tell who started kissing who again first, he only knew that it was the consuming kind of kiss that left him desperately pulling at Tony to press into him firmer and firmer, until he became a fixture in the wall if he had to be.

Then Tony's hand was back inside of his trousers and the way that it made him arch caused his head to thunked against the wall and it would have been humiliating if it was anybody else he was with.

What wonderful friction it was.

Loki tried to pull Tony even closer but Tony was already standing on the tips of his toes to kiss him properly and it was then that there was suddenly a gap between them and the contrast was disproportionately cold in comparison to what it should have been.

"Ready?" Tony asked.

***

Loki learned many things. He learned that Tony was fully capable of excruciating patience, that he knew how to use slowness to make it maddening, to make Loki's fingers clench the mattress so hard he might have torn its edges, that he – on this occasion, at least – waited until Loki was lying there, damp with sweat and panting, and on the brink of having to beg. Loki believed the word 'please' was involved somewhere, though in no way politely.

The way he'd buried his face in the pillow only made his breathing louder and the only sound louder than that was the sound their skin made when it met, and that sound alone worse to bear than the slowness, than the indignity of it, than the heat so intense he must have been dripping with it.

The pillow ensured he couldn't see anything but the noise that filled in the picture somehow had more of an effect on him than the actual feeling of Tony inside him, or perhaps it was only because it was combined with it that it amplified it so much.

And now this time, the second time they'd done something like this together, Tony was far less afraid to touch him, to use enough pressure and force for it to grind in ways that caused Loki to seek friction wherever he could, against Tony, against the mattress beneath him, it just had to be against something.

Instinct made Loki want to act, for the unvoiced thrumming vibrations in his throat to make noises for more, for it to get faster and faster and finally end or never end at all and just when he was on the brink of writhing, it stopped.

"You sure you don't want that lampshade?" Tony asked.
Loki lifted his head only to slam it back down on the pillow in exasperation, right into–

What the–

Why was it so wet?

Oh. He'd been biting it, that was why. There was a dark patch where his mouth had been.

"You," Loki uttered once he'd regained some of his breath, "are maddening. You just can't resist, can you?"

Tony's laughter shook him. "I wish I could see the look on your face."

"It's displeasure. Extreme displeasure. You have both seen and have been the cause of it plenty of times before."

"Not at this level."

Loki turned his head far enough to direct a scowl at him. "No. I believe you've managed to outdo yourself."

And then Tony started laughing – unabridged laughter, laughter that rang and cackled and filled his eyes with tears and it was difficult to remain irritated with him for long against something that infectious.

***

"It's still not sunk in, you know?" Tony confessed after the fit of laughter was over and they'd finished what they'd started.

Loki knew.

Tony kept his eyes trained on him, the pair of them very alert in contrast to the rest of his body. "Thanos. Time travel. Getting back. We did it – we fucking did it all."

Loki sensed there was a but coming.

"But," Tony added, "I don't know. It doesn't feel over yet. Not properly. Don't get me wrong, it doesn't feel like there'll be another massive fight, it just feels... unresolved. This is why I hate murder mystery movies – you start watching them, get bored, then you have to finish or else you end up with this shitty feeling." He reached behind him to adjust a pillow. "Maybe I'm just being paranoid. I was so set on being prepared for the big bad in space coming that I couldn't think about what happens after."

"I could lie to reconcile you but I won't." Loki shifted to fully face him. "You're right: it doesn't feel fully resolved. Not yet."

"Shit."

"Indeed."

"But why? Thanos is definitely gone, we did one hell of a thorough job avoiding making any paradoxes. If there was anything else, wouldn't your witch friends have bothered to mention it?"

Witch friends? Ah. The Norns.
"Everything they told me, we have resolved. We stopped Thanos from wreaking destruction across the universe and from reaching them. We retrieved the gems – and lost them again, but they never mentioned wanting us to have them permanently." Loki strained his memory, trying to remember anything else. "The only thing I don't understand is the vial."

"Vial?"

"Yes. They gave it to me after my conversation with Hela – the time when we were in Helheim, that is. I was informed that I’d want to use it eventually."

"But you never needed it."

"No."

"Maybe it's like a gift thing rather than an essential quest item thing. Like a bonus package. A thing you don't need but might want."

"Hm..."

"I don't know how these Norn guys work. They sound like whackjobs to me."

It was a rare occasion when Loki didn’t enjoy someone insulting the Norns, but this wasn't one of them. "They'll know you said that."

"If I didn't say it, they'll know there was a possibility of me saying it so I don't get why actually saying it makes it so much worse. I don't think they'll give much of a shit anyway – they get to live, same as the rest of us."

"If you're lucky," Loki said, "you'll never be forced to endure a conversation with them."

“Maybe that’s why they chose to have their cosy chat with you and not me.”

Loki almost snorted. “Because you would be impossible.”

“That’s me.” His eyes brightened. “You know we have a lab now, right? A proper one this time.”

“... What are you getting at?”

“You’ve got a mysterious vial and I’ve got an advanced chemistry set – I won’t use more than a few drops, honest.”

“I had wondered,” Loki replied, not without fondness, “how long it would take until you assigned yourself your next project.”
Chapter 53

Waking up, Loki was not certain if he had ever ached quite so pleasantly.

"Boss?" Friday called, causing Tony to stir. "I should inform you that–"

"Mute," Tony interrupted. Loki's vision was still bleary as he angled his head to look at him, observing the way he thumbed the corner of his eyes before opening them. Tony’s eyes were fixed on the ceiling before he commented, "Maybe constantly interrupted sleep is the last enemy we'll have to face."

"That sounds relatively tame in comparison."

"I'd prefer a fight. There's nothing like a fight to make you tired enough to send you straight to sleep."

Loki shifted in the sheets, trying to rediscover the position he’d been finding so comfortable and attempting to revert back to sleep.

There was a cold draft; Tony must have left the bed.

"I hate mornings," Tony muttered from somewhere near the door.

"There is a way of avoiding them," Loki replied without opening his eyes.

Tony let out a small snort. "I wish. There's way too much I need to do. Got a shitload of stuff to reactivate and me and Pepp need to sort out what I'm gonna say for my 'hey I'm back' speech and then there's all this other shit I've gotta sign. And that's before people start showing up to--" There was the distinct sound of approaching footsteps from the corridor. "Friday – why didn't you warn me?"

There was no response.

"Oh yeah. Unmute."

"You have a visitor, boss."

"Yeah, I got that." Tony swung open the door. "Pepp?"

"Tony."

That voice did not belong to Pepper.

It was Rhodes and the sound of his voice was close – closer than Loki had anticipated. There were a few more footsteps and then before Loki could attempt to decide if he wanted to conceal himself–

"Oh god."

Loki would not allow himself to be shamed for this, for something he wasn’t ashamed of.

"Yes?" Loki answered, raising his head to look at him. If anything, Rhodes appeared far more embarrassed than he was to have caught him in such a telling location.
"I didn't mean you."

Loki took great joy in exaggerating looking from one side of the room to the other. "Considering that I am the closest being who happens to be a god, I assumed you were addressing me." Loki sat up, keeping the sheets wrapped underneath his arms. "Well? I assume you had something to say."

The man's eyes had yet to return to their normal size.

Tony remained standing in between them. "Don’t forget to blink, Rhodey."

Rhodes looked from the bed to Tony, then back and forth again before he spoke. "This is a disaster."

Tony spoke before Loki could. "Which part?"

"You know which."

"Do I?"

"He's an alien, Tony."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "That's not very politically correct of you."

Rhodes’s stare was flat. "I've never judged who you've been with before so long as you're not harming anyone. But when the guy you're with isn't even human—"

"Shall I take my leave?" Loki cut in. "I get the distinct impression you're going to keep me awake otherwise."

"No," Rhodes said.

"Yes," Tony said at the exact same time.

"I'm glad that's settled."

Rhodes pointed a finger. "This is– This is far from settled."

"Oh, come on. What's the big deal? Loki's got better things to do than taking over the planet. So what's the problem?"

Rhodes's mouth opened then closed again before he addressed Tony. "I can't believe you picked the one person who's more of a disaster than you are. What happened to opposites attract? That worked for you and Pepper."

"Yes," Loki replied, his voice still slightly on the dry side since waking. "That must be why their relationship was so stable."

"Look at that." Tony pointed at Loki. "You poked the sleeping grouch-cat and now his claws are out." He cocked his head to one side. "Also, he's kinda got a point."

Rhodes groaned. "Tony..."

"What? He does. And anyway, you're getting way ahead of yourself. Me and Pepp dated for years but we've only just started er... Dating probably isn't accurate. Unless space-dates count." He turned to Loki. "Did we space-date? Is that what" – he waved a hand – "that whole thing was?"
"The last segment of our journey could probably qualify."

Tony turned back to Rhodes. "There. See? It's new. Don't shove labels on it."

"If only this was normal enough to think of a label for."

Tony patted him on the shoulder. "You know I don't do normal."

"Yeah, I know. We've been friends for decades. But when I said I thought you were friends, I mean I thought you were friends. You know, like any sane person would."

"Since when do I take the sensible options?"

"Tony..."

"Aw, come on. I've been time travelling and teleporting and flying through wormholes and your biggest hang-up is me sharing my bed with this guy? The guy who showed up and now we're all not dead. The guy who brought me back home even when he didn't have to."

"Look," Rhodes sighed. "This isn't even about trust. This is about stability and where you are right now because you've both been shoved together for who knows how long so you could save the planet and--"

"Universe," Tony corrected.

"Universe, then."

"Go on."

"What?"

"You didn't finish. There's something else you wanna say. I know that look."

"Alright. Fine. Can I speak to you in private?"

And then, much to Loki's surprise, the question was directed at him.

It was a shame that bedsheets were not particularly dignified garments. "Give me a moment."

###

"Well?" Loki asked as he entered the living space. Tony had taken the opportunity to begin working on analysing the vial, leaving them to alone.

Rhodes held out a hand, a motion for Loki to take a seat. Loki complied, but only because not doing so on principal would have been petty.

"It's not that I hate you," Rhodes began. "Because I don't. I don't know you so how could I hate you? I kinda hate what you did to New York but I wasn't even there for that. And yeah sometimes – alright, most of the time – Tony's decisions are... questionable. But he's more careful now. Not with himself exactly, but with who he keeps close and who he doesn't. And it looks like he's chosen you to stay close."

Loki would not allow himself to be cowed into looking away or lowering his head, he would not. "Does that offend you?"
"Offend me? No. Why would that– Never mind. He's given you a free invite here. You know the only other people who get that these days? It's me and Pepper. That's it. We were the only other two people allowed in and now there are three of us granted access. So what's that say about you?"

Loki chose his words very carefully. "Either that I have succeeded very well in fooling Tony or I have not."

"You fooled him well enough to fake your own memories, is that what you think I'll swallow?"

That made Loki pause. "I am a known opportunist."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"So I'm not a known opportunist?"

"Well yeah, but not here. Not with Tony. It's not like you need money. Or tech. Or attention."

"Maybe I am in sore need of entertainment."

"Sure. That's why you both risked your necks I don't know how many times."

Loki stiffened and opened his mouth to dispute his theory but Rhodes held up one hand. "Alright. Fine. I won't talk about it anymore. I'll pretend to believe you if you want." Wonderful. And now he had his charity. "I just hope Tony's right."

Loki hesitated. "About what?"

"You." Rhodes's gaze was level. "He knows he can trust you, but are you actually good for each other?"

Well, Loki thought, we didn't destroy the universe.

***

"Did you find any answers?" Loki asked, hours later, when Tony finally made an appearance.

Because he is busy, he had to remind himself. Because not being active on Midgard for more than a few years creates an array of complications.

"Yeah, kind of. Well. Pepper came up with most of it. Something about a high-level clearance remote base in Antarctica. Got the conference soon. Can't say I've missed them."

"I meant any answers regarding the vial."

"Oh. No. Not many."

"But some?"

"Hey – I've barely had time to look. Turns out we got a couple matches though. Basil and lavender. Are the Norns secretly hippies into natural remedy shit? Because I did some digging and basil is supposed to be an anti-inflammatory and lavender’s supposedly a purifier type thing." Tony pulled a face. “Their words, not mine. Maybe you’re gonna get hay fever or something.”

“I doubt the Norns would act upon something so trivial.”

Tony shrugged. “Maybe. But there's loads of stuff in the mixture I can't identify yet. I took a look
at it and even the cells look weird."

"Strange how?"

"As in they're not animal cells or plant cells. They're just... They're weird, okay? They keep moving – not when the water moves or anything. They move on their own and they keep expanding and contracting like they're breathing or something and I swear I watched one of them take off and swap places with another and that's not normal."

"It mustn't be that surprising to find all the components aren't of Midgardian origin."

"It is when you find yourself looking at a completely new type of cell. Seriously – are those things conscious? How are they doing that?"

"This liquid came from the Norns. We should expect some of the ingredients to be magical."

"And I thought I was done with fucking with magic."

***

Their work was slower, the progress hindered by how little time Tony was able to spend on the task with all his other duties.

"Just give me a week. Fine. Probably three. But after that, I swear my schedule's clear."

The most frustrating aspect was how slowly Loki worked when he was left to his own devices and limited to Midgardian science. Friday provided the instructions for the various tests well enough, but without the deep-rooted knowledge, it was a struggle to make the leaps he knew he would have been making if he'd been studying something within his usual element.

The magic, naturally, was in his element, but there was little he could do with it apart from detecting its presence if he strained his senses. The only conclusion he'd been able to reach through his own means was that the magic was dormant – not extinguished, just waiting.

From there, he gave up on attempting to identify ingredients while he was by himself and focused on attempting to come to conclusions about the effects of the potion instead.

In the days that followed, Loki began his experiments.

The first was adding minuscule drops of the liquid to plant leaves but the cells – the cells that Tony insisted didn't make sense – appeared to have no desire to interact with the leaves. Loki didn't need a microscope to feel the lack of response or how little effect introducing the two was having.

His next test was using insects. There was a moment in which the energy from the vial appeared to hesitate, as if it was testing the insects as much as Loki was testing it, but whatever quality it was searching for must not have been found.

Live specimens then. And not just live ones – ones that had animal forms.

Loki would not experiment on the rats, not when they had already lost a member of their mischief – and speaking of Jingles, he'd had an idea of his own he thought more prudent than a plaque.

They already had a wealth of flowers outside the tower gifted from those who were mourning the supposed loss of Iron Man and they might as well be put to use rather than being disposed of. At least, that was how Loki justified giving such tribute to an animal, though he never pitched it as
honouring her as such. Not when he didn't have to. And Tony hadn't seemed to mind, not when it was their first time out of the tower together after their return, and certainly not when they'd travelled to a river so secluded there were no Midgardians present to recognise Tony or interrupt them.

The sight of the burning flowers was oddly picturesque, and, Loki realised with a pang, one that he missed out on when he was forbidden from attending his mother's funeral.

The river was slow and steady enough to gently wash away the wooden base and the flames licked at the stems and heads of the flowers, turning the myriad of colours into a spectrum of slowly crisping petals.

"Your funerals are better than ours," was all Tony said when the raft disappeared out of sight.

***

The following morning was the first time since they'd started that Tony had been able to spend a number of hours in the laboratory alongside him and in such a short period of time, he'd already identified nettle leaves and some kind of wood known as Palo Santo and a type of ginger.

None of them, they'd discovered, seemed to have much in common in terms of the effects they were supposed to give.

And in the end, all it had taken was one sentence, one sentence for it all to fit together and Loki was left wondering how he could ever have possibly thought it could have been anything different.

"Okay, maybe my first theory’s out the window," Tony started. "You're not ill and there's not much that could harm you that much with your super-advanced biology so why would you need it if it’s medicine?"

Maybe *Loki* wouldn't need it. What was it the Norns had said? Ah yes, that he might *want* it.

“What else do the ingredients have in common, then? Are they from the same region? Do they behave differently if they interact with one another? Is there anything else they’re used for?”

“They’re from pretty much all over. Hang on, just let me–” Tony began typing away at his keyboard. “The Norns are into magic stuff, right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because the only thing that comes up when I take remedies and health stuff out of my search – and get this – according to The Little Green Witch That Could” – Tony did not bother to disguise his scorn – “is removing curses.” He took another look at the screen. “The internet has dark holes. You’re lucky you never had to deal with this.”

*Curses.*

Loki might have had his fair share of tricks but it seemed the Norns had one last one to play on him.

*Oh.*

That was–

That was rich of them. Rich of them to presume that–
Maybe he'd dispose of the vial just to spite them.

It was tempting.

Maybe he'd march into Jotunheim and drink the vial himself since it would do nothing to someone who hadn't been afflicted. Maybe that would serve them right.

Maybe.

He'd have to go back to Jotunheim anyway, he might as well...

And what was that? Considering voluntarily going back to Jotunheim so soon? Then again, he supposed he'd done a similar thing before they'd entered the void and that place held far worse things than Jotunheim ever could. It was the true monsters that were in the void, the truly horrifying ones, the ones that could chill him to the bone in ways that the Jotuns, for all their abilities, could not.

Delaying wouldn't make it any better; it'd only allow him to dwell more on it, to dread how it loomed in his future. And besides, there was the pathway from Jotunheim to Asgard, the one that'd make it far easier to travel undetected with the use of a ship.

Thor.

Thor hadn't seen him for over three years. Not that three years was a particularly long length of time, but the last time Thor had gone so long without seeing him had been when they were barely older than adolescents.

Thor, he was sure, would be sickeningly delighted if he found his lost wayward brother was one of the reasons why the majority of the universe was no longer in peril.

Just as Thor would be sickeningly delighted that Loki had people on Midgard to vouch for him and that he had little interest in bending them to his will.

And that alone should have been enough to deter Loki and yet–

And yet it was Thor. Exasperating, oafish, stubbornly loyal Thor.

Sometimes he used to long to see those eyes of Thor's, the ones that were a shade of blue he could only describe as naive, just to see if he could break his spirit using his words alone.

Other times he couldn't bring himself to do anything that could make Thor so much as flinch.

Maybe this time he would get to find out which one it would be.

But first, there had to be Jotunheim.

And then, barely aware of the fact that he was doing it, Loki sunk into his chair, almost blind to what was in front of him in comparison to how acutely he was aware of what the vial contained. "It's not for me."

"Not for you? What do mean? The vial? But they gave it to you. Why would they–"

The resignation made it difficult to muster any enthusiasm into explaining. "They gave it for me to give."

"To who?"
"It seems I have further need to visit Jotunheim."

***

And there he was – again – taking it upon himself to walk upon Jotunheim.

The air was bitterly cold and the ice reflected a pale blue light rather than dark purples, indicating that it was daybreak.

It had taken approximately the length of two days to journey there, even with the Dark Aster travelling at full speed.

The ship had always felt large but it felt considerably larger when he was the only being alive on board and both the days and nights were startlingly quiet.

The rats were safely inside of Stark Tower, as was Tony himself.

"I won’t be long," Loki had informed him before he’d left.

"Going already?"

"Believe me, I'd rather not be."

There they remained, both standing still, both standing in the same position, waiting for the other to say something.


Jotunheim. The realm where he’d had to restrain himself from killing Tony in a fit of grief-fuelled rage. The realm where he’d first discovered he had other blood relatives. The realm where he’d learned how much of a lie his origins were.

“I can’t say they’re particularly pleasant ones.”

“Funny how much stuff changes.” Before Loki could reply, Tony spoke again. “What about Asgard?”

"Oh, I'm sure Asgard will be thriving without me. Years of peace and prosperity with little excitement. Now that I come to think of it, the people will most certainly be bored and arguing amongst themselves."

"Were you that bad as a king?"

"I like to think not." Loki tried to smile. "But someone had to do something. We were completely unprepared. They would have been slaughtered if Thanos came for them."

"Sounds like you did a better job than the legit king."

"Treason," Loki teased, but the words had warmed him nonetheless.

"Treason," Tony repeated, the word making his lips raise upwards. "I like the sound of that. We should celebrate when you get back."

"Celebrate treason?"

"More like celebrate us both being back and alive properly this time but hey, I’m not gonna throw
away a good excuse to do something."

"What are you thinking?"

"You never got to do the whole tourist thing here. Since you were basically my tour guide for the whole universe, I figured I could return the favour sometime. Show you around. I've travelled a lot, I know the best hangouts, the best hotels, the best places to visit."

“I’d assumed as you’ve only recently returned home, you would prefer to…”

"Most of the time I spend at home is in the workshop anyway. It's not like I got homesick for my house, just my home planet. So what do you say?" Upon seeing his face, Tony added, "Doesn't have to be straight after you get back. Whenever we want. We can rest up, chill here." His face lit up. "I can show you all the time travel movies you've never seen. Oh man, there's so much Earth-culture you need to absorb. There’s all the music and movies and pop-culture and people who shouldn't be famous but are. I can't wait to see your disdain for it all."

Loki had to laugh at that.

"You ever been on a bottomless boat?" Tony continued. "Because I haven't. I know – weird, right? I've been on pretty much every type of transport you can think of except that. Well, that and a submarine, but who needs one of those when you've got a suit. We could hire a boat out, take it wherever we like. We should probably figure out how to steer the thing unless you think getting lost would be another adventure and–"

"I'd like that."

"You would? It’s just… I don’t know. I thought you'd stay longer after we got back."

So did I. "Maybe when I return I will no longer be so distracted with wondering whether there are any other tasks the Norns might have left me and you will have dealt with everything you need to due to being absent for so long."

Tony stared at him, his hands twitching by his sides. “How long are you gonna be?”

“It shouldn’t take any longer than a week or so, I should imagine.”

The disappointment that had come when he’d first announced he was leaving had mostly faded.

"Good." Then Tony’s lips quirked. "Try not to get locked up without me this time."

Loki released a huff of laughter. "I shall endeavour to try."

“Wait – before you go, I’ve got something for you. Well, not for you, just something I’d like you to pass on."

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You remember when I went to chat with the Jotuns and they told me where Mimir’s well was?”

“... I do.”

“Remember the part where I mentioned getting a couple of commissions?”

As it happened, Loki had entirely forgotten. “A lot has happened since then and now."
“Turns out they wanted better security tech. And I’ve got stuff they can use that’s been in storage for years. It’s not like they’ve got much stuff they want protecting anyway.” And before Loki could figure out exactly what he meant by that, Tony spoke again, uncharacteristically hesitant this time. “You’ll come back, right? You’ll let me know if you’re gonna leave me hanging?”

Loki placed a hand on the place where Tony’s neck and shoulder merged. “You have my word.”

***

Jotunheim felt colder than Loki remembered.

After a while, all the stretches of snow and ice and mountains began to appear the same, but Loki was mostly certain it was not all that far from where he had been held captive – far enough away that the Dark Aster was unlikely to be discovered during the few hours in which he’d be gone but close enough that the journey wouldn't contribute too much to how long he'd have to remain there.

Loki made his way closer, the city glistening ahead of him.

He frowned.

He hadn't remembered it glistening quite that much, nor the structures being that tall or elaborate. Spires. He remembered spires and clumsily built entrances that lead underground, not layers upon layers of elaborately carved and sculpted ice. Some of the structures rose like colosseums, only narrower and squarer, others like high towers with bridges of ice stretching between them, forming pathways on the levels above the ones built upon the ground.

The contrast was enough to make him stop and stare, doing nothing but taking in the sudden difference in architecture, the one that must have occurred only recently. Nothing like it had been touched upon in the few history books that happened to mention Jotunheim and it was a struggle to comprehend why they would be there.

Until he recalled how he'd given them back the casket, that was. The Casket of Ancient Winters, the one that used to be at the core of their planet, the one that allowed the Jotuns to further harness their abilities to manipulate ice and the essence of winter itself.

This, all of it – all the buildings and the expanding city and the way the Jotuns could thrive upon the surface of their realm – was because of what he'd done. Because he'd brought them their casket back and now their realm was repairing and rebuilding and transforming into something he'd never known it was capable of being.

In some way, the constructions were elegant, like ornaments blown from glass, only they were not so likely to shatter. The way the translucence reflected the blue and green and purples could almost be described as captivatingly picturesque.

It was... odd. Unsettling, though in a way that was brought about by the sheer unpredictability of it rather than the fact that it had happened.

Then again, what had he expected? He'd even been told they'd use it to rebuild, but he hadn't expected anything of that level of sophistication. And it seemed they hadn't only become ambitious with their constructions – they'd also found a way to heal over the huge crater he'd left in the ground when he'd aimed the Bifrost at them, the new sheets of ice patched over it like material over a wound.

Loki walked closer.
It was not long before he entered the city and instead of the desertion he would have expected, there were Jotuns standing, socialising, trading, working, even some who must have been children playing. Out in broad daylight – or the closest Jotunheim got to broad daylight, anyhow.

He’d seen no such sign of a palace which left him with the question of where a prince from their realm might reside. Perhaps they had grander housing instead, but he couldn't differentiate between the housing and the buildings that were designed for public use; they all appeared the same to his eyes.

Once, while he was trying to get his bearings, a Jotun who must have been an adolescent frowned at the footsteps that appeared behind Loki in the snow, before shaking their head and presumably deciding there must have been a more logical reason than someone among them being invisible.

Loki did not manage to find a palace nor any housing that appeared suitable for royalty, but he did manage to locate the prison himself and Tony had been held inside of, and for a lack of any other links to his would-be Jotun brother, he made his way inside.

He wasn’t certain what he was expecting. It wouldn't have been reasonable to assume Byleistr would be spending his leisure time in such a grim place.

When he entered there were two Jotun guards inside the section between the entrance and the gates that led underground.

And what was he supposed to do with that? Placing the vial on the counter and demanding to see the prince was one option, but not one he was willing to take. Particularly considering that the only person who had given him his word that he wouldn't let his people reimprison him if he returned with something that could aid him was the said prince in question.

"Another one?" one of the guards was asking.

"There have been a number of them each month, but the frequency is declining."

Loki lingered by the entrance, thinking it unlikely that something would come out of remaining there but not leaving on account of not knowing where else to go.

The first guard spoke again. "This city is infected with madness, I am sure of it."

“It was a slight epidemic but its days are numbered.”

Was it a coincidence or could what they were referring to have been a result of Loki’s actions? When he’d struck Byleistr, had he been the cause of whatever epidemic of madness they were speaking of?

No, Loki decided. They must have been speaking in metaphors and his tendency to assume the worst was getting the better of him.

"I still don't see why they'd lie about what they saw."

"Stranger things have been done to gain the attention of the royal family."

And that got Loki's attention.

"Not like this. Not so many of them." The guard lowered their voice. "If you ask me, it's his ghost they're seeing."
His ghost?

Was he dead, then? Had Loki actually done it? Had he killed him with nothing but a singular rash decision? Where they even talking about Byleistr?

The closest guard shook his head. "I'd say the ghost is nothing more than a recluse who is not sound of mind."

Maybe Byleistr wasn't dead after all.

All Loki needed to know was where, where it was that he had reportedly been seen, and then he could investigate whether the only clue he’d managed to find was worthy of pursuing.

The second Jotun made an agreeable noise and the topic of conversation was swapped for another.

“We were sent letters from Miklu Lengra again.”

“Do you know what they say?”

The Jotun shook their head. “You know I was never taught to re–”

“Neither was I,” the other Jotun replied. Being invisible, Loki did not have to work to conceal his resulting satisfaction. “Did they seem important?”

***

The second time Loki walked back into the prison, it was wearing a face that was a mixture of various Jotun faces he’d seen during his walk through the town.

One of the guards looked up as he entered. "We don't usually get people voluntarily walking in here."

Particularly not when they would be detained upon sight if you knew their true identity, Loki thought. His answer was smooth. "I need to speak to one of the prisoners."

"Under whose authority?"

Loki's reply was not so far from the truth. "I'm investigating the" – he lowered his voice – “recent reports.”

The guard he addressed frowned. "Why? What they're doing is only a trivial offence."

"The royal family have little desire to have their name slandered by rumours." When neither of them appeared to be particularly moved, Loki added, "I can produce the official papers if you require."

"No need, no need," the Jotun insisted hastily and rose. "Follow me." He placed a hand on Loki's shoulder and the worst part was having to maintain the illusion of neutrality while he could feel the blue spreading out from where he touched him. Even if he couldn't see it, he could still feel his form changing and the cold becoming more and more hospitable.

Loki grimaced. "As you wish."

He was led deeper and deeper underground, through winding passages and forked paths until they came to a stop by a row of cells.
The Jotun remained where he was.

Wonderful.

Loki made his way further – if he went out of sight he'd be followed, but he could remain far enough away so that as long as he spoke quietly then his voice would not carry.

And then, refusing to allow the ridiculousness of the situation to cause him embarrassment, he asked aloud to all those that could hear him, "Did any of you see the ghost?" And then when that yielded no answers, he carried on. "The man who dwells in a cave?" And when that brought him nothing but odd looks cast his way, he finally asked, "Which of you have been accused of harassing high nobility?"

The entirety of the populated cells stood to attention.

Loki took a breath.

"I need you to tell me what you saw." And then, "And I need to know where he is."

***

Loki was not certain what the appropriate etiquette was upon approaching a cave that happened to be inhabited by a Jotun. Should he knock? Tap his knuckles against the ice? There was no scenario in which that did not seem a ridiculous course of action. Then again, these were Jotuns. Courtesy was a thought that shouldn't have crossed his mind.

Loki made his way inside.

"Who goes--" a voice called. Then it went silent.

The owner of the voice must have been able to see better in the dark than he could because all Loki could see was the vague outline of a shape whereas the person the voice belonged to had silenced themselves at the sight of him – not just at the sight of someone – specifically at him.

Loki froze.

Of all the idiotic things to do, of all the truly out of character things he could have done, this one somehow managed to top everything.

Because he was still in his Jotun form.

He’d been so focused upon his task and so at ease with the cold and knowing no one he cared for would see him that he hadn’t thought of returning to his usual form. And how strange that was, that so long as his mind was occupied he felt no such crawling sensations across the blues of his skin.

But there was no point in changing now, not when he wasn’t keen on wearing his usual face in the unlikely event that Heimdall would happen to turn his gaze to Jotunheim. Which, Loki supposed, wasn’t that unlikely anymore given how rapidly Jotunheim was developing. And if he wore only an illusion of a Jotun instead then Byleistr would know and he’d look at him with those pitying eyes and then Loki might not be able to go through with his plan after all.

Loki walked further inside and did a marvellous job of appearing to look at Byleistr without directly looking at him.

"Don't worry," Loki said as a greeting, "you're not going to have to send me back to another cell."
Byleistr blinked, his mouth open as he took in the sight of him. "Loki?"

Loki gave a small bow, mocking and cutting at the same time. "Well remembered."

It wasn't until Byleistr's face darkened that it occurred to Loki that he hadn't seen his temper flare before, not even when—

"Do you have any notion of what you've done?"

"Well" – Loki glanced from side to side, gesturing to the landscape that lay outside of the walls – "Jotunheim appears to be prospering with the return of the casket."

And was that anger? That was definitely anger stirring in those eyes of his, something that turned them from crimson to a threat. "I meant what you've done to me."

"Ah. Yes. You do appear to have developed a certain fondness for reclusivity as of late."

"Fondness," Byleistr uttered, the word dripping with scorn, "is not how I'd describe it."

*I care little for how you'd describe it*, Loki could have said.

This was not how Loki remembered him. The person he remembered was calmer, more tempered, unable to be shaken, almost nauseating with his forgiveness. The person Loki remembered was not this bitter savage thing that dwelled in solitude in a cave on the edge of civilisation.

"How unfortunate."

This creature of loathing was a stranger to him and yet more familiar than his would-be brother ever was.

"What's unfortunate," Byleistr corrected, "is my lack of choice in the matter." Loki hoped he wouldn't be talking for long. Perhaps he should fling the vial at him and be on his way. That was an idea. "This" – he pointed to himself, to the cave – "is all your doing, Loki."

Given how Loki had been the one to introduce whatever curse it was with the tip of the arrowhead all that time ago, Loki had assumed he was probably to blame for it somehow. Wasn't that the usual trend?

Maybe the reason his sourness was so familiar was because Loki had infected him with it. That wouldn't have surprised him; bitterness was an infectious thing.

"I can only apologise," Loki said and Byleistr was so shocked that whatever thing resembling malevolence on his face vanished. "I didn't realise I'd cursed you with such terrible judgement in accommodation."

Byleistr laughed then, harshly, acidly, and it occurred to Loki that he hadn't heard such a sound come from him before. Or anything remotely resembling such a sound, nothing that came close to it. He'd afflicted the man with something he hadn't even known how to identify and yet even that hadn't elicited anger, only disappointment. He'd been oddly forgiving, for a Jotun. Even by Asgardian standards, his behaviour would have been bizarre.

It couldn't have been anything but some sort of curse; he didn't see what else could have caused his fundamental personality to have been so drastically altered in such a short period of time, even if it was three or four years from Byleistr's perspective.
"Only you, brother."

Loki's fingers twitched – not to seek a weapon but to resist the temptation of clenching, of revealing how much it still disconcerted him to hear him use that word. With the other Byleistr, he wouldn't have had quite so many objections to him witnessing it because Loki’s own discomfort was a weapon against him, but this Byleistr seemed so far gone he might have been capable of using that very same discomfort as a weapon against Loki.

"Don't you think you should pay more attention to your tongue? The last time you called me that–"

"You inflicted a curse upon me," Byleistr finished, giving him with a look that made Loki doubt for a moment whether he'd hold true to his promise not to imprison him if he returned with a way to undo the damage. "I remember it well."

Loki wouldn't apologise, not when he still couldn't quite bring himself to feel sorry, only uncomfortably aware that his actions weren't particularly justifiable.

But he could hand over the vial.

It didn't make him more willing to when Byleistr was glowering at him like that. At what point did he gain the ability to hold such hostility in his eyes alone? Had he always been able to do that or was it only because of the hold the curse had over him?

Would it even have made it any easier if he was more akin to how Loki remembered him? His sheer desperate hope that they could someday call each other family had been... disturbing. Morbidly fascinating to a certain extent, in retrospect.

"About that–"

"It makes sense that it'd be you." And the word was spat out with such venom, it almost knocked Loki back.

The man he'd briefly known had grown so caustic he was barely recognisable.

How odd it was to find himself wishing Byleistr was the one of his memories instead, how surreal to find himself practically missing a Jotun.

"What would be me?"

Loki watched as Byleistr pulled his lips upwards in a parody of a smile.

"Being here. Speaking to me."

"And why," Loki asked, "is that?"

"I can't deny the irony of you being the only one. The only one who doesn't care for me. Who won't care for me. Who can't care for me. Of course it has to be you. One of the few people I'd wish–" He cut himself off and it was a relief for the rest of the sentence to remain unfinished.

"Does it truly surprise you?"

"That you don't care for me? No. Why would you? You don't remember any of it – what it was like when you went missing, what we all went through after the war. I was still a child but I searched and I searched and I shouted your name over and over – the first name you were given, your Jotun name." The rage had quieted and what was left behind was something older and sadder.
"Why?"

"Because you were my brother."

"Half-brother," Loki corrected, the interruption cracking like a whip. "Why did you never mention that?"

"It seemed irrelevant. We were family. It didn't matter whether both of our parents happened to be the same."

Loki had no reply he could make to that.

"Your Jotun name," Byleistr continued. "Do you want to know what it was?"

"No."

He inclined his head. "Have it your way."

"Does it bother you?" Loki's eagerness was making him lean forward.

His words caused Byleistr's expression to flicker. It should have been satisfying. Why wasn't it satisfying?

"Not as much as how being mostly certain of how little you care for me is very different to having it indisputably proven."

"Proven?"

"Oh. So you really weren't aware of what you afflicted me with, were you?"

Something about the way he spoke caused Loki's stomach to knot.

Byleistr was the one to lean closer this time. "I'll enlighten you then. Now you can understand why I have been driven to live this far from civilisation, why none of my family or friends can see me, why I am now incapable of forming new bonds."

Morbid fascination was enough for Loki to allow him to continue and then Byleistr was so close that if he chose to strike there would have been little he could do about it.

"They can't see me," Byleistr stated, his voice constrained, holding no intonation, the stress of it making it quiver ever so slightly. "None of them can see me. If they care for me, they can no longer see me. They no longer hear me. They can no longer detect me in any possible way and you have no conception of how hard I tried. I tried to speak to my mother but her eyes stared right through me. I tried to write my cousin a letter but all she could see was a blank piece of parchment. I travelled closer to the city to ask citizen after citizen to pass on messages to my family and companions but when they spoke, the meaning of the words became confused. There were only so many times I could try to send them back with different words and clues before they ran into trouble for harassing nobility and making what were interpreted as cruel jokes about their missing son." His jaw was set so tensely he could have been frozen. "That's why I chose this as my new home. That's why I can't do something so simple as have a pleasant conversation without risking the person I am having it with no longer being able to perceive me. Do you– Do you have any idea what that's like? To inevitably cause every person to turn away from you? To have no choice in doing so? To be left with no one, no one at all?" His eyes did not leave Loki's, as if he was just as eager to see if his words had inflicted any wounds as Loki had been the last time they'd seen each other.
Loki didn't reply.

It wasn't unwarranted but he wasn't going to apologise – that wasn't what he came here to do, it wasn't – or speak of anything he wouldn't share with a stranger.

*To inevitably cause every person to turn away from you,* Loki's thoughts echoed.

He had far more in common with this Byleistr than the old one.

But Byleistr had not finished. "If I wish to remain visible, I must either be so unpleasant none could care for me or so forgettable they remain indifferent. Forgive me if that makes me behave rudely. Though I suppose considering you are the reason I am having this problem in the first place, if there is anyone who deserves to be spoken to in such a way..." He shook his head. "Pain and misfortune I could have endured. But this – this is so much worse. I have never been more *alone*–"

"If it's any consolation," Loki offered, "I came close to being killed enough times to lose count. I think it's fair to assume we both haven't enjoyed the time following my departure from Jotunheim."

Loki thought it may not be tactful to mention the aspects of it he had enjoyed since.

The muscles in Byleistr's jaw tensed. "Why are you here?"

"Do you not remember the terms of our treaty?"

"We agreed that you would be permitted to return only if you remove whatever ailment you inflicted upon me." Then he appeared resigned. "Though I have reason to believe you have the resources to return here without alerting us to your presence."

Loki's smile was slightly on the tight side. "That is correct."

"Which part?"

"All of it."

Byleistr blinked. "You– You can rid me of the curse?"

"I believe so." Loki pulled the vial out of his pocket dimension and held it within plain eyesight. Byleistr's eyes could not leave it. "But why?"

"A wiser person would ask no further questions and accept the thing I am offering."

Throwing it was a risk but it was one Loki was willing to take; he didn't want him to be getting any ideas about his conscience after all.

Fortunately for Byleistr, he caught it. "Loki." He blinked again. His mouth hadn't fully closed for the entirety of Loki's visit. "I– Thank y–"

"Don't."

Not so long ago, Loki might not have noticed the subtle changes to a Jotun's features that indicated traces of a smile.

"Very well. I won't." Byleistr opened the vial and poured the entirety of the contents into his mouth. "If this is poison I suppose I have little to lose anyway."
Loki eyed him. "How does it feel?"

"Wonderful," he replied flatly. "Oh. You mean the potion. I'd describe it as warming."

At least it appeared to be doing something, which was more than Loki could say for the results of any of their other tests. And that meant there was a strong chance that he'd got it right, that the Norns – those infuriating Norns – had intended for him to give it to Byleistr all along.

"I can go home if it's worked," Byleistr murmured and finally there was a distinctive trace of the Jotun Loki remembered, the one who was far less corrupted with that corrosive bitterness. "I can go home and they'll finally be able to see me. They must have thought I'd abandoned them or worse and now I can explain it to them, explain everything." He closed his eyes, relishing it, before opening them again. "They'll finally understand."

"And now the curse has been lifted..." Loki prompted.

Byleistr stared. "Yes. Of course. I will make a request. They will welcome you here."

_They but not him._

The concept of him being welcome on Jotunheim was one that he doubted very much; the only person who lacked enough rationality and who had been foolishly sentimental enough to do so would have been the Jotun in front of him. But he wasn't about to alert the Jotuns to his past actions outside of the impulsive cursing, not when they had so conveniently assumed it was Odin's doing.

_They have the casket now_, Loki reminded himself. They had the thing they needed to rebuild their civilisation and restore it to its former–

Loki was not going to say glory.

Byleistr took a few steps towards the exit and paused, one hand on the icy wall. When he turned back around his gaze was softer; not because of the contents of the vial, but because of the knowledge that he could finally return to where he belonged.

Idly, Loki supposed that must have been a pleasant feeling: to know where he belonged and to be at peace with returning there. It was an abstract concept, one he did not wish to linger on for too long or else risk appearing as if his forlornness was due to Byleistr leaving rather than for any other reasons.

"You could join me, if you like."

Loki _must_ have been staring for too long. "No." Perhaps he'd been hasty in how emphatically he'd stressed his rejection and he'd half expected Byleistr to flinch rather than witness the defeat pass over him. "No thank you."

Byleistr took a step closer. "Is this it then?"

"What were you expecting?"

"Not... this. I hadn't thought I'd ever see you again. I hoped I would but–"

"Yes, well, my presence here delivering a cure would help with that."

"I see your claws have not become less sharp over time."

And in his Jotun form, the nails on his hands did more closely resemble claws.
"They might be used with slightly more caution." There. That was the closest to an apology he would give.

And then, in a smaller voice, Byleistr voiced, "Why did you do it?"

Loki hesitated for a long moment, his lips pressed together as he deliberated. And then, "Your timing was atrocious."

"My timing?"

"My brother – my real brother–" Loki realised what he had just named Thor and the sudden understanding made him halt with surprise. "I was under the impression that I had recently watched him die."

Whatever answer he was expecting didn't appear to be that. "Oh," Byleistr said after a long moment had passed. "Maybe that explains why you were particularly..."

"Vicious?" Loki finished. He could admit that much, at least.

"When you said you were under the impression..."

"It's too complicated for me to explain in full. But Thor is alive and well."

"So where did you find it?" He inclined his head towards the empty vial.

"That? It was gifted to me by the Norns themselves."

Byleistr chortled, the sound rusty.

"No," Loki went on. "I am being completely serious."

The amusement disappeared from his face, leaving him with nothing but astonishment. "But the Norns? They haven't been sighted in so long we were all starting to think they're nothing more than stories. How did you..."

"Again," Loki said, "the explanation would be complicated and convoluted. And the Norns certainly didn't bother to make it any easier. Figuring out what the vial was supposed to be for was practically a riddle within itself."

There was a flicker of warmth in the way Byleistr regarded him, one that was much more akin to the man from Loki's memory of his time in Jotun captivity. Maybe the two different versions of Byleistr weren't so separate entities after all.

"But you did," Byleistr said.

"Yes," Loki agreed, only with a small amount of defeat. "I did."

"Why would the Norns suggest–"

"I don't presume to be any authority on the Norns. They do not think as rationally minded beings do."

Byleistr frowned but then the frown was conquered with sudden hope. "Does this mean there's a reason they want me alive? Alive and fully able to communicate, I mean."

I doubt it, Loki thought, recalling their words about how the vial would be a want rather than a
necessity. Maybe if he wouldn't apologise he could refrain from causing him any further misery. "Perhaps there is."

For a stretch of time that felt far longer than it lasted, Byleistr stared at him, the optimism emanating from him enough to ensure Loki couldn't look him in the eyes. "I am glad you visited."

"Yes, it must bring you great happiness to be relieved of–"

"Not purely because of that."

The admission made Loki tense, though whether to flee or attack he did not know, instead it resulting in him freezing before being able to say, "If that is all, I really must be going."

"Wait – Loki." Byleistr reached out with a hand and then thought better of it. "One more thing."

"Yes?"

"Is there anything you want me to do for you?"

Loki gave it a moment's thought. "I left my ship concealed within the mountains. I'd prefer for it to remain that way."

"I'll see what I can do."

Loki was about to make his exit when he was interrupted for the second time.

"Loki," Byleistr called from behind him, his voice strong enough to carry but not too severe. "Do you think you'll ever return?"

He was a Jotun, a Frost Giant, and yet there was such raw vulnerability contained within his voice that even Loki couldn't bring himself to respond too harshly. "I doubt that it would be anytime soon," he said, but the tone of his voice was softer than he would have liked to admit.

Then Loki stepped outside of the cave, the relief of having resolved the final task like a breath of fresh air.

The container Tony had requested to pass on he left outside the cave; Byleistr would receive the message. It was only after he placed it that Loki realised the Jotuns must have made a request to Tony for something to ensure the security of the casket all along.

But speaking of Tony – Loki could return now. Return to Tony and then maybe it wouldn't feel as if they still had something left to accomplish, as if they wouldn't still have to fight for something just to continue to exist.

It would be nice if it could be that simple.

The boom came after the light and it echoed across the mountains, the impact causing the ground to quake.

The Bifrost.

It was the Bifrost, the imprint of it left on the ice less than a mile away from where he was standing, the shadow of a figure contained within a spectrum of colours and uprooted snow.

Loki would recognise that figure anywhere.
It was Thor.
Chapter 54

The speed at which Thor flew left little time for Loki to decide what to do about his sudden appearance.

Thor came to a stop and dropped to the ground a few meters away, his body taut with tension, his boots leaving deep footprints in the snow. His frown was heavy, his stance giving him the appearance of an entire army composed of only one individual.

Thor's eyes swept the surrounding area and skimmed past Loki for a second before they veered back and locked on his face.

"Loki?" Thor breathed. He remained stood there, eyes wide, his entire body no longer moving.

_Odd_, Loki thought. Usually when they found themselves meeting like this, there would be some form of collision one way or another. But the expression on Thor's face was more than just disbelief: it was uncertainty.

Why would Thor have reason to doubt who he was, how was that possibly–

Oh.

Loki was still in his Jotun form – his _Jotun_ form – and that realisation made him stiffer than Thor had become.

It was of little wonder that Thor hadn't been eager to come into close contact with him.

Because that was their usual pattern, wasn't it? Loki would lose himself somewhere and then the next time he and Thor would see each other again, there would be bruises and accusations.

It was the quietness of it, the stillness of it, that was perhaps the most disconcerting part of all.

No shouts, no punches, no threatening his person with Mjolnir. Only a matter of decades ago, Loki would have had to inevitably defend himself against Thor's mighty embrace. He'd never considered there might come a day when he'd almost miss it.

_It is better this way_, Loki told himself, though either being maimed or embraced would have been preferable to seeing Thor just standing there, doing nothing but gaping at his Jotun-blue skin.

It became incredibly difficult to look at Thor too closely in that moment. If Thor was disgusted by something he'd done then that was one thing, but to be disgusted by something that was out of his control was far less preferable, was something that sent dread seeping through the lining of his stomach.

Thor still hadn't said anything.

What was he waiting for?

He knew it was Loki, he had to know otherwise he wouldn't have said his name. Some of Loki's features must have been recognisable enough even with his altered skin and claws.
Thor took a step closer, lowering Mjolnir. The crunch of his boot against the snow was loud in contrast to the silence.

Jotunheim did not suit Thor; it made the usual tones of his skin appear far too vibrant, the pinks and reds standing out against the greys and blues of the landscape. And then there was his cape.

Red, far too red.

Loki swallowed.

The last time they'd both been standing on Jotunheim had been when he'd first discovered he was not everything he thought he was, was when he'd tried, genuinely tried, to convince Thor not to further aggravate Laufey. It had been when the Allfather had appeared at the end of it to save their miserable hides.

The Allfather.

Had he been the one to send Thor?

But how had he known where to send him?

Heimdall. It must have been Heimdall, though Loki had assumed he wouldn't have bothered to cast his gaze to Jotunheim at all, never mind remember what his Jotun form looked like when he'd only seen it for a matter of seconds.

The casket, Loki realised. He hadn't known quite to what extent the casket would alter the realm and surely Heimdall must have had the duty of monitoring the Jotuns to ensure they wouldn't become another threat to Asgard.

It would only be a matter of time before the others would arrive, surely Odin would not have sent his only son with no other aid.

Loki could have cursed if he'd had the energy, could have raged and fought and cried out in protest because he thought everything would be over – if only temporarily – and he might finally get a moment of peace.

Loki allowed himself to feel the cold again, to feel the pain of it rather than the power of it, and his skin reverted back to normal.

If Heimdall already knew where he was then he had little reason to remain in his other form. Particularly not while Thor couldn't stop staring at him as if he almost couldn't recognise him, which, Loki supposed, was probably accurate.

Some part of him had been surprised Thor had recognised him at all.

It was far chillier this way, with the wind beating against his face and the cold stinging his skin.

Thor took another step closer and how sweetly that stung, to have Thor – compulsively warm loyal Thor – only come within range of touching him while he wore the appearance of an Asgardian.

Loki’s nod was stiff. "Thor." He forced himself to resist the temptation to fiddle with his fingers. "It has been a while."

Thor’s mouth hung open before he spoke. "I thought you could have died."

It made a change from being accused of his own death being nothing short of a ploy.
"I'm sure I came close."

Thor squeezed his eyes shut, his face contorted in what might have been frustration. But by the time he opened his eyes, he was chuckling, a large grin dominating his face. He came even closer, one arm stretched out, but when Loki tensed his hand landed on his shoulder rather than forcing him into some sort of embrace. "Brother," was all Thor said and Loki didn't have it in him to deny it, not anymore.

Loki allowed his hand to remain there, the solid tangible feeling of it reminding him that Thor was real and alive and that everything he had undertaken to ensure his survival had been worth it.

"Would you believe me if I informed you that me appearing as if I might have died is no fault of my own?" Loki asked. "Even if it is the third consecutive time in a row it has happened."

Thor tightened his grip, hard enough for it to be undeniably real but not hard enough for it to be painful before he dropped his hand. "When were you going to tell me that you're alright?" Concern flitted over his features and his eyes met his. "You are alright, aren't you?"

Loki nodded and he had to work to speak despite his throat suddenly restricting his voice. "As incredulous as it may sound, I was actually on my way to see you."

Sometimes he couldn't stand it when hope filled Thor's features, as transparent as a film of water, but he found that this time he did not object.

"You were?"

"I was."

"That... does not sound much like you."

The breath of air that Loki released was filled with gentle amusement. "That is a fair assessment."

"Why were you seeking me out?"

To say farewell, for now.

"Why were you seeking me out?"

It did not bode well that Thor had managed to track him down and that others must not be far behind him. If Heimdall had informed anyone else then there was no reason to believe the others weren't already closeby; Heimdall had never shown Loki any such loyalty.

It was another one of those moments in which Loki found himself sorely missing the Tesseract. Everything would be far simpler if it was still within his possession. He would have never been stuck in this situation, he could come and go whenever he pleased, no one would be able to trap him like this, not while he was bound to wherever he was stood. It would have helped with the void too – he could have avoided that entire fiasco and–

No.

Loki needed to stop, to stop thinking about how convenient something would be if only he had it. Thinking about it too much made him miss the feeling of it, how much freedom it had granted him. And detecting imaginary glimpses into its temperament was not a sign of sanity.

Weary.
His limbs were so weary.

He was supposed to have completed all his tasks. He was supposed to be able to return to Tony and they could do nothing but breathe and enjoy each other's company. He was supposed to be back within the week but he doubted that would still be possible.

When Thor did not respond straight away, Loki asked a different question: "How long?"

Thor paused. "What?"

"How long until the rest of them get here?"

Thor swallowed before speaking. "It can't be long now."

Loki began making his way through the snow, back in approximately the same direction as to where he had left the ship. "Then I congratulate you on what a magnificent job you’ve done so far of stalling me."

Despite his long strides, Thor caught up before long, his fingers touching Loki’s elbow in an attempt to persuade him to stop.

Loki shook him off.

"Must you always assume the worst? I came here to warn you."

"To warn me? If you'd done me the courtesy of warning me about how effective you’d be at stalling me then--"

"Loki – please." Thor matched him stride for stride, his fingers hovering above his arm instead of touching it. "They're coming and I had to tell you."

"Well." Loki forced a smile that was too thin and too tight to ever be interpreted as genuine. "Now that you have told me, I can get on with--"

"They won't stop, Loki. Don't you see that? Don't you see that they'll never stop, not unless--"

"I hope you're not about to suggest that I ask them politely."

"No. I'm asking you to submit yourself to Asgard before they find you."

Loki stopped walking entirely.

Submit yourself to Asgard.

Was that what Thor was here to do? To ensure that he'd meekly trot with him back to the cell that was waiting for him in the dungeons of the Realm Eternal?

"I might have gambled my life for your wellbeing but do not think that I would so much as consider gambling my freedom just to ensure you keep the Allfather content."

Thor shook his head. "I'm not doing this for him."

"Oh. And I suppose this is all for my own good, is it? Forgive me if I am failing to see things from your perspective as you hunt me down like some sort of wild beast and try to lure me back into my cage."
"I'm trying to help you!"

"You are here to retrieve a wanted prisoner, are you not?"

"I'm not even supposed to be here." The coldness in the air made steam leave Thor's mouth as he spoke. "But I meant what I said."

Did you?

"You'll have to be more specific."

"I meant it when I promised that I would vouch for you," Thor said, his voice quiet in comparison to its usual volume and his eyes bright with earnestness.

"You'll vouch for me against the Allfather. Oddly enough, I don't find this persuasive enough to surrender myself."

Loki resumed his walk again, picking up his pace.

"But I can– I will make this better, Loki. If you rid us of the tyrant – which you must have done, given that you've returned after all this time – then we owe you a great debt." He broke off and frowned. "I already owe you a great debt."

"Then let me go," Loki urged without turning around.

"Where?"

"Anywhere," Loki said. "I could go anywhere."

"Loki," Thor sighed.

"I mean it, Thor."

"Come home."

"Asgard has not been my home for quite some time now."

"Then where is?"

"Nowhere. Anywhere. Wherever it could be."

"But--" Thor stopped himself to take a breath. "But you'll be running all your life."

"Then it's convenient that I have built up some stamina over the years."

"We could clear you of your alleged crimes, I am sure of it. I know you might not believe it but I will make sure everything is going to be fine."

"I am not about to hedge my freedom on the suspicions of a delusionally optimistic well-established utter oaf."

"Loki," Thor responded, his tone firm and commanding before breaking into a plea. "Can we not try?"

"The benefits don't outweigh the risks."

Thor was almost having to run to keep up with him. "What if there's a way to ensure there isn't a
That almost made Loki pause. "What do you mean?"

"If the worst happens, I could do... something."

"I fail to see what you could do."

"If you are sentenced to prison again, I could get you out. I know I could."

"I doubt the Allfather would be very happy with you after that."

"I am trying to do the right thing regardless of what Father–"

"Your father," Loki corrected, though it was not said with maliciousness.

"He is already unhappy with me."

Once, that might have brought Loki joy. "Is he? Did you bring your Lady Jane back to Asgard?"

"Not Asgard, no."

They had reached the side of the town that Loki had first entered, which still left the stretch of paths between the mountains until he’d find the Dark Aster.

"Where then?"

"Alfheim."

"Alfheim? Why Alfheim?"

Thor was by his side, no longer having to exert himself to remain there as Loki walked.

"She already mapped the stars from Asgard. And she was intrigued by the elves' elemental magic."

"She is faster than you are, Thor."

Thor's pride was blatant in his smile. "I know. I can barely keep up with her." Then he turned to Loki, the accusations of him trying to distract him surely on the tip of his tongue. Instead, what he said was, "I will vouch for you if you let me."

"You won't have to vouch for me if I am left to go free."

"Heimdall informed me before he warned the Allfather as a personal favour. That means Asgard's forces are already on their way. If we make it look like you came back voluntarily, your outlook would look even better."

"Or," Loki suggested, "as an alternative, I could not return at all and avoid having to take any unnecessary chances."

Thor grew quiet for a moment. "You know he won't stop."

"Maybe I won't either."

"He won't rest until he finds you."

"I doubt it'll be because he misses me."
"I know he is hard on you, but that's--"

"Hard on me?" Loki scoffed. "He would have sentenced me to die if it wasn't for Mother."

"Are you certain? Father – fine, the Allfather – knows what he has to say to get other people to do exactly what he wants, just as well as you do."

"And what do you think he wanted from me, then? What would he have to gain from me believing he would have killed me without remorse?"

"Your attention, maybe."

Loki whirled around. "He already had it." The last time he'd seen Odin before he'd received his sentence, he'd begged for it, begged for some sign that Odin cared, that he'd finally done something right. And then Odin had said no.

Thor remained unaffected. "Have it your way. Maybe he didn't want you to pay attention to him anymore."

"In which case, threatening my life is hardly an effective way of achieving that."

Thor threw his arms out in exasperation. "Then I don't know, Loki. I don't know why he would have done it but the two of you are more clever than I am and sometimes I miss things I shouldn't."

"Such as me?" Loki asked, the sarcasm in his tone enough to leave no room for doubt.

Thor, being Thor, either completely missed it or deliberately ignored it. "Of course I missed you."

"That's not what--" Loki cut himself off. "Why are you still here?"

"I'm trying," Thor responded, "to persuade you."

"Consider me unpersuaded."

"Don't you want your name cleared? Don't you want to be free to go wherever you choose?"

"I already am, provided I look the part. Unless you're going to stop me?"

Loki considered Thor's lack of an assault as a sign that he may not attempt to physically prevent him from leaving.

*Good.*

"Why make this harder? Why won't you make this easier for you by coming with me now?"

"Because there are plenty of other places I'd rather be."

"Like here? On Jotunheim?"

And it was just as much a surprise to Loki as it was to Thor when he replied, "Yes, actually."

Thor faltered and it caused him to fall behind. "Why are you even here, brother?"

And what was Loki supposed to tell him? That he'd discovered someone who cared enough to call him a brother but he was the reason that very same person hadn’t been able to interact with anyone properly for years?
"Why do you think?"

"I... I don't know. You hate this place. Or I thought you did." *So did I*, Loki thought, but Thor had not finished. "Why would you give them the casket? I know that was your doing; Heimdall might not have seen the entirety of it, but he saw enough that I am certain it must have been due to your antics."

Loki almost grinned at the mention of his antics, a stark contrast to his previous mood. "Did you enjoy my gift?" he asked, keeping his voice innocent enough.

"Your gift?" Thor's brows furrowed. "Oh. Yes. You mean the rock."

"Concrete," Loki corrected. "The spontaneously appearing concrete." All the way from Taradaxia.

"It was the only thing that made me certain you were still alive." Thor glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Until three years passed with no signs of you, that was."

Loki was spared from having to respond with the explosion of light ahead.

The Bifrost.

Again.

"That will be them," Thor murmured, his eyes in front of them.

"In that case, I better be making a hasty departure." By which Loki only meant he'd continue heading towards the ship, only faster than he had previously been and with the aid of invisibility.

How inconvenient it was that the Asgardians were between his route and where he had left his ship.

"Wait--"

"For what? For them to find me and haul me back to my cell?"

Thor reached out and managed to grab him, grasping the same elbow he'd previously gone for. Much to his surprise, not only did Thor manage it despite him not being visible, but he also didn't prevent him from moving, instead using it as an anchor to keep by his side as he walked.

"Let me help you, then," Thor said.

Loki's foot struck the snow and anyone less balanced might have succumbed to falling over.

"What?"

"If you won't come with me then I'll go with you." Thor's eyes shifted. "For a short while, anyway. I'll help you get away."

Loki was unable to discern whether his suspicion outweighed his shock. "I don't need your help. I only need my ship."

Thor raised his eyebrows. "You got yourself a ship?"

"How else do you think I could have got here?"

"The last I saw, you had the Tesseract."
There it was again, that little sting causing a lapse in Loki's judgement, making him imagine for a second that he could still taste its power.

"Not anymore." And then when Thor appeared intrigued, Loki resigned, casting his veil of invisibility over Thor too. "I'll tell you about it if we manage to leave this place without Asgardians on our tail."

"If you tell me where your ship is, I could get us there much faster than on foot."

"I don't want to be carted around like some sort of child while you fly us to--" Loki cut himself off. Asgardians.

Apparently, they weren't being as quiet as they thought and now they were surrounded by them, by dozens and dozens of Asgardian guards all brandishing shields and spears.

It might have been flattering, how many of them had been deemed necessary to detain him.

"Drop my illusion," Thor whispered in Loki's ear as it became clear their invisibility did them little good when their set of footprints in the snow led right to them. "Allow me to speak to them."

Having no better ideas himself, Loki conceded.

"As a prince of Asgard, I command you--"

"Your brother was a prince too," one of the guards interrupted, presumably the leader, given his audacity.

"Allow us to pass by unharmed. I promise that Loki is no threat."

That was almost insulting, as if Loki was some kind of muzzled wolf that was incapable of inflicting damage all because he hadn't completely resisted Thor's futile attempt to help him.

The guard's eyes shifted and Thor took advantage of the hesitation, turning his back on them and making his way further up the path.

"But we were instructed to--"

It was Thor's turn to speak over the guard. "And I am instructing you to allow us to be our way." When the guards still did not appear convinced, Thor continued. "Disobeying your prince is treason."

"Then disobeying the Allfather is even more treasonous."

And with that, the fight began.

All their attention was focused on Thor, the one with the strength that was every bit as legendary as Mjolnir, the one who bellowed and roared and whirled as he fought, the one who had taken to hurling the guards at one another instead of maiming them with his hammer.

"Go!" Thor shouted, as if the thought hadn't already occurred to Loki.

What to do regarding abandoning or aiding Thor didn't matter because the circle of guards was there, surrounding them both.

With his knives remaining in his pocket dimension, Loki jabbed the nearest guard in the stomach
with his fingers and that was all it took for the spear he carried to be dropped.

It was remarkable how much easier they were to fight when they could not see him to anticipate his actions.

By the time Loki had retrieved the weapon – spears were far more effective than fists, after all – the rest of the guards who were nearby had narrowed down where he must have been stood and were rounding upon him, their weapons drawn and their eyes darting around to try to catch a glimpse of him.

Even blind, they still succeeded in separating him from Thor with a wall of shields and live bodies, and now, unlike the last time he’d encountered them, Loki wasn’t facing them with the Tesseract at his disposal. He was beginning to see why the Allfather thought the guards were so useful.

Loki struck another guard with the pommel of the spear and he slumped to the ground.

All he needed was an opening and there was only one body in his way now a member of the barrier had collapsed.

He lashed out with the spear, his arm sweeping wide, and made a leap over the cleared space. He'd been anticipating them predicting where his path would have been and preemptively striking out despite not being able to see him. He'd been anticipating more guards being summoned to capture him rather than engage in conflict with Thor – and rightly so, because they had. But what he hadn't anticipated was another boom echoing through the mountains as the Bifrost hit the ground once more.

Heads turned – all heads turned – wondering who else possibly could have had a stake in this.

And there he was.

Odin. His power and influence evident in every step he took.

It was only as Odin got closer that Loki was able to see him more clearly: the dark shadows underneath his eyes, the grey tinge to his skin, the way the skin around his cheeks and neck hung loose and sallow, the way there was a barely visible tremor to the new sceptre as he held it.

This was more than him nearing the Odinsleep – this was age. How had Loki not seen it before?

How could he have aged that rapidly in such a short period of time? It had only been three years.

The coldness of Niflheim must have had lingering effects on his health.

Guards were clinging to Thor like insects clinging to fur, no amount of squirming or throwing them off enough to fully deter them but the guards being unable to do much in the way of harm other than pester.

"Thor," Odin called down. "That is enough."

Then Odin's eye settled on Loki, irrespective of his illusions. "Your trial will begin soon enough." There was little inflection in his voice and his eye was as passive as it would have been if he'd been speaking to a stranger. "Any more resistance will result in further punishment."

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Loki had resisted. Of course he'd resisted – well, tried resisting.
He shouldn't have been disappointed that Thor had not done the same. But of course Thor hadn't. One word from the Allfather and Thor trapped his wrists in his hands with a tight smile and a whisper about how everything would be fine.

Ridiculous. How ridiculous he had been to not run the moment he'd seen Thor. He didn’t know why he was surprised. Thor had never defied the Allfather on his behalf before and now Thor had gotten everything he wanted: Loki, unable to harm anyone but himself, always able to be found and accounted for inside of Asgard's prisons.

After everything that had happened, all the fighting and the saving, all the running and the hiding, all the mockery and tricks, Loki supposed it was only fitting that he should end up exactly where he had started.

His cell.

If he ever saw the Norns again, he should be the ones they needed to concern themselves with, nevermind Thanos.

He might have been impressed with how poetic it was if it wasn't for how much it infuriated him.

"Don't worry," Thor told him through the barrier. "You won't be here for long."

Loki stared back, his gaze flat. "If my head is to be removed from my shoulders, then no, I suppose I won't be."

"Loki..." Thor almost stepped forward, then righted himself before coming into contact with the golden ward that surrounded the cell. "I told you I won't allow it to come to that."

"You might not have a choice."

Thor shook his head. "I will not stand by and allow the Allfather to make his threats again."

His threats. Hadn't Frigga said something similar? Were they both still so blind?

"I don't recall you objecting the last time."

Thor opened his mouth to speak, his face growing increasingly desperate the more he could not conjure an adequate response. "I am not always doomed to repeat my mistakes."

No, Loki thought. Thor had already demonstrated that long ago with his little trick with the cuffs when he'd broken him out of his cell to take revenge upon Malekith. And he'd demonstrated it again when they'd been reunited and it hadn't ended with one of them striking the other.

And Odin? Loki wondered. Thor might, on occasion, challenge him, but the fact remained that Thor was despairingly naive with his judgement when it came to the Allfather.

And there was still so much Thor didn't know, still so much Loki didn't know if he should tell him because maybe, just maybe, he'd gain some satisfaction from Thor's illusion of Odin shattering, and he wanted to be there to witness it when it did.

There.

He might not have harmed his brother, he might even have allowed him to lay a fond hand on his shoulder, though that didn't mean he’d stopped being tempted by not particularly noble incentives.

But maybe this wasn't the right time to inform Thor of what he'd learned.
Telling him would be a risk. There was always the possibility of Thor willfully ignored his claims regardless of Odin's actions. Anyone with a shred of sanity would have accused Loki of lying, and anyone with enough power would have added another issue of treason to his long list of crimes.

How many treasons was that now?

At least three, and that was only since he'd died. Any more than that, and he might as well hand Odin an axe and draw a line on his own neck to mark where to strike.

"I should hope you’re not as doomed to repeat your past mistakes as you might appear," Loki finally replied.

"I know that you may not believe me yet, brother, but the past few years have taught me more than the centuries combined before them." Thor's fingers tugged at the sleeve of his clothing as he spoke, a habit he had not been inclined towards for years. "If it wasn't for what I have learned recently, I may not have--" Thor broke off and frowned. "Well, I may not have given you the chance to speak and explain yourself." He met Loki's eyes. "But I remain glad that I did."

"Sometimes," Loki said truthfully, "I think I prefer it when you just punch me instead."

Thor's expression bore a striking resemblance to an animal left out in the rain. "I know you don't want my help," Thor finally said, his words quiet.

"You were trying to help land me in a cell. I would have been well on my way until you--"

"Heimdall had already seen you in your Jotun form."

"Then why was telling Odin not his priority?"

"I told you – Heimdall owed me a favour."

"For doing what, exactly? What could you possibly have done for him that he couldn't do himself?"

"He..." Thor trailed off. "He happens to--"

"We both know the truth is that Heimdall always liked you better than the Allfather." Or himself. Definitely more than himself. Even when the throne had rightfully fallen to him all those years ago, Heimdall had still gone behind his back and...

Well. It made little difference now.

"I believe Heimdall may be the only person in the entirety of the Nine Realms who has committed treason more times than I have." Loki cocked his head to one side. "He's good at it, don't you think?"

Thor, who'd previously had such a desperately sad set to his mouth, let out a small chuckle. "Better than you."

"Only because I keep getting caught. When is his trial, might I ask?"

"Never mind about that – what about yours? We have much we need to accomplish."

"We?"

"Of course." Thor straightened his spine. "Two days is not a great length of time."
"Two days? My, Odin is in a rush, isn't he? Should I be flattered that I am considered such high priority?"

"Loki, please... Give me your word that you will not provoke Father."

"My very own existence appears to provoke him. And he's your father not mine, brother."

"But how?" Thor asked. "How can I be your brother if he is not your father?"

And then Loki was reminded of a similar conversation in the exact same cell, with him in the exact same position. Only his opinion differed this time.

*Because I choose you in spite of it all, Loki thought. And I don't choose him.*

"There are things Odin has done that would shock you."

With a shake of the head, Thor allowed the subject to drop. "I am not here to speak about him. I am here to speak with you about your trial. I will speak on your behalf but I cannot be the only one to do so. I need you to tell me who else—"

"I will not ask anyone to beg on my behalf."

"Why have you lost your fight already?"

"Everything has a threshold and I've been fighting mine for quite some time." Years. Or longer. Most likely much longer.

"So you're surrendering?"

Loki almost laughed. "Is this your idea of motivating me to beg for the Allfather's mercy?"

"You know I tried--"

"You failed." Loki watched Thor flinch. "How is it that you allowed this to happen and yet you expect me to believe you won't allow me to remain here? Isn't this everything you wanted?"

Loki received nothing short of outright bewilderment in reply.

"Why would I want this?"

"Because I am finally in a place where I am a threat to no one. You can indulge your conscience by visiting your poor misguided long-suffering brother and leave me to my own devices at your convenience."

"Loki – I am trying to help you. Must you insist on making this harder for yourself?"

Loki seated himself upon the bed. "I have a knack for it."

"I won't disagree with you there, brother." Thor appeared as if he might have left him there, but he did not. "Can't you name a single person to vouch for you? What about Stark? He spoke for you when I last saw you."

"Tony is--" Loki caught sight of Thor's surprise and amended himself with hopes of no further questions being asked. "Stark," he said, the formality he used to be so familiar with strange and foreign on his tongue, "is reacquainting himself with his home. He's earned some rest and I am sure he would not enjoy being whisked off to another realm so shortly after finally returning to his
Thor was not deterred. "Who else?"

"I don't know, Thor. Most of the people I meet I tend to make enemies of rather than leave a lasting positive impression on."

"That's not true, I'm sure—"

"I slaughtered multiple Jotuns – again – upon visiting their realm."

"When was the last time Jotuns appeared in Asgardian court?"

Loki didn’t know if he had an answer.

"I broke inside of a dwarven family's home upon my trip to Nidavellir."

"Then I'll rule out Nidavellir."

"We caused a falling out with a particularly angry elf." And Loki wasn't going to mention how he and this particular elf were linked by blood. "Entirely by accident, this time."

"The elves have faded into obscurity anyway, their testimony wouldn't hold much weight."

"And even on a planet so far away Asgardians don’t even know it exists, I teleported two unwitting Taradaxians and stranded them on Nidavellir."

Thor blinked. "You did?"

"They were in our way."

Thor shrugged his shoulders. "It's not perfect but it's a start."

"I doubt that they see it that way."

"No – I meant if I can find them, they could be called to the trial."

"I am not already accused of enough crimes? I thought you claimed you wanted to help me, not help further condemn me."

"If you were close enough to teleport while they were in your way, you must've been close enough to kill them. And yet you chose to spare them. It can't hurt for there to be evidence of your mercy."

"Mercy?" The reply bordered on a whisper, uttered in disbelief.

"Can you think of anyone else?"

"Short of summoning the Norns themselves – no."

It was rare, Loki thought, for Thor to appear so thoughtful. Never did he ever appear so strained, not while in combat or training or when using the full force of his strength.

"Do you know if there is a way of—"

"No. The Norns come and go as they please, as they have always done. I spent years waiting for them to contact me and if I couldn't find a way of contacting them instead, I doubt you can." What a shame it was that Loki would most likely never see them again, not with how much he’d enjoy
throttling them acting as a natural deterrent.

"If that is all you can think of..."

"I'd rather not have the largest possible gathering of people I have met invited to see me condemned. Again."

Thor lifted a hand, as if attempting to reach him through the barrier, then let it fall. "But what if you're not? What if it's because of them that you won't be?"

"Sometimes you are far too optimistic for your own good."

"Look at our respective positions and tell me which one out of the two of us is better off."

"That comment was... unnecessary."

"I need assurance that you won't sabotage yourself."

"It's not as if I ever deliberately plan to."

"That's what makes me worried."

"Worried?" Loki repeated. "How strange. I could have sworn you've said multiple times that everything is going to be fine."

Thor let out a sigh. "It would make it easier if you tried to cooperate."

"Then I wouldn't be the brother you have come to know."

Thor shook his head, his lips twitching before he became more grave. "No. I suppose you wouldn't be."

"Are we done here?" And why did he have to say that? It wasn't as if he desired to be on his own, left with nothing to think of but an eternity in his cell or worse looming in front of him. With nothing to think of but how much granting Byleistr the vial had cost him, about after how much himself and Tony had fought for some semblance of peace, he’d gone and ruined it all.

Thor deserved his fury.

Thor had the same expression as a kicked pup.

Sometimes, it was very difficult to remain angry with Thor.

"Do you want me to leave?"

Yes. No. Only if you stop insisting on trying to help me.

Loki didn't reply.

"You know," Thor finally said, "if I thought it wouldn't end in disaster, I could probably have persuaded our – my, I mean – father to visit you."

The thought of it did not make him recoil so much as confuse him. "Why would I want to speak to him?"

"Since your... visit to Midgard you have not spoken a polite word to him. I... I believe if he sees
you behaving yourself and being able to speak civilly and reasonably, he may be more inclined towards listening."

"You are beyond ridiculous."

"I wasn't inclined towards listening, was I? And here I am, listening to what you have to say. Why do you think it is impossible that he can't do the same?"

Because Odin is as unchanging as Asgard itself, Loki might have said. Because Odin is more of a liar than I am. Because Frigga is not here and she was the only person Odin acknowledged might be wiser than himself.

"Is it because he didn't visit you after you invaded Midgard?" Thor went on. "Is that why–"

"Oh, no."

"Why then?"

Not so long ago, Loki might have craved Odin's anger, his fury, even his disappointment over his impassiveness.

"The thought of Odin's presence..." Loki trailed off, searching for the right words. Infuriates wasn't it, wasn't anywhere near close. Nothing that extreme, not now he'd had the chance to distance himself from Asgard and from the place he'd once craved to belong to so desperately.

"I can understand why you would be wary–"

"Wary isn't it. Weary may be more accurate. The thought of Odin's presence tires me."

Thor frowned. "Tires you?" He tried to force a laugh. "What happened to you? There used to nothing like mentioning him to goad you into a fight. One slip of his name and you'd be snarling and summoning your daggers." Half a smile appeared. "Both verbal and otherwise."

Loki smiled then, not one that was forced or was there for no reason other than he thought it ought to be. "Believe me, brother. I'm finding that I much prefer it this way."

Thor’s smile faltered. “But if you could just calmly explain to him why–”

"Even now, you still don't understand the futility of it."

"This is not hopeless. You've saved all our lives–"

"Do you really think that will matter when the one person who will decide my fate is the same person I left stranded on Niflheim?"

"He is not beyond reason."

"Where I am involved, he is."

"If we could just prove that we are all still alive because of you, that would change everything. And not just for your trial – for our family."

Loki’s spine became rigid. "He is not my family."

"He'd be proud of you if he knew what you have accomplished."
Any other time and Loki might have laughed, might have scoffed at the idea of it, might have fallen into an angry silence or weaponised his words in the form of a cutting retort.

Instead, Loki said nothing. Not because he wasn't capable of speaking, but because he felt nothing beyond mild irritation.

Even in a world where Odin was capable of being proud of him, it would make no difference as to whether or not Loki cared for it.

And that, Loki decided, certainly made a pleasant change.

Chapter End Notes

Eeek - not many chapters left now.

Two? Three? Not sure about four.

And this fic surpassed 300K words!!??!
Chapter 55

Boredom should have been the least of Loki's problems. There were far larger concerns than simply not being entertained, far more pressing matters at hand.

His fate, for one thing.

It wasn't as if he disbelieved Thor's intentions. The sincerity had been shining from his eyes in such a way when he'd offered his aid that Loki could not doubt that he meant it. Thor’s abilities on the other hand...

Thor could fight and fight and enter battle after battle, but the only thing he refused to directly fight against was the Allfather.

If the Allfather was removed from the equation, Loki’s chances of one day being allowed to go free would be considerably higher.

Even if Thor did once again cross the Allfather, it wasn't as if Odin wouldn't have anticipated the possibility of it – after all, Thor had done it before. Not for the sake of Loki’s benefit, but he'd still done it.

Thor appeared to be under the impression the fact that he'd freed Loki from his cell successfully before meant that it would be easy to do again rather than the opposite.

Odin would be prepared. Odin would have measures in place. This time, Odin might even get a chance to grant Thor a suitable punishment for his defiance.

So, no, it wasn't Thor's intentions that Loki doubted: it was his ability to think things through and know himself and the people around him sufficiently well enough to predict their actions and plan accordingly. Which, unfortunately, was something Odin excelled at far more than Thor. But maybe if Loki couldn't rely on Thor...

There was that one conversation he remembered having some time back, the one where Tony had mentioned in jest about how he'd have to break Loki out of Asgard if it came to it. Loki was fairly certain that had happened.

Maybe Tony had meant it.

Maybe his best chance was if Thor and Tony were to somehow work together and rescue him from–

If there was one thing Loki despised, it was having to be rescued, to be forced into placing his future into the hands of others.

Future, he thought. And what future might that be? What was he expecting, exactly? If he was free, he could travel to places he'd never visited, walk through cities filled with species he'd never known existed, and there would be a window of time that Tony would still be happy to spend with him. And after...

If ever there was a time when Loki became distinctly aware of Tony's mortality, it was when he thought of his future.

Even if by some miracle he didn't manage to drive Tony away, he'd have to watch him age, watch
him get progressively more and more frail while he in turn looked no more than a day older.

It was simpler, easier, to brush those thoughts to one side while they were together for the simple reason that he liked being around Tony and he liked himself far more when Tony was around too.

Being trapped in his cell was disjointing, like being trapped inside a cage of everything he used to be, only he wasn't the same creature anymore and it seemed unfitting that the cage would still trap him regardless. If his cell had bars, he might have felt as if his form had altered so much so that he should have been able to slip through them.

But there were other ways.

If he'd managed to think himself out of meeting his doom with Thanos, surely there had to be something he could do when it came to facing Odin.

He might not have had the Tesseract but he still had his mind and words and his dearly beloved tricks.

***

It all happened far too similarly to how it had happened the last time he'd been brought before the Allfather: chains around his ankles, chains around his wrists, the long march to the front of the throne room.

The attendance of the throne room was full, Asgardian citizens packed in so tightly that there was no longer any seating and many had resorted to standing.

*If the Allfather wants a spectacle, Loki thought, it's a spectacle he'll receive.*

Unlike the last time Loki'd had a trial, Odin's advisory council was present, and as was Thor, already waiting by the empty seat opposite the throne.

Maybe it was a positive sign that he'd been granted a chair. He'd been given the same during his first trial, but not when he'd been summoned to the throne room again to receive his sentence. It meant that his trial was expected to last long enough that he most likely wouldn't be receiving his sentence on the same day and that he wouldn't immediately be declared guilty.

Loki reached the chair intended for him and the two guards holding his chains at either side fastened the rings to it.

"Loki," Odin said. His voice projected with ease but it lacked the raw power and volume it had once had. "Laufeyson."

Loki cocked his head to one side. "Am I?"

Underneath Odin's impassive stare, there was a twitch of irritation. "This is neither the time nor the place for your mockery."

"Oh, I have no intention of mockery," Loki replied with perfect mimicry of innocence. "If I am a Laufeyson then you must acknowledge that Laufey did not name me Loki." The frown he put on was deliberate. "As I recall, it was you and Frigga who named me Loki Odinson. Therefore Loki Laufeyson, being a hybrid of the two, is the name of a character who never existed."

"Is it wise to begin with such pedantic--"
"I think we ought to begin with at least *some* truths, don't you agree?"

The annoyance concealed within Odin's eye was becoming more and more visible. "No one has forgotten what you earned yourself a name for being the god of. And as for this argument – I know what this is about. You would rather force me into naming you Loki Odinson than admit to–"

"Actually, it's nothing of the sort."

"Then I am pleased to hear it." And yet he appeared far from pleased. "Very well. Let it be known that upon this day, the trial has begun for Loki of... Asgard."

"I think we're a little passed that, don't you?"

"Loki of Jotunheim, then."

"That's not strictly accurate either."

If Odin had been irritated before, it was little in comparison to the exasperation that crossed his face. "Where, then?"

Loki was of neither Asgard nor Jotunheim, neither a combination of the two nor any other realm; he was from the spaces that existed in between and he was something else entirely that belonged to no particular species or world, no singular group or culture.

"Nowhere," Loki answered.

It had bothered him, once. When he had so desperately yearned to belong to somewhere, when he’d wasted years chasing after a dream that only resulted in the opposite. But being of nowhere was not the same as being of nothing because the former meant he did not ally himself arbitrarily; it meant he was not tethered to one place, that far more options were open to him.

And in that instance, nowhere was unanimous with anywhere.

Odin eyed him. "Are you finished with your theatrics?"

Loki raised his chin. "My trial has only just begun."

"In that case... You, Loki of" – and how satisfying it was to see Odin's reluctance in obliging him his self-professed title – "Nowhere," Odin finally said, with a significant glare at Loki, "are called here to be held accountable for the crimes you have already been found guilty of as well as the crimes you have committed since escaping your punishment.

"You have already been tried and found guilty of breaking the peace between Asgard and Jotunheim, attempted fratricide, and treason by allowing enemies of Asgard to enter into our territory and deliberately placing the life of your king in danger. You have also been found guilty of treason by attempting to crown yourself king of a realm you had no claim to, breaking the peace between Asgard and Midgard, subjugating various persons to your will through magical means, conjuring forces of unknown origins to fight on your behalf, and therefore being responsible for the collateral damage."

The collateral damage. The tens and tens of Midgardians dead, he meant. And how telling it was that prior to that, Odin had neglected to mention the genocide attempt upon the Jotuns.

"That is correct," Loki confirmed.
"For your crimes, you were sentenced to spend the rest of your life alone and in the dungeons of Asgard."

"Father–" Thor interrupted.

"Not now, Thor." Odin turned his attention back to Loki. "Given that you escaped confinement, you are aware that your punishment for those same crimes will now be more severe."

Loki’s response came in the form of a sardonic smile. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

"But–" Thor interjected.

Odin continued to speak to Loki over the top of him. "In light of your attempt to escape Asgardian punishment and the years you have wrongfully spent free, you will find the circumstances of your cell far less accommodating and will be required to contribute your labour to tasks from within your cell." For all the emotion on Odin's face, he might as well have been reading a register. "But," Odin added, the emphasis on the last consonant ringing out, "that is not taking into consideration the further crimes you have committed since."

Loki’s did not allow his smile to falter.

Odin ignored it. "Aside from the crimes you have already been previously found guilty for, you stand accused of further counts of treason, attempted regicide, once again assisting Asgard's enemies, theft, and destroying an entire realm."

The last accusation Loki thought to be something of an exaggeration. It was because of his actions that Jotunheim had been rebuilt, not destroyed. Unless Odin intended to imply that by assisting Jotunheim, he'd ensured Asgard would have to attack it before they could fully regain their strength.

Loki fingered one of the metal rings that secured him to his chair. "Had I known you'd grown so prone to stretching the truth, I would have recommended you embellish a few details further. Make me out to be the murderer of children. Spread the word that I feast upon the organs of those I refer to as friends."

Odin's stare was hard and unyielding. "Do you deny your crimes?"

"On the contrary."

The voices of the crowd began to mutter behind him, the scorn distinguishable even if the words were not.

"You do not deny your guilt?"

"I am as guilty as–"

"Father," Thor interrupted, rising to his feet, his chair legs scraping against the floor. "Father – you do not know the full account of the story. Please, before you proceed to–"

"Silence," Odin commanded. He did not have to raise his voice to make the entirety of the throne room fall quiet and the sibilance of the word hissed. Odin gave the council a meaningful look and then turned his attention back to Loki. "Let me clarify: you do not deny your treason?"

"No."
"Loki..." Thor hissed underneath his breath.

"You do not deny your attempted murder?"

Technically speaking, Loki had never intended to murder Odin but if the Allfather wasn't referring to himself then there were plenty of other candidates available one way or the other.

"No."

Thor's knuckles kneaded into his forehead.

"You do not deny collaborating with enemies of Asgard?"

"No, I don't deny it."

Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, it was that admission that caused the crowd to begin muttering again.

"You do not deny equipping Frost Giants with weapons from Asgard's own vaults?"

Another hush fell over the room.

"No," Loki answered. "I do not deny it."

"Father, listen--"

"You are to stop speaking." The effect of Odin's command was like a whip. Then his eye met Loki's. "At least by your accounts thus far, it appears you are sparing us the tedium of a lengthy trial."

Loki allowed Odin to presume what he liked. "You know how I hate to inconvenience you."

The remark washed off him. "Now that you have confessed to--"

"He only gave the Jotuns the casket to save us!" Thor burst out.

Odin became very still, his lips so thin they had become invisible behind his beard. "Thor," Odin said in a dangerously carefully measured pace. "What have I told you about--"

Thor was calmer when he next spoke, the initial urgency of his delivery tempered. "He might've been aiding an enemy but he wasn't conspiring against Asgard: he was saving it."

The weight of Odin’s eye on Thor must have been a heavy one for him to bear but Thor withstood it all the same.

"And you believe this?" Odin demanded to know. "The word of the same brother who once told you that I was dead just to ensure his own reign would last longer?"

Thor nodded. "I have proof."

"Proof," Odin repeated. "Very well, then. Do not let it be said that I am unfair with my judgement during these trials."

"Thank you," Thor said, softer, more sincerely. "But first there is one point I must make clear for your consideration."
For a short moment, Odin closed his eyes. He might have pinched the bridge of his nose had they not had company. "Speak, then. But do it quickly."

"Loki's sentence was for the rest of his life." Thor's fingers toyed with the sleeve at his wrist, and Loki could only notice on account of how closely they were sitting. "But he died, Father. He died on Svartalfheim, slaying the beast responsible for the death of Mother."

Some of the hard lines in Odin’s face softened and his voice grew so quiet that only they could hear it. “I know he did.”

Of course Odin knew; he had been the one to grant him Valhalla in the first place, only Odin couldn’t admit that without presenting himself as a witness to speak in defence of Loki.

Thor blinked in astonishment. “What?”

Odin's volume returned to normal. "You claim Loki died, do you?"

"I was there," Thor insisted. "I was there and I can verify that—"

"Can you verify that with absolute certainty? Can you verify that there is no possibility that Loki – a known trickster an illusionist – was not deceiving you, knowing that fooling you into believing him dead would grant him the ability to walk free?"

Thor's jaw clenched. "I can't," he finally said. "But he can."

Thor beckoned to a guard to open the side-door he was stationed at and Loki turned to see who would emerge. And then, out from behind it, Heimdall stepped forward.

Odin might have been the only person more surprised than Loki in the entirety of the room that Heimdall was prepared to speak on his behalf – or so Thor was under the impression of, anyway.

Heimdall's gaze was level as he met Odin's, calm and sure.

Odin did not grant him a greeting. "Well?"

Heimdall did not hesitate when he came to stand beside Thor. "I had my eyes set to Svartalfheim. I knew from the information Thor had told me that it would be a risky venture—"

"As is disobeying your king," Odin interrupted, rather pointedly.

Heimdall gave a singular nod.

If it hadn't been for how Heimdall might actually have had something to say in his favour, Loki might have spoken out at the hypocrisy of it all – he'd been the one to send Heimdall to Asgard's dungeons when he'd played at being Odin, even if it had been under his orders to watch Thor that Heimdall had been set free again, and yet underneath the true Allfather's rule Heimdall had paid nothing for his crimes.

"I was concerned for Thor's safety," Heimdall continued, his intonation no different. "The Aether was unpredictable, Thor was facing the Dark Elves who we assumed to be long dead, and he was travelling with the brother who once tried to kill him. It was for this reason that I was watching closely." He spared a glance at Loki but his face remained as unreadable as ever. "I saw the weapon pierce through the front of Loki's chest and exit out through the other side. I saw his skin turn grey as the life left him. I watched his final words and I watched as he drew his last breath."
"You saw it," Odin corrected, his eye moving to the council and back to Heimdall. "That is different from being certain an event occurred. Particularly when illusionists are involved."

Heimdall nodded once again. "I also saw Thor holding his body, which I am sure Thor can attest to."

"I was, Father. I was touching him. How could it possibly have been an illusion if I was touching him?"

A member of the council, seated to the far-right, rolled his eyes. In the past few years, Loki had experienced more far fury on Thor's behalf than he would have liked to admit and the sight of such blatant dismissal irked him despite his full awareness of the flaws in Thor's statement.

"Were you, for instance, only touching the fabric of his clothing? Were you only touching the back of his head?"

"I– I had my arms around him, I watched as he–"

"Heimdall mentioned his skin greying. Were you touching his skin?"

"I–" Thor frowned as he struggled to conjure the memory. "I cradled his back."

For a strange moment, Odin almost appeared disappointed by Thor's response. "So you weren't touching his skin?"

Thor faltered. "No. Yes. I wasn’t touching his skin."

Odin appeared almost as distracted by his council as Loki was, his attention diverting between them and the subjects of his questioning. “Is there anything else, Heimdall?”

Thor sat back down.

Heimdall pursed his lips. "I also watched as Loki was... revived."

Odin leant forward. "Revived?"

"I watched as his wound healed and Loki, whose body had been lying still for hours, sat up as if there had been no injury at all."

“By your testimony, Loki should have a scar.”

Loki stilled. “... I do.”

It was subtle, but there was satisfaction in Odin’s eye and Loki could not for the life of him think of an explanation as to why. He’d left Odin’s body to freeze and had stolen his throne in the meantime – even if Odin was feeling uncharacteristically generous, he still didn’t have any reason to want to prove that Loki had actually died.

Didn’t he?

“Then I would like to see it.” Odin rose from his chair. “Guards!”

A guard came from either side, approaching with little concern for his dignity, their fingers tugging at the strings of his tunic. Their hands were clumsy, like insects scrambling over his chest, and they lifted the fabric so the skin of his stomach and chest was exposed to those in front of him.
Odin walked closer. His eye did not leave Loki’s scar. His mouth opened slightly and slowly, with a faint tremor in his fingers, he pressed the tip of his sceptre against Loki’s flesh.

The coldness of it was uncomfortable. First the exposure of Loki’s skin, then the way Odin, Thor, Heimdall, and the entire council could see his scar. And after, the cool temperature of the sceptre touching him, lightly pressing against the circular mark.

Odin swallowed. “And the other side?”

He disappeared from Loki’s view as the skin of Loki’s back was exposed. That time was worse than the former, the eyes of the crowd able to see his naked skin and the feeling of their eyes more insect-like than the guard’s fingers.

The sceptre pressed against the matching scar on his back and then it was gone and the guards pulled down the fabric so he was covered again.

“'The scar is genuine,” Odin concluded. And then, quieter, in almost a murmur, he added, “How did you return?”

It was no desire of Loki’s to reveal that part just yet.

Loki smoothed his tunic the best he could with his chains still attached but it did not erase the feeling of their eyes touching him. "I believe I'll opt to explain that part later."

The gentleness was gone. "You stand as the accused, you have no right to decide in which order you answer."

"I assume you want this over with as quickly as I do."

"I see no point in delaying this."

"Then, for once, it seems that we have met an agreement."

Once again, Odin glanced at the council. Was that a flicker of concern? "Without further elaboration, some may dismiss the claims of you having returned from the dead."

"Be rest assured that I will elaborate." Loki met Odin's eye. "Even glossing over my miraculous recovery, I am sure you have enough evidence to condemn me for many lifetimes over so we might as well spare ourselves a little more time and—"

"Yes," Odin interrupted, his voice growing colder and sharper, like refined steel, as he made his way back to the throne. Odin placed himself in the seat. "Let's proceed to the part where you bore arms against your king."

"I did?" Loki asked in mock astonishment. "And who, I wonder, can possibly stand as a witness?"

The look Thor cast at him communicated how tempted he was to punch him. "Loki," Thor whispered in a hiss. "Try not make this any worse."

Define worse.

Odin rose to his feet, nostrils flared, fingers clenched. "You turned my own weapon against me, Loki. You struck your king."

"Technically speaking," Loki said with an air of carelessness he could only hope would further infuriate Odin, "since we've established that I'm not of Asgard, you cannot reasonably claim that
"You struck your king! You struck Gungnir against the back of my skull and then you left me to die on Niflheim!" He paused to regain some of his breath. "At best, it is treason, and at worst, it is attempted regicide."

"Attempted regicide? If I was truly trying to kill you, I would have deposited your body in the fires of one of Muspelheim's volcanoes, not left you to freeze."

For a moment, Odin appeared so overcome with fury that he could not formulate a response. Thor raised a hand to placate him. "Father," Thor said, "I know you may not like it, but his point is a valid one."

Odin's words were terse, laden with warning. "I have heard enough from you." He looked away from Thor. "We'll return to Loki's long list of criminal acts." There was a pause. "After usurping me, you then proceeded to use your tricks to wear my image, to give commands in my name, and to impose as the Nine Realm's true king, all to satisfy your own need to see yourself on a throne."

Thor's mouth opened as if he had been about to make a counter-argument but no words left it. And then, slowly, surely, they got out. "That is... not entirely correct."

"Do you intend to answer for every accusation aimed at Loki?"

"I-"

"You are a prince of Asgard and a prince of Asgard should not be permitted to show such favouritism towards its prisoners."

"But he's not a prisoner yet, not fully." Thor swallowed as Odin's anger flared in his direction. "He has to be tried and found guilty in order to be a true prisoner."

"Then that is even more reason why you cannot be allowed to show such bias towards your brother."

_Brother?_ How was it that Odin had first called him Loki Laufeyson when the trial had begun and yet he still referred to him as Thor's brother?

Thor's lips were pressed tightly together though unlike Odin, not in anger. His fingers twitched and then, staring directly at Odin, he replied, "Then neither can you."

For a second, Odin did nothing but stare, his face a wash of disbelief. And then, in a voice so clipped it was barely audible, Odin replied, "I am judging him as objectively as possible."

"For a man who experienced me abandoning him on Niflheim, I'm certain you are," Loki replied. The disbelief vanished when Odin focused on him. Anger. That was something Loki was familiar with when it came to him. Not Thor's oddly respectful defiance and clumsy but well-intended attempts at diplomacy.

"Do you deny your guilt of usurping the throne and impersonating myself, the true king of Asgard?"

"Oh, not at all," Loki said.

"He was defending Asgard," Thor interrupted.
"He rid Asgard of its king."

"He was--" Thor hesitated. "I've spoken to you about this before, Father."

"Not before the court, you haven't."

"He knew an enemy was coming."

"I had a conversation with Loki," Heimdall offered, "that involved him mentioning a great threat."

The crowd broke into murmurs.

Odin banged the base of his sceptre against the floor to silence them before asking, "What enemy?"

There was a long pause.

"His name was Thanos," Loki finally said.

"Thanos." Odin shook his head. "And which realm does this Thanos hail from?"

"None of the ones we know of." Except Odin, perhaps, but there would be little point in mentioning how many more worlds there were than the Asgardians were aware of when he'd have to somehow actually convince them of it.

The crowd tittered and Odin's fingers clenched together tighter, his nails surely digging into his palms. "Loki," he said, the warning clear and evident in his tone, "don't be ridiculous."

As ridiculous as the man who had dealings with the Collector pretending that there were no more worlds than nine?

It would be bordering futile to attempt to get Odin to admit it. If Loki wanted to make *that* announcement, his trial would take weeks and he'd be more likely branded a madman than anything else. So he settled for a different kind of truth.

"I encountered Thanos in the void."

A flash of something Loki could not identify in time crossed Odin's face and if it had been anyone but him, Loki might have called it alarm.

"You mean..."

Was that hesitancy? From the Allfather?

"After I..." *After I thought I'd seen the last rejection from you. After I lost myself to something worse than oblivion. "After I... fell."*

Odin remained perfectly still. No interruptions. No interrogations. No disputing his words.

"Thanos waged war and destruction wherever he went." Loki shot a meaningful look at Odin. "More so than I ever did. And when I learned he had plans to invade Asgard--"

"How?" The harshness in Odin's voice had softened. "How did you learn of these plans?"

"I had a rather interesting conversation with the Norns."

Someone behind him snorted.
"The Norns?"

"Oh, yes. They came to me while I was sat on the very throne you are seated upon now. They were concerned for their safety and sought me out."

"To protect them?"

"I am an unlikely protector, I will admit."

"But this happened after you were already on the throne. If you only discovered this enemy was plotting to invade afterwards, you must have--"

"I will admit it: I wanted to guarantee my own safety. I had not only an excellent disguise, but also alibis to my supposed death, as well as a position of high power. And with that power I began to fortify Asgard."

"Fortify Asgard?"

"I rallied troops. I raised Asgard's defences. I reaffirmed alliances that had grown distant over the centuries. I picked those to oversee the soldier's training."

"And tell me, how self-servient were you as Asgard's ruler?"

"Yes, of course. You are entirely correct. Within a matter of months, I arranged night after night of debauchery with a vast array of--"

"Books in the library, as I recall," Heimdall finished. Loki scowled.

Odin's eyes shifted between the two of them. "Is this relevant to the trial?"

"He was seeking information for how to better Asgard," Heimdall answered. "Tirelessly."

Loki's scowl deepened.

"You expect me to believe that Loki only overthrew me because he had Asgard's best interests at heart?"

"Absolutely not," Loki answered before Heimdall had the chance.

"What, then?"

"I overthrew you and then just happened to have enough self-preservation to know that Asgard's defences would prove useful."

"Why would you provoke him?" Thor groaned. Then, upon seeing that his furious whispering had been heard, Thor raised his voice to address Odin. "Loki did everything he could while he was king to ensure the safety of Asgard."

"Did he?"

"I can't speak for his motives," Heimdall stated, "but I saw him attempt to mend bridges between realms. I saw him rallying the soldiers and I saw him researching to the point of sacrificing sleep."

"And what does the accused have to say for himself?" Odin asked. Loki the Accused. That was
another name to add to his already extensive list of titles. "Well?"

"I am guilty on both accounts: preparing Asgard for war and placing myself as a false king."

Even though they were yards apart, the way Odin's jaw clenched was still visible, only it didn't appear to be in anger or frustration this time. Odin's eye fell on him and when Loki met the stare, there was something bordering hastiness in the way Odin looked away again.

"And I don't suppose there is anyone who can verify the existence of this tyrant that has been talked about so extensively?"

"Actually," Thor said, "there is." For the second time that day, Thor gestured to the side-door.

"And this is...?" Odin asked.

"I'm Tony Stark."

Loki whirled around with such vigorousness that his chains clanked against their restraints.

Tony made his way forward, appearing as if he was at just as much ease as he would be strolling through his own home.

Tony.

On Asgard.

He'd worn a suit for the occasion, the shirt a deep shade of crimson underneath a black blazer.

Loki couldn't stop staring.

Tony was here. On Asgard. For him.

After Tony caught his stare, he waved a hand, wiggling his fingers. "Thought I told you not to get yourself locked up without me."

And for that comment, Loki had to laugh, had to laugh like the entirety of his future wasn't in question, had to laugh like the thought of Odin speaking to Tony didn't fill him with dread, had to laugh like his chance to be the first person to introduce Tony to Asgard hadn't been ripped away. But there was also the fact that Tony's timing and the way he said it was nothing short of spectacularly comical. The way Tony had enough confidence in his stance that no one would be none the wiser if it wasn't for his foreign clothing that he was the only mortal in a room filled with gods. The way he appeared in front of Asgardian court, the most formal of settings, and spoke with that air of familiar nonchalance. The way that being scrutinised by the Allfather, the highest official authority within the Nine Realms, did nothing in the way of intimidation.

The effort of trying to suppress further outbursts of laughter made his cheeks ache.

"Oh," Tony added, "and I'm the other guy responsible for saving the universe. No need to thank me or anything."

Some of Loki's laughter escaped.

Odin did nothing other than give Tony a glare that informed him it would be his last warning. "Which realm are you from, Tony Stark?"

"Earth. Midgard."
"Do you know why you have been asked to speak today?"

"Uh – I can take a pretty good guess."

Odin raised his eyebrows.

My king. Once again, Tony had missed uttering the expected ‘my king’ at the end of his sentence. Thor and Heimdall might have been able to get by without it, and Loki had already been at odds with the Allfather for long enough that it would be odd for him to grant him the courtesy of using his title, but for Tony to elect not to...

"You've got Loki on trial here and let me guess, everything started going wrong when it turns out pretty much everyone on your planet is still breathing because of him."

Loki expected ridicule but instead the crowd made no noise.

From the throne upon the steps, Odin towered above Tony even when seated. "I mislike your tone."

"Hey – no one gave me a briefing. I just showed up to the meeting after getting summoned at four in the morning so maybe I'm not at my best."

Titters echoed behind him and Odin held up a hand to silence them.

"So my guess is this the part where you figure out whether the whole Thanos thing is real or not."

"My king," Odin corrected.

"Huh, that’s funny. I’d say I’m more of a celebrity, myself."

"Your insolence will not grant your testimony any favours."

Tony cleared his throat. "Right. Yeah. My testimony. The whole Thanos thing was totally real. Except it was and it wasn't. It's complicated."

But Odin was not deterred. "Was he or was he not real?"

"You want an honest statement, right? See – here's the thing: he was both. At different times. Maybe at the same time, I don't know. But er... how much time do I have to explain this? Because when I said it's complicated, I meant it. Wait. Which bit of the story are we at? I could barely hear from your witness cupboard. Have we done the battle where everyone died but not really yet?"

Someone in the crowd guffawed.

"Take that as a no. Right. Er..."

Thor decided to assist. "Odin is trying to determine whether Loki was telling the truth in the claim that he was defending Asgard."

"Fortifying it," Loki corrected before any of the audience received any false impressions.

“Well, Loki thought Thanos was completely real, if that helps."

Odin's stare was flat. "Is that a mortal's definition of helpful?"

"Hey – I just got here. And I've mentioned how complicated it is. If you let me tell you the whole
"I am in control of this trial. I and I alone. I will send for you when your testimony will become relevant."

A clear dismissal.

"Relevant? Are you kidding me? If you actually--" Tony broke off when he noticed Odin make eye-contact with one of the guards and amended himself. The visible attempt to control himself was both impressive and rare, given the compulsions he was often drawn to. "What I'm saying is the story is long and complicated and getting this patchwork mishmash of testimonies is only gonna confuse everything."

Odin granted him a singular curt nod. "Then you may leave."

"But--"

"I said," Odin began, his voice rising in volume, "that for now you are done."

Tony blinked. He opened his mouth, presumably to object or insult, but then, with what looked like difficulty, he closed it again. Tony's shoulders moved when he took a deep breath before turning around to meet Loki's eyes and mouth 'shitty fathers club'.

It was a gesture Loki appreciated.

"Alright, alright. I'm going back to my cupboard." Tony shot a glance at a Heimdall. "But how come he gets to stay?"

"Because," Odin said icily, "Heimdall's sight is far less limited than yours. Now be on your way before I banish you for insolence."

Tony took another breath. He stroked something on his wrist, something that had all the defining traits of the technology he had such an aptitude for designing.

The guard took another step closer.

For a handful of seconds, Loki could do nothing but wait, but then Tony let his fingers fall and he left without having to be further prompted.

Odin cleared his throat to put an end to the quiet chatter that had risen. "Heimdall?"

"Yes, my King?"

"Did you see this enemy Loki claims to have existed?"

"I did not."

"Did you have any reason beyond Loki's word to believe that he existed?"

"Aside from witnessing Loki's actions as king from watching from the dungeons, he spoke to me in private to request that I closely surveyed anything that might emerge."

"And?"

"And something did."
"What was it?"
"A fleet."
"From where?"
"The void."

So that must have been what eventually happened to the fleet of Thanos's that Loki had tricked into flying through the portal; it had slipped Loki’s mind, though he supposed if they abruptly stopped receiving instructions from Thanos after his disappearance then it made sense that they'd stop heading towards Earth. Either that, or they continued seeking out the Mind Stone to follow his last command. Except that, he realised, Thanos's last command had been for them to travel to Earth with him, and therefore the moment they realised – three years later, given the time distortions from the void – that Loki was not with them, they would have been after him. And he had been on Asgard.

"What kind of fleet?"

"A large fleet, capable of fast flight. They flew orderly at first, heading towards what appeared to be Midgard, perhaps. When I informed Loki of them, he believed they were tracking the Mind Stone—"

"The Mind Stone?" As if Odin didn't already know what it was. "How does the Mind Stone come into this?"

"Thor had brought an acquaintance from Midgard back with him who carried the stone." Contained would have been more accurate than carried. "After Thor's guest stayed in the palace for a short length of time, the fleet changed direction."

"To where?"
"They headed for Asgard."

"And what became of the fleet?"

Heimdall frowned. "They ceased to fly in uniform and their sense of direction seemed to become... haphazard." If they had been seeking Loki and he was teleporting from realm to realm and eventually to outside of the Nine Realms themselves, of course they must have struggled. "Eventually, they disappeared back into the void."

"And Loki?"

"He disappeared to find Thor."

"Where were you, Thor?"

"I was with Jane and Vision – my acquaintance who had the Mind Stone."

Odin managed to express disapproval with nothing but his eye alone. "You mean to say that you were spending frivolous time on Midgard while an entire fleet was heading for Asgard."

"Loki gave me the task of moving Vision from realm to realm to deter Thanos from Asgard. I was under the impression I was following your orders."

Odin turned to Heimdall. "What happened after you told Loki where Thor was?"
"I didn't," Heimdall answered.

"Then how did–"

"The Norns."

Somehow, when it was Heimdall confirming the Norn's involvement, no one scoffed. There were no scuffles of movement, no quiet voices, just hundreds of Asgardians listening in rapt attention.

"You saw them, I presume?"

"I did," Heimdall confirmed. "I watched them visit Loki and I watched as they handed over the Tesseract and sent him on his way."

"Which was..."

"To Midgard."

"Did you see Loki arrive there?"

"I was occupied."

"Occupied with what?"

"Watching where the Norns went."

Odin's eyes flickered to the crowd. "I will follow further lines of questioning regarding the Norns in private. But to clarify – you did not see with your own eyes that Loki went to Midgard straight after his meeting with the Norns?"

"No."

"Thor? Did you?"

"I... No. But that doesn't mean he wasn't there."

Odin looked pained. "Very well," he sighed. "Bring in the mortal again."

When Tony next appeared, he did it with far more exasperation than the previous time.

"When did you first see Loki after the time in which he waged war on your realm?"

"Uh... Jotunheim."


"Well, yeah. I was pretty out of it. Okay – very out of it. There was a massive battle and I got hit by something from behind. Turned out that something was– Nevermind. I'll explain that later."

"A battle."

"Yup. With Thanos."

"Is there anyone else who can testify that this happened? Heimdall?"

"My gaze, as I have mentioned, was elsewhere."
"Surely there must be hundreds of other mortals who witnessed this battle and can verify that Thanos was a hostile attacker."

"Er – no. Here's the thing I keep trying to tell you: Thanos was both real and not real."

"You are speaking in riddles."

"Okay – fine. Uh... How do I explain this? Have we got to the time travel part yet?"

Where before there had been several guffaws and sniggers while Tony was speaking, this time there was outright laughter.

"Take it as another no then."

Odin shook his head. "You dare to jest–"

"I'm not kidding."

"You expect the court to swallow such ridiculous nonsense–"

"Infinity Stones," Tony interrupted. "You've heard of them. I got the Time Stone, Loki got the Space Stone – i.e. the Tesseract. Turns out if you combine them just right, you've got yourself a time-travelling portal gun."

Thor gaped.

The laughter grew louder.

Odin was the only other exception who did not appear amused. "The Time Stone," he repeated. "Where did you find–"

Upon hearing that the Allfather wished to continue with his line of enquiry, a hush fell.

"Niflheim," Loki answered, mostly to spare Tony of having to speak with the Allfather.

"But how–"

"There was a labyrinth that led deep into the realm."

Odin grew still. "Loki," he said gravely. "Do you mean to tell me you removed the stone?"

"I fail to see how else we would have used it."

Odin stared. "Loki." His mouth was slack. "You melted the entirety of Niflheim."

Loki blinked. "I did what?"

"You heard correctly."

Loki shook his head. "I like to think I would have remembered doing something that extreme."

"Then would you care to explain to me how I awoke shortly before Thor's men were sent for me because I was no longer frozen? Would you care to explain to me how it came to be that the rest of the frozen warriors had become mobile too? I only narrowly escaped because of your reckless regard for other realms–"

"But–" Why was Odin so convinced it had been removing the stone that had done it? "I couldn't
"If it wasn’t you responsible for it, then who else was it? Who else could visit Niflheim without immediately freezing? The other Jotuns don't have access to the Bifrost so it couldn't possibly have been them."

"Think about it," Loki urged. "How could I have melted an entire realm? I am well aware that I have an unfortunate penchant for attracting chaos, but even for me, that would be extreme."

"You think it's a mere coincidence that after you remove a powerful object from the core of the realm, the realm ceases to continue as it once did?"

"I-" Loki broke off. He could recall it now, how when they'd taken the Time Stone off the plinth there had been all those terrible splintering and cracking noises, how they had only just teleported out of Niflheim with enough time to spare, how they had never returned since. "You are telling me that its ramifications spread across the whole of Niflheim?"

"Yes, Loki," Odin snapped, "the whole of Niflheim."

The lights in the labyrinth. They had been growing like roots between the gaps in the walls, all the same amber light as the Time Stone. Afterwards, he'd assumed it was only the labyrinth that the Time Stone influenced, not that much more. Let alone the entirety of the realm.

"Uh," Tony said. "Actually, I was the one who took the Time Stone."

They both turned to stare at him, though for entirely different reasons: Odin because of the admission meaning Loki might not have been fully responsible, and Loki because no one was forcing Tony to admit that; he could have far more easily said nothing.

"You?" Odin uttered.

"I didn't know taking a stone would melt the entire planet. I didn't even think that was possible. Who the hell designed that place? Because that's one hell of a security flaw."

Odin appeared to be deliberating before he answered. "The norns did," he finally said. "Not the three Norns of legend, but their ancestors. It was before their time. The norns, they... They may not have even known the artefact was the Time Stone." Judging from Odin's expression, neither did he.

"So why do it?" Tony asked. "Why stick a powerful stone in the middle of a planet? That's what I don't get. Why do it if it ends up freezing--" His face lit up. "Oh," he gasped. "Oh, that's good. Well, kinda bad for them. But I was actually right!"

Loki was familiar with that expression, with the look that came when Tony gained a sudden understanding of something. "What is it?"

"Freezing. Remember one of the first things I managed to do with the Time Stone was freezing something in time? Well – not freezing exactly, just slowing it down a hell of a lot. And then--" Tony stopped speaking again, shaking his head in delighted disbelief. "Remember when I couldn't figure out why my beard stopped growing?" He pointed at the crowd. "It's not a competition. For the record, I like my beard tidy." Then when he spoke, it was to Loki and Loki alone. "Remember that conversation we had about it on the ship? Where we had a ton of theories about why my beard wasn't getting stubbly." He moved closer to lean on the arm of Loki's chair as he started to explain, gesticulating with one hand. "Because if the Time Stone froze stuff, and when we – I, I mean – essentially unplugged it from the planet and the planet melted... That means the Time Gem was responsible for freezing the planet, right? Except the Time Gem doesn't control temperature or
"Ah," Loki breathed.

"Yup. Explains why the place started melting."

"But if Niflheim was frozen in time, why weren't we?"

"The stone was at the core. If it’s anything like radiation – which, guess what, the stones kinda are – it takes time to spread out and influence new objects."

Another memory: the sensation of becoming colder and colder. And now there was the new possibility that it was more than just acclimatising to the temperature – it was gradually being frozen. In time.

Loki couldn’t stop staring up at Tony. “If anyone was to discover the stone could prevent ageing…”

“If that group of people decided to share their discovery of what they thought was the key to actual immortality with the whole planet…”

“And if they received all the arrangements they needed in order to grant every person immortality…”

No wonder the labyrinth had been so elaborate. It would’ve had to be capable of influencing the whole realm.

Tony grinned. “I’ve got another theory."

“I’m listening."

“Alright, but I only came up with this because I had a good teacher. Get this: whoever put the Time Stone there never learned to wield it properly. Or if they did, they were gone by the time the gem started altering people and anyone realised they were all being frozen rather than stopping ageing.”

Thor cleared his throat and it was only then that Loki realised he’d paid no mind to Odin and the rest of them, paid no mind to the fact that they were in the middle of his trial, that Tony was leaning far closer than he would be expected to be comfortable with.

Thor gave him a slightly puzzled look.

Nota note. Why did Thor have to choose now to be observant?

Odin slammed a hand on the arm of the throne. "Are you quite finished? Does the thought of being responsible for hundreds of beings of unknown strength becoming unfrozen delight you so much that you can't stop your excited chattering?"

Tony startled, a subtle stiffening rather than jolting, and he adjusted himself so he was stood leaning not quite so closely. "I'm having to leave loads of stuff out of my testimony here. You should see the director's cut and commentary, that's really something.” He was met with unanimous puzzlement, which he promptly ignored. “Where were we before you sidetracked us with all this melting stuff? Oh yeah – I was telling you about Thanos. So me and Loki end up getting both gems and we go back to Earth to do more study buddy sessions. Except there's no sign of the battle ever happening. And no – it wasn't because of Loki's illusions. Well, not that Loki's
illusions. It was future-Loki’s illusions but we didn’t figure that out until later. Anyway, I’ve got this tech that can access your memories and the battle for Loki was just as real as it was for me – well, more real actually, since he didn’t pass out by the end of it."

"How long will this take?" Odin enquired.

"Alright. The short version – I still can’t get over how many cuts I’m making – is I invented SHIT," Tony said matter of factly and the sheer amount of disbelief on Odin’s face made it difficult to resist snorting. "Stands for Shooting Holes in Time. So anyway, we figure if we travel back in time and change the one thing that happened that made us work together to invent time travel in the first place, that's gonna make a paradox. Because if the battle never happened, there's no way we would've got on the same team. Except Loki finds the loophole: the battle only needs to seem like it happened." The grin Tony gave was infectiously wide. "And that's where his illusions come in."

Odin gave him a singular nod, perhaps being the only person to have understood after having been given such a brief explanation.

"And later on we encountered Thanos and well... Loki talked him into paradoxing himself out of existence, that's what happened."

Odin glanced at Loki. The corners of his mouth were creeping upwards but he held the rest of his face in place.

*He’d be proud of you if he knew what you have accomplished.*, Thor's words echoed. How fortunate it was that Loki had been as correct then as he was now: it didn’t matter in the slightest to him.

"Is there anyone else who can verify this?" Odin asked. "Heimdall?"

Heimdall shook his head. "My vision does not extend beyond the Nine Realms."

"Do you know of anyone else, Tony Stark?"

"Who can prove the time travel bit? No."

Not unless the Norns themselves put the slightest amount of effort into making his life any easier.

"Then that," Odin said, "concludes the first day of Loki’s trial."

*Oh, no.*

Absolutely not.

Even if Odin had, in his own way, assisted with proving Loki’s death had been genuine, even if he had almost smiled at the thought of Loki besting Thanos, Loki still wasn’t close to satisfied.

"We're not finished."

Not until he was able to begin his plan, the plan he had generated in his cell in event of his prospects remaining grim.

The look Odin gave him was more bewildered rather than anything else. "Is there anything else you feel inclined to confessing?"

"Oh, we’ve finished with the list of crimes I have been accused of." Loki left a deliberate pause, savouring the silence, savouring the mounting tension, savouring the baffled expressions on the
faces of those around him. "But what of your crimes?"

"My crimes?"

"You heard me correctly. It is good to know that your hearing remains as acute as ever. A rare gift."

The confusion had still not cleared.

"I am not the one on trial," Odin reminded him.

"No," Loki agreed. "But perhaps you should be."

"On what grounds could I possibly be on trial?"

Loki stood straight. "I would begin with the subjugation of entire worlds."

Odin froze.

"Followed by various war crimes," Loki added. There was more than a hint of panic in Odin's eye. "Followed by abusing your power as Asgard's king to inflict punishments without undertaking the process of an official trial."

"I– What?"

"You heard correctly, as you well know."

Odin shook his head. "You are the one that is on trial, Loki."

"If I am to be on trial then you should not have to miss out either."

Odin used his sceptre to point at the audience. "You think to fool this crowd with such shameful tactics?"

It was a reasonable strategy of Odin's, to stroke their pride by insinuating that of course they were far too clever to fall for such tricks.

"Some people may call it tactics. I, on the other hand, call it taking opportunities."

Odin turned towards his council and rose, having to use the sceptre as leverage to stand. It shook as he weighted it. "I was already in the process of declaring that this trial will be postponed up until its completion on–"

"I said," Loki repeated, louder this time, "that we're not done."

"That is not for you to decide."

Loki turned to face the rest of the room. There was enough slack in his chains for that, at least. "None of you trust me. None of you believe that my presence here is a positive sign. Many of you will suspect that me being here is by my design." Loki smiled through the lie; it wasn't as if they would be able to know the difference. "I have allowed myself to stand before you like this, before the court, before the very throne on which the Allfather sits, to accuse Odin Allfather of subjugating the minds of the inhabitants of Asgard as well as numerous other realms."

Silence.
Then laughter, great jeers of it. There were shoulders shaking with amusement, hands not bothering to conceal mouths, even tears appearing in some of their eyes.

"The lies of a desperate man have no place in court," Odin declared, having to raise his voice to speak over the top of the crowd. He took a step down the steps to the throne.

"I agree entirely."

There was another flicker on Odin's face. "Unless you have substantial evidence to support the preposterousness in which you are suggesting–"

"If you allowed Tony to explain the full story, you would know that I spoke with a certain man named The Collector," Loki said and watched Odin hesitate. "If you allowed Tony to tell you the full story, you would know that I learned how you traded the Mind Stone for the Tesseract, how I learned of your connection to The Collector in the first place, and, more relevantly, what it was that you used the Mind Stone for."

"If you have no substantial evidence, today's court session is concluded, and all persons may leave."

No chairs were scraped back and there were no bustles of movement.

Loki let out a faint laugh. "Tell me: is it merely a coincidence that only you knew of the artefact in Niflheim’s core, or did you take inspiration from it? You might not have known what the stone was or how to reach it, but you knew it was powerful and that it reached across the entirety of the realm. If you planted another powerful artefact – say, the Mind Stone, for instance – then how simple, how convenient, how easy it would be to alter their minds to remember only what you wanted them to remember. And that's not even taking into account how integral the Bifrost is to Asgard – if the reach of the Mind Stone was able to spread across the bridge then... Well, I suppose you found out, didn't you?"

Odin shook his head. All he uttered was a quiet, "We're done here, Loki."

"No," Loki corrected. "you said we are done here unless I have substantial evidence." Odin’s knuckles were white as they gripped his sceptre. "And I know exactly where that evidence is. If I was to lead a group of impartial witnesses right to where I know the evidence to be–"

"As a prisoner, you do not have the right to wander the palace at will."

"The palace? How interesting. I never said anything about the evidence being inside of the palace."

Odin paused his journey down the steps. "You are twisting my words–"

"If I do not have the right to lead the witnesses then I can at least direct others to where the evidence is."

"I will go, Father," Thor volunteered.

"You are too easily swayed by your brother's–"

"Then send your advisory council with me," Thor suggested.

Warmth blossomed in Loki's chest. Thor. Ever hopeful Thor. The warmth would not diminish, not even when he was forced to address Odin. "If this is what you say it is – if this is nothing but a desperate bid in an attempt to condemn you rather than myself – then what do you have to fear?"
"I–" Odin's voice died in his throat and he shuffled forwards. "I will not allow it. I will not stand back and allow you to disrupt your trial purely to–"

"The trial can continue with or without Thor and your trusted group of advisors, I am sure. The trials have done in the past."

"No."

"Why ever not?" He had Odin now, trapped, cornered. But he was not finished. He raised his voice so even Asgardians at the very back of the throne room would be able to hear. "How is it that an entire realm could not notice how Frigga was never pregnant with her secondborn child? How is it that an entire realm did not know that Frigga was not the first woman to provide Odin with a royal heir?" Somehow, the silence that followed was quieter than the previous silences. "How is it that an entire realm forgot that Thor is not Odin's firstborn?"

From the periphery of Loki's vision, Thor's mouth fell open.

"What?"

"The evidence," Loki said, addressing both everyone and no one in particular, "is waiting for you. If only the Allfather would–"

"Any person or persons who follows Loki's instructions is directly acting against the command of their king," Odin interrupted. "And therefore is committing an act of treason."

Heimdall stepped forwards. "An act of treason should be an act that goes against the interest of a realm, not its king."

Loki stared.

Heimdall.

Heimdall had acted against the Allfather once before but he'd never spoken against him in such open defiance. And certainly not for an argument that would ultimately benefit Loki. Perhaps it was possible that Loki had underestimated him when he'd assumed Heimdall's distaste for him would override his judgement.

Loki opened his mouth.

All he needed was to tell them was where in Odin's vault the painting and the receipt for Mjolnir was. That one instruction which if followed would cause ramifications he could only attempt to predict.

What would the people do once they realised Odin did not uphold Asgard's laws – or, more significantly, what would they do once they realised how little Odin had regarded the sanctity of their minds?

Loki might have subjugated a few people to his will when he was the furthest from his peak he'd ever been, but at least he hadn't subjugated tens of thousands.

Odin reached the bottom of the steps and was stood directly in front of him. "Loki," he whispered, a plead, a cracked beg for him to stop.

Loki would not stop.
Odin closed his eyes. "You played me well." He rested a hand on Loki's shoulder and murmured so softly that only Loki could hear: "In some ways, you are my son more than Thor is."

"I," Loki said, removing the hand and allowing it to fall to Odin's side, "am not your son and I have no desire to be."

Odin drew back. He looked oddly vulnerable like that, a strange concoction of shock and hurt.

Maybe that had been how Loki had looked when he'd held on to Gungnir by one hand and pleaded with the Allfather, begged him for his acceptance.

Except this time Loki was the one refusing him – not out of spite or rash anger, but because when he stared into Odin's eye all he could muster was indifference.

Loki waited, though he was not certain what he was waiting for. And then he saw it: a glimmer of blue hovering in the air between himself and Odin.

Odin frowned at it but the question was directed at Loki. "What are you doing?"

But it wasn't him. It wasn't one of his illusions.

*No,* Loki thought, *it's better.*

Because he could feel it now, feel its energy and power that was so attuned to his own.

The Tesseract.

And it had come to him of its own accord.

The Tesseract must have willed it like the Power Stone had desired to be in the hand of Thanos, must have sent itself to him, and what sweet spectacular timing it had.

Because now he had access to far better proof than the evidence that lay within Odin's vault.

The Tesseract floated to rest in his palms.

"If it is treason for anyone to assist me," Loki said, the Tesseract's energy infusing him, rejuvenating him, "then I suppose I'll do the courtesy of bringing the evidence myself."
Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Loki reappeared in the throne room – only this time he hadn't returned alone.

The time in which it had taken him had not been long enough that most of the audience had left, and Odin remained seated on the edge of the throne.

The room went silent.

The Allfather did nothing but stare, his jaw slack and his eye wide.

How Hela's eyes focused low on Odin's feet had nothing to do with subservience and everything to do with her being able to drag her eyes up, analysing him from heel to head, scrutinising, taking in his new frailty, her grin growing wider the more she saw.

"Hello Father," she said.

Odin went stiller than he had ever been on Niflheim.

The sound of her voice had triggered the guards to form a line between her and the Allfather, their weapons drawn and pointed at the unknown threat. Hela walked closer to him, the same predatory slink of a large cat.

The sceptre in Odin's fingers fell to the floor and rolled down the steps.

"That's not as impressive as the sceptre you used to have." She took another step forward, her body inches away from the wall of spears. "Was letting this one go surrender or clumsiness?"

"H–" Odin got out.

"Well?"

"H–"

She waved a hand. "Yes, yes, hello or Hela or whatever it is you're trying to say." She waited for a response but Odin was incapable. "I'll assume it was clumsiness. If you were to surrender, it would not be such a quick ordeal."

"But how did you–"

Hela gestured to where Loki stood behind her. "My brother and I had a bargain."

Odin's eye flickered back and forth between them. "You... You and Loki?"

"That is what I said." She surveyed the rest of the throne room and pointed with her chin towards Thor. "And that's the other brother, is it?" There was no reply. "I can see the family resemblance between the two of you," she added in a tone that had grown disconcertingly conversational. "It makes me glad I took more after Mother."

Odin had yet to stop staring. "What are you doing here?"
"What does it look like I'm doing?"

He tore his gaze from her. "Loki," he uttered, his voice hoarse. "What have you done?"

Loki would not allow himself to be cowed. "I fulfilled my end of the bargain."

"Late enough to be irritating," Hela added. Seven years. Seven years it must have been from her perspective, despite it only being a matter of months after they'd made their deal when Loki had defeated Thanos. Seven years was not a long stretch of time for an immortal, but the waiting, the not knowing, must have made it feel longer.

"None of the terms were breached," Loki stated, suddenly glad for the distance between them.

"There might have been a bargain between the two of you," Odin said, "but at what cost?"

The cost of not spending any more time in Helheim than I already have to when I die.

"It comes at the cost of the truth," Loki answered instead. The truth had always cost him more than any lies had – he and Odin had that in common, it would seem.

There was a look in Odin's eye Loki was not quite familiar with, one that was ridden with foreboding and severity. But accompanying that, there was still anger, anger with what Loki had done, anger with how he had done it, anger with the situation it had left him in. "You have no comprehension of what you've unleashed."

Loki looked pointedly at Hela. "I would say that I have unleashed a powerful deity who, at this moment, happens to be incredibly angry with you."

Odin's teeth grit together. "And what happens when she's through with me?"

"No one is going to be through with anyone," Thor interrupted, speaking for the first time since Hela's appearance.

But Thor might as well not have spoken for all the attention Hela gave him. She addressed Odin and Odin alone. "I haven't finished deciding what happens when I'm through with you."

Why haven't the guards attacked yet? They kept glancing at each other and they were poised in position – position to defend rather than attack, Loki realised. Despite not knowing Hela had even existed before he brought her back with him, despite knowing nothing about her powers or abilities, there was something so innately threatening about her which only suggested that she'd be able to inflict a great deal of damage if she wished to. None of them were eager to make the first move, not while they could wait on her to do so.

Loki kept his face composed. He hadn't been ignorant of the risks bringing Hela to a realm of the living would pose, given her temperament. But the Tesseract did give him a certain advantage.

Tony, who'd moved to stand by him, opened his mouth.

"Please don't," Loki murmured so quietly it was for his ears only. And then when he appeared close to being insulted, Loki decided to clarify. "I need her attention on the Allfather."

Tony shrugged. "Looks like you don't need any help with that."

He wasn't wrong. The two of them were still so locked on to each other that the rest of the people in the room might as well have not been present.
Odin shook his head. "What happens when you are through with me will be nothing good."

"As your reign has been?" Hela moved as she talked, strolling up and down the row of guards like they were as irrelevant as fenceposts aligned next to her path. "The dead are more than capable of talking and I've heard many of their tales." She pivoted on her heel. "You spoke of a new age, a prosperous peaceful age, and only centuries later began another war."

"Do not pretend peace was something you ever wanted."

Hela unleashed a laugh. "I couldn't have put it better myself."

"Father." Thor's voice came from behind Loki and he spoke lowly, measuredly. "Tell me what this is."

Both Hela's grin and eyes widened with delight, gleaming bright white. "You mean to tell me he still doesn't know?"

Odin's throat moved. "Hela--"

"You've made me waste enough opportunities already. I'll take this matter into my own hands." She turned to Thor, her fist held to one side of her chest in a mockery of the royal salute. "My first introduction," she said. "The fabled Thor..." She allowed her arm to fall and her voice to grow colder. "My replacement."

"Father--" Thor spoke again but Odin did not – could not – answer.

"Yes," she confirmed. "We have that in common. Unfortunately." Her eyes flickered to Thor's side. "Speaking of things we have in common, that is another thing."

"What?"

"Your hammer."

"Mjolnir?"

"You named it?"

Thor's fingers hovered at Mjolnir’s handle, but he wasn't looking at her. "Father...?"

Through thinned lips, Odin spoke: "Mjolnir is yours, Thor."

And Loki had to admire that, the ability to, even under such circumstances, stretch the truth so much in order to mask the lies.

"Is that so?" Hela extended an arm. Mjolnir flew out of Thor's hand, straight through the air, and she caught its head.

Thor stared, open-mouthed. "How--" He cut himself off before attempting to speak again. "How did you--"

"Oh, shit," came Tony's response.

"You weren't the first person Father thought worthy." She was the only person in the room grinning, the only person to be actively enjoying this. "You weren't even the first person he decided to give a hammer to. You weren't the first person Father took it from when you displeased him. And," she added, testing its weight in her hands, "you're not the only person who has won it
Thor's expression might have been comical under any other circumstance. "Father," he said, but this time he wasn't asking – he was commanding. "Tell me: did you give this woman Mjolnir before me?"

Odin was motionless, frozen in spot, his indecision paralysing him.

"Tell me," Thor demanded.

Odin's fingers were curled around the edges of the throne, his grip so tight the metal must have been digging into his flesh. He inhaled. Exhaled. And then... "Yes," he finally answered, the volume barely above a whisper.

Thor moved forward. "And is she right? Is she telling the truth? Is she my– my sister?"

"Half-sister," Hela corrected with a dismissive wave.

Odin swallowed. The way he closed his eye and his lack of a response said more than any of his words could have done.

Thor's own eyes were glistening, though with rage or the sting of betrayal Loki could not say. "But how could you? I trusted you, I believed in you, and yet you–" He shook his head in disbelief. "Both of my siblings you've lied to me about for almost my entire life. Both of them. Is that it? Is there anything else you've hidden from me?" His body was vibrating. "I just– I can't understand. How could you–"

"I was going to ask him the same question." The look Hela gave Thor was a particularly withering one. "And I wouldn't recommend getting in my way – I've been waiting much longer than you." She attempted a pleasant smile but it held too much maliciousness to be convincing. "So. Father. Allfather. How is it that until not so long ago, not even my own siblings knew of my existence?"

She pointed with a hand to Loki. "Despite my annoyance with his belated arrival, I couldn't have planned my return at a more appropriate time."

Odin opened his eye. There was still some fight left in it. "You may have returned but I am still king."

"For now." The corners of her lips rose. "How much longer will that last?"

It was a strange thing, to see an expression bordering concern on Odin's face. "Why?" he asked. "Are you going to kill me?"

"After you had me trapped in the realm of the dead for over a millennium? If I was going to kill you I would make it slow and I would make it happen in a way that could never be interpreted as a battle." She reached the centre of the line of the guards. "I wouldn't want someone thinking you've earned Valhalla, after all."

"Then you're not going to attempt to kill me."

"Not immediately, no." The blackness in her eyes danced. "Not while there are far more satisfactory things I could do to you first."

"Is that a threat to your king?"

Upon hearing Odin's words, the guards changed position, shuffling into a tighter formation. The
tips of their spears touching her appeared to amuse her.

"I wouldn't recommend it," she advised. She raised her head to speak above them to Odin. "You wouldn't want to waste their years of training and service only to have me kill them in seconds."

"Then don't give good men who are loyal to Asgard a reason to attempt to harm you."

"I stopped taking orders from you the day you cast me out of the Nine Realms."

"Why are you here, Hela?"

Her face darkened. "I want what's mine."

"The throne, you mean."

"Well if you insist on putting words into my mouth then fine, I'll play along." She drew her arm back, the one with Mjolnir. "If you don't remove yourself from the throne," she said, her voice perfectly calm, perfectly level, but the anger underneath it lingering in the spaces between the words, "then I'll launch the hammer at it anyway."

"Hela – be reasonable."

"I gave you a warning. Which is more than what you gave me."

Two of the guards in the forefront attempted to strike her, the tips of their spears aimed at her stomach. Their deaths happened in quick succession: the dodge, the blades that emerged from her hands, the driving of them through their guts.

Gasps echoed from the crowd.

"Hela, I–"

Then Hela flung Mjolnir. Odin launched himself from the throne, landing sprawling on the steps and the hammer collided with the back of the chair.

A second passed. Nobody moved.

Then the guards scurried backwards, forming a circle around Odin.

"Leave me," he told them but doubt held them in place. "I said go."

It was only after his last command that they retreated, their faces ridden with doubt, uncertain of where to stand, of their duty to both obey and protect their king.

"Father?" Thor rushed forwards but Loki grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Don't underestimate her, Thor," Loki hissed in his ear. "Don't make the mistake of assuming she'll be easy to beat."

Thor wrenched himself free and rushed to the steps. Far more calmly, Heimdall shadowed him, remaining a distance behind him – not, Loki suspected, to defend the Allfather, but rather Thor. Even without his greatsword, Heimdall was still a formidable enough figure that seeing him there provided some relief but–

"Touching," Hela remarked.
Odin had no visible injuries, though he remained lying on the steps. The throne, however, had not survived quite so intact. The force she'd thrown Mjolnir ensured it was wedged inside the metal and cracks splintered down the rest of the chair.

"Don't worry," she added for Thor's benefit. "I'm enjoying seeing him at my mercy to harm him too much just yet."

Thor reached out and Mjolnir returned to him.

"Oh?" she asked. "It's going to be like that, is it?" Then she reached out with her own hand and Thor had to grasp Mjolnir's handle to prevent it from flying towards her. Her hand remained in place and she was smiling. Why was she–

Oh.

She was still pulling Mjolnir towards her, only Thor was being pulled along with it.

Odin pushed himself to sit upright, the effort causing his arms to tremble as he weighted them. "If you don't intend to kill me," he got out, "what do you want from me?"

The momentary distraction allowed Thor to regain some of his footing.

"The dead need a new ruler." She cocked her head to one side. "If only I knew someone who could get you to them." Her eyes met Loki's. "Well, brother?" The word felt stranger coming out of her mouth than it did from Byleistr's. "Don't tell me you've come this far only to not to have the stomach to defy him."

Loki's hands twitched and he fought to keep them still. "Defiance isn't the problem."

"Then what is?"

I want my freedom. "I need his testimony first."

"His testimony?" Disgust was on her face. "What for?"

"Well," Loki began, "I'd prefer it if the whole realm learns of his guilt rather than assuming this to be a desperate gambit on my part."

"And then?"

The few seconds in which Loki faltered gave him away.

"You haven't thought that far ahead, have you? Proving Odin's guilt has no bearing on your own. If it wasn't for me, you'd still have your sentence to wait for."

"Proving Odin's guilt would result in a far less biased authority of the court, I would hope."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows. "So tell me: who are you hoping for? Me... or Thor?"

With an effort that caused his arms and legs to shake more than ever, Odin stood upright. "I'm not--" He had to start again after regaining some of his breath. "My reign is not over yet."

One of the council members stood up. The group of them had been rendered innocuous after Hela's appearance, their relevance obsolete, but that must have only given them time to discuss matters between themselves without others giving them much mind. "Given the recent change of circumstances, the council has voted to temporarily depose the authority of the Allfather until such
a time that the full truth can be determined."

The look Odin gave them was not a furious one: it was a weary one, an exhausted one, like they were only providing a minor inconvenience. "You don't possess the kind of power to depose a king."

"As a council, no, individually we do not. But taking into consideration the power of those who stand before you..."

Odin's eye lingered on Loki and Hela before, with desperate hope, it settled on someone else. "... Thor?"

Thor could barely bring himself to look at him."You did not deny that she is my sister, Father. That means... That means if she is then you must have tampered with the memories of an entire realm, at the very least. I--" Thor spoke to the steps by the throne instead of looking anyone in the eye. "I think I cannot be allowed to show such bias towards my father."

The council member's face did not change as he turned to Thor. "As next in line, the throne falls to you."

The nod of acknowledgement Thor gave them was a grave one.

"Next in line?" Hela repeated. "I am his elder. The next in line to the throne is me."

"Perhaps," the councillor agreed. "If you are the trueborn daughter of Odin and if there are no clauses in written law that determine you unfit for ruling."

"What more evidence do you need? I am here, in the flesh, I--"

"The matter of the guilt or innocence of Odin Borson, and as such, your right to be his heir, will be discussed in his trial."

"Checkmate," Tony muttered.

"Not yet," Loki thought.

Hela's lip curled. "And in the meantime? You expect me to do nothing but stand around and wait?"

The councillor had the grace to look down. "The changes in circumstance are... unusual. In such cases, the official heir as well as the council collectively comes together to make a decision." His voice was dry, and it was little wonder with the raw fury that was being directed at him from Hela's direction. "If you are deemed the legitimate heir to the throne, you have no reason to threaten us."

"Impatience," Hela said, her blades appearing in either hand. "Impatience is a very good reason."

"That is enough." Thor stood between her and the council. "I will not have you threaten our people while you attempt to seize the throne. The first vow we make as ruler is to guard the nine realms."

She rounded on him, her face twisting into a snarl. "After all this, you still want to bind yourself to the promises of Father."

"Hela," Odin said. There was a tinge of softness in his voice, but it caused her to whirl around all the same. "If you harm all those that stand in your way, you will once again find yourself the queen of a dead realm before long."

"I won't need to kill everyone. Only those who will cause the rest of the people to submit to me."
Thor’s horror was evident in his stare. "Then what sort of queen will you be?"

"A powerful one."

"Have you learned nothing after your banishment?" Odin asked. "Power is not the only thing that makes a good ruler. I tried to tell you that the day I—"

"The day you decided that you’d had enough of me," she finished for him. "The day you decided I had gone from being useful to being too useful. The day you decided your weapon was too effective. The day you decided there was no sense in trying to justify not using your greatest asset."

"The day I learned I had created something I did not want to be a part of."

"Us, you mean."

Loki didn’t know it was possible for Odin to look more exhausted until he witnessed it.

"We had conquered every realm, Hela." He was pleading with her. *Pleading.* "And you still weren’t satisfied."

"Every realm, maybe." She raised her head. "But not every world."

There was a harsh intake of breath at that; the councillors, who had only come across the concept of it years ago while Loki had attempted to prove to them the existence of a threat from outside of the Nine Realms; Thor, who had only heard mentions of it from Loki and Sif and the Warriors Three; the audience – the ones that had remained after Hela’s slaughter of the two guards – having previously heard nothing of the sort.

"You would bring destruction and ruin to the very realms you would have sworn to protect." The silence of the room made Odin’s words loud by contrast.

"Is that the voice of experience?"

"It is," Odin answered in a murmur.

Thor moved closer towards Hela. "How can you expect a realm to accept your rule when they do not know you?"

"I don’t *expect* it. But I *can* enforce it."

Thor clenched Mjolnir all the more tightly. *Don’t use Mjolnir, Thor,* Loki wanted to warn him. *Don’t be foolish enough to still rely upon the one weapon she can control."

"Asgard will not allow it," Thor growled.

"And how will Asgard stop it?"

Loki let out a sigh. This had gone on long enough. "It doesn’t need to be *Asgard* that stops it."

Their heads turned towards him – it had been some time since he’d last spoken and the three of them had gotten so tangled up in each other it hadn’t occurred to them there were others still present.

Hela’s voice dropped by multiple degrees and the accusation was clear in her eyes. "*You,*" she said. "You would try to stop me. Even when you know what he did."
"I am the only one who is capable of sending you back to Helheim." With his current exhaustion, the Allfather only had a chance of being able to conjure enough dark energy to do so after waking from the Odinssleep. "And I will do so if it is a guarantee of my freedom."

"Brother." She extended one of her blades. "I knew you weren't to be trusted. We're not in the realm of the dead any longer. There is nothing to stop me touching you and nothing to stop me going through you."

"Well, yeah, maybe." Tony stepped forward. "Except me, for a start."

This was Hela – Hela who was temperamental at best, Hela who did not respond well to the most minor of provocations, Hela who was already prepared to maim whoever happened to annoy her. He'd asked Tony not to speak to her, not to gain her attention, for good reason.

"And you are...?"

"I'm the guy who doesn't have the Tesseract." Tony gave Loki a meaningful look, one that signalled he was supposed to be doing something, but what it was Loki could not say. "But that doesn't mean I don't have something else." When Tony reached into his pocket the answer came to Loki. Yes. Yes of course he could assist with that. There was nothing in Tony's palm, no source of power, but Loki could make it appear as if there was. And if his suspicions were correct... "The Time Stone." Tony brought out the illusion of it for all to see and Loki had to stop himself from grinning, had to remain in line with the bluff that was as outlandish and outrageous as Tony was himself. "It's good at stopping the whole people going through people schtick."

She paused, the interruption throwing her off her momentum. "Then I'll have to go through you first."

Loki smiled pleasantly. "Of course, you would have to reach him first." He summoned the Tesseract. "Which would prove difficult while I happen to have the Space Stone."

And then they were at an impasse. Hela glared but did not venture any closer, and her frustration was evident in the way she held herself and her weapons.

But it wasn't just Hela and Loki who were at an impasse – it was the entire court.

The same councillor who had previously stood up cleared his throat. "Thor?"

With a somewhat dazed look, Thor stumbled towards the throne.

Odin looked like he was moments away from entering the Odinssleep. Just a little while longer, Loki urged him. Surely it was not such an impossibility.

Thor stared at the man who was his father, at the man who had been king. "Bring him to some bedchambers." And then, after another moment's thought, Thor added, "See that it is guarded." It was a surprisingly deft move, both ensuring the Allfather could not leave and that no one could attack him without having to face the guards first. Not that it would be difficult for Hela, given her complete lack of concern for the tens of guards she'd faced. "And Hela," Thor said. "If there is justice to be dealt, it will be dealt with during Odin's trial."

"You are seriously suggesting that I do nothing but wait?"

"You can reacquaint yourself with Asgard, so long as you harm no one." With unsure movements, Thor placed himself on the throne, his body covering the cracks in the chair. He looked at Loki,
then at the remainder of the audience, at the rest of those present in court. "We should remember that this is Loki's trial, not my father's."

"We have already held court for far longer than expected--" one of the councillors interrupted.

Thor held up a hand. "I know." His hand returned to his side. "But a decision needs to be made about Loki's fate." The more he spoke, the more his doubt faded, now that the subject was no longer about Odin. "Loki died after his previous crimes, bringing justice to the monster that killed our queen. And afterwards, he saved my life – he saved all our lives. For that reason, I don't believe he should be rewarded with imprisonment."

"You would allow him to walk free?" the councillor protested. "After everything?"

"Given the light of recent events, there is only one action of his that I would have him put right," Thor said and the council ceased their objections. "Niflheim." He allowed a pause. "If Loki prevents Niflheim from falling into chaos and, as he proposed earlier to – his eyes lingered on Hela – "help protect Asgard when it needs it, I see no reason why he should not walk free." He faced the council. "Do any of you disagree?"

They stared.

A moment passed.

None of them uttered a word of disagreement.

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Loki coughed lightly to clear his throat. "Thor?" he called softly, approaching the doorway. When had been the last time he'd walked these particular hallways? It must have been years and years ago, since before he'd fallen, and it was odd how his nostalgia made the place appear warmer. It was odder still that he could walk through them freely – freely – and with no disguise.

"Loki?" Thor's voice called. "Come in, brother."

Thor was sat in his bed, his sheets bundled around his waist.

"I wasn't certain whether you would be awake," Loki said, remaining half inside the doorway. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen Thor like this. It must have been when they were boys, when he used to make a habit of sneaking into Thor's room during the night.

"I'm glad for the disturbance."

"You are?" Loki recalled when Thor had grown older, when he'd abruptly began despising Loki's nightly visits. "You used to place great value on your hours spent asleep."

Thor chuckled. "My priorities have changed since then."

"Well... Good."

"I think so too." Thor shuffled to sit on the edge of his bed, bringing the blankets with him. "Is there a reason..."

"A reason why am I here, you mean to ask."

"Yes."
"I came here to..."

"You can sit down, if you like." Thor patted the sheets next to him.

Loki obliged him, toying with his fingers as he attempted to locate the right words. "Thor," he finally said. "I wanted to..." And then Loki had to fight the way his throat was trying to work against him, trying to force him into using any phrase but that one. "I wanted to thank you. For your efforts."

Thor's eyes crinkled and for a disconcerting moment, Loki thought his brother might have hugged him.

Was that hurt in Thor’s eyes? Had he noticed how he'd braced himself? Was that why instead of reaching for him, Thor drew back in mock astonishment?

"Is that truly you sitting before me?" Thor asked with heavy-handed incredulity. "Ah. Now I know it must be. Who else would have winced so much to admit such a thing?" And yet, despite the mockery, there was an underlining warmth in his voice.

Loki knocked his arm against his. "I was being sincere."

"I know." Thor dropped all pretences of jesting. "And I thank you for it."

"You thank me? No – I was the one thanking you–"

"And I'm telling you that I appreciate your efforts. I'm well aware that gratitude doesn't come easily to you." Thor noticed his frown. "Would you rather I pretended that it did?"

"Yes, actually. That would be much preferable."

Laughter rumbled from Thor's chest. "Very well, then. I'll speak no more of it."

"Marvelous."

Thor's returning smile was wide and it gave him the appearance of looking far younger than his years. "I'm glad you're here."

Loki struggled to retain eye contact. "Careful now," came his gentle warning. "We wouldn't want to overdo it and ruin this strange newfound..." He trailed off before he could say peace. "... truce."

"Would a hug be overdoing it?"

Loki hesitated. "Perhaps the next time one of us assists the other in escaping imminent disaster you could ask again." He glanced down at the bedsheets, Thor's lower half concealed beneath them. "Preferably while you're wearing at least some clothing, Thor."

Thor's grin widened, his teeth showing through. "I'll take it."

Loki still had one more visit and then he could see Tony again and they could leave this place for as long as they wished. Maybe then his freedom would seem like a fully viable thing, a reality rather than a promise. He could leave Thor's chambers now – maybe he should leave – but something was making him reluctant. It was the thing that existed between them, a mixture of old a new comfort. Was this what reconciliation was supposed to feel like?

Sometimes the warmth from hearths could be stifling.
"You still have the skull from your first hunt on display," Loki noted upon seeing it mounted above Thor's bedside table.

Thor turned to where Loki had nodded. "I'm so used to it being there it might as well be a part of the stonework." He turned back to him. "Loki..."

Whatever Thor was about to ask must have been something dubious because it took a great deal for Thor to sound cautious.

"What is it?"

"If I ask you a question, will you answer honestly?"

"That depends upon the question." Loki's attempt to alleviate some of the foreboding failed.

Seeing anger, Loki could have managed. Seeing disbelief or confusion he also could have handled. But why did seeing Thor's sadness have to be that much harder?

"I wanted to ask you how long you knew."

"Know what?" Loki asked despite having a very distinct feeling he knew exactly what.

"About Hela. That she's our..."

"Half-sister."

Thor nodded. "Yes. That."

"I--" Oh no. Absolutely not. It wasn't fair how those pitiful eyes were dragging the truth out of him. "I discovered the evidence I mentioned during the trial in Odin's vault a matter of months ago." He frowned. "From my perspective, that is."

"And you didn't..."

"Tell you?"

"Yes."

"In my defence, I have had little opportunity since I learned of the truth. And even then, it took Hela herself to announce herself as my sister and the Norns to confirm we had the same mother."

"Oh?" Thor blinked in surprise. "So you are actually related. I hadn't-- Well, I hadn't thought."

"Hela is related both by blood to you and by blood to me."

"That makes another way in which we are brothers in every conceivable way but blood."

If Loki wasn't careful, he'd start leaking fondness for Thor.

And then, so softly he wasn't certain if Thor could hear or not, Loki whispered, "I'll take it."

A long moment passed and the silence was a comforting embrace.

"Loki," Thor started. "What are we going to do about her?"

"What are you going to do about her, don't you mean?"
"But–"

And then, much more gently, "I'm not going to remain on Asgard for long, as you well know."

"She wants the throne."

"Of course she does. It was her birthright and as far as she's concerned, Odin snatched it away from her and gave it to you instead."

"I can't trust that she won't attempt to take the throne for herself through force."

Loki smiled. "You have grown far wiser than you used to be."

Thor's own returning smile was sad. "I had to." He returned to the matter at hand. "But neither do I want to banish her back to Helheim, not unless I have to."

"Then don't."

"But if I am putting my people at risk..."

"Hela has her bloodlust. That, I will not deny. Odin's detainment has calmed her slightly, but we do not know how long that will last. But if you are concerned about what she will do if she has the time to act, don’t allow her the time to act."

Thor’s brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"She has shown an interest in politicking. Well, more specifically, warring. But you can interpret that as politics if you are willful enough. Give her something to do. Let her believe she may earn herself a position of authority if she works hard and well enough. Let her earn herself some respect and recognition beyond the princess that was forgotten."

"If she does a good enough job, it is not impossible that I would eventually allow her such a position. She can lift Mjolnir, after all. She must be worthy for a reason."

"Worthiness," Loki stated, "is a relative concept. Something I fear was determined by the Allfather well over a millennia ago when he first ordered his commission."

"But Mjolnir knew Vision was worthy."

"Odin's perception has always been... skewed. I cannot speak for your Midgardian friend, but I would hesitate to trust someone based on that reason alone."

"But going back to your advice – I can't keep her occupied indefinitely, can I?"

"No," Loki sighed. "But what you can do in the meantime is make her realise how unappealing ruling truly is, so long as she does not grow wise to your plan to do so. I have never seen anyone appear as miserable as you do when you seat yourself upon that throne. Once she understands that the skills required of her won’t be as tailored to her interests as she once thought they would be, it is possible that she may lose interest."

Thor swallowed. "When did you find out about the Mind Stone?"

Not, Loki noted, what Odin did with the Mind Stone, just the stone itself. "There is a painting in Odin's vault with him holding it alongside Hela. And it was The Collector who confirmed that the Allfather had traded it for the Tesseract." Though Loki had yet to determine precisely why.
Thor's eyes were low. "It's just... I thought I knew him."

"As did we all."

"No – I knew he had his secrets and that he kept his feelings to himself, but for another one of his secrets to be that colossal, I..." Thor tried again. "I'm struggling to believe it even though I know it to be true."

Loki placed his hand on Thor's shoulder and gave it the lightest of squeezes. "Odin has fooled us all at one point or another." He forced a smile. "At least with this particular deception, it had nothing to do with your past."

"No," Thor agreed. "But it does alter... everything. I thought I was the firstborn, Odin's eldest child and rightful heir. I thought I was the one Mjolnir was intended for and the only Asgardian able to wield it." Loki did not fancy explaining that technically, Hela was a half-elf. Perhaps another time, he decided, though it would no doubt raise some questions about his own physiology. "I thought Odin was a good king." Thor's hands wrung his sheets as he spoke. "I thought he was a good king but he lied to his people and he manipulated their minds to suit his convenience. He led more wars than I knew existed."

"He did."

Thor's voice wavered. "But I admired him so much, Loki."

"There was a time when I did too."

Thor looked at him then, an alarmingly astute look that was strange to witness because not so many years ago, he wouldn't have been capable of doing such a thing. "I can't imagine what it must have been like for you. The first time. When you found out. About your..."

"My heritage, you mean."

"Yes," Thor said. "That." He was hesitant to look at him. Was that because of him recalling how Loki had looked in his Jotun form or because he wasn't certain whether or not he'd be willing to discuss it?

"It's strange," Loki finally said. "Strange how I don't regret giving them the Casket of Ancient Winters back."

Thor raised his eyebrows. "That's... good?"

"Believe me, it comes as far more of a surprise to me than it does to you."

"You definitely seem a lot... calmer these days. More often than not."

Loki allowed that. "I wouldn't describe myself as calm just yet. But I'm closer to it than I've been for a long time."

"And Stark?"

And there it was. There was the limit to what he was willing to discuss. "What about him?"

"You seem to have bonded well," Thor stated. If only you knew, Loki thought. "I– Well, I didn't realise you would've had so much in common." His smile grew sheepish. "Which may have been foolish of me. You both prefer to use your intellect, you both cause far too many problems with
your mouths alone, and you both thrive in chaos."

Loki hoped he appeared casual. "He's..." Interesting had been the word he'd been about to use but that might clue in Thor a little too much. "... someone I get along with rather well."

"I'm a little surprised you didn't end up fighting each other constantly along the way."

"Oh, we did. Initially, at least."

"Ah. You got past your differences then."

"Eventually."

Thor nodded. "I'm glad."

"Glad?"

"Glad you've made a friend."

"Could you be any more condescending?" The accusation was a valid one, though it was not said with true anger. If Loki was being completely honest, he was relieved to have another subject to latch on to. "I'm not a child returning from play."

The sheepishness grew. "Yes. I suppose that was a little condescending."

"Well." Loki pushed himself from the bed. "I'm glad too."

"Glad you'll be leaving in a matter of hours."

Thor sat up straighter. "What?"

"It's not--" Loki sighed. "It's not you that's the problem. If I remain on Asgard too long, it starts to feel like my cell has expanded to the size of the entire realm."

"I didn't think you'd stay here forever. But I didn't know you'd be leaving so soon either. Can't you--"

"I won't be gone forever."

The corners of Thor's mouth turned upwards. "So you'll come back?"

"From time to time." Loki summoned the Tesseract. "It makes it a great deal easier when I have this to aid me."

Thor nodded. "You are welcome here anytime, I hope you understand."

"Welcomed by you, perhaps."

"The people bear no hatred for you."

Loki shook his head. "There are no people driving me out of Asgard but myself. This place can be--" he searched for the right word -- "stifling, sometimes. I have no desire to remain here for long periods of time."

"I understand as best I can, I think."

Loki opened the door, turning around just as he was about to leave. "Farewell, Thor."
Thor's eyes sparkled and he pointed a joking finger. "Return soon or I'll... I'll..." It rapidly became apparent that Thor was currently incapable of thinking of a suitable threat.

"In that case," Loki said through his smile, "I wouldn't dare disobey."

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Loki neglected to knock when he made his way into the room where they kept the Allfather – well, he supposed it might have been more accurate to only refer to him as Odin now. His continuing title was yet to be determined in the trial that would be held for him in the following weeks. Weeks, not days. It would give Odin plenty of time to prepare but there was little he could do about denying his actions considering the indisputable proof that was Hela herself. At best, Odin would be able to bargain for some form of lesser punishment. But what? Imprisonment? It seemed odd to think that might be the fate waiting for him, and if the universe was a just place, it would be where he would spend his retirement from being Asgard's king.

But that change might be a little too much of a radical one for Asgard. They were a nation set in their ways and they trusted and had great respect for their king – or they had, anyway. It would take a considerable amount of time for those who weren’t at the trial to hear how Odin had violated their memories, and even longer for word to spread far enough that it was not believed to be rumour or hearsay.

That, Loki decided, if anything, was a good reason for delaying Odin's trial.

Even after being accused of his own list of crimes, Odin was still not treated the same as any other prisoner would be. Not even the same as any other Asgardian royalty would be. Instead of a cell, Odin had been granted one of the palace guest rooms. It wasn't as grand as any of the quarters for the royal family, but it would be far more comfortable and far more dignified than what he would have earned.

Odin was seated in a large chair by the fireplace, his eye that had drifted to a close startling open when Loki closed the door behind him.

"Loki?" It was a large contrast to how Thor had asked his name only a matter of minutes ago – Odin's version was too stunned to be pleasantly surprised and yet too detached to be displeasure.

"I haven't come to gloat or mock."

"Then why have you come here?"

"It isn't for the pleasure of your company." Loki took the chair opposite him without being invited to it. "There are some answers I would like to have."

"Is that all you truly came for, Loki?"

"I almost considered not coming here on principal but decided that would be a form of you besting me."

"Me winning, you mean to say?" Odin repeated, his voice distant. "I haven't won anything for quite some time."

"Fortunately for the outcome of my trial."

"I wasn't referring to that." Odin's hand made a reflexive grasp for the sceptre but his fingers met nothing; it had been taken from him by order of the council. "I lost Thor's respect." Was this self-
pity Loki was witnessing? "I lost the respect of Asgard, of the rest of the Nine Realms." Odin dropped his gaze. "Before that there was Frigga." There was something about the underlying sincerity that meant that even Loki could not doubt his grief. Definitely self-pity. Indulgent self-pity, but self-pity nonetheless. In some ways, it was nice to know that Odin was not immune to it. His eye met his again. "And before Frigga there was you."

"If it's sympathy you're looking for, you have turned to a questionable source."

"No," Odin replied. "I am not seeking pity."

"Good." Loki readjusted himself. "Because once we've had this conversation, I don't expect I'll ever have need to speak to you again."

Loki had only seen it up close in the fleeting moments when Odin had approached him during his trial the true reality of how old he had gotten, how much greyer and more wrinkled and transparent his skin had become.

The lines around Odin's mouth were etched deep into his face. "You have been wrong about things before."

"I doubt that I am wrong about this. I don't understand why I would possibly want to converse with you after this."

"Is this punishment because I did not visit you in your cell?"

"If this was punishment, I would treat you with the same disregard as you did me."

"Then why? Why are you here?"

"Because there are some questions I have and the sooner they are answered, the quicker they will leave me alone."

"You want answers."

"Yes, I want answers."

Odin sank back in his chair – a resigned motion rather than one intended to bring him comfort. "I suppose I owe you that, at least."

Loki had to work to hide his surprise in him agreeing to cooperate, to explaining his actions and decisions with no official obligation to. And then there was the matter of him claiming to owe him – it was probably the closest Odin was likely to get to admitting his actions were faulted.

To begin, Loki decided to test the waters, to start with a question Odin would be reluctant to answer but not one he'd be likely to refuse.

"At the trial..." Loki began. "We both know it was because of you that I was granted access to Valhalla. I thought that if I made that claim, you would have denied it and disputed my credibility all the more." His seat was too hard but he had no desire to show any sign of discomfort, not while their respective positions were so optimally reversed. "But you didn't. You made me prove it. You knew I would have a scar there and you showed them it was real." Loki leaned forward. "Why?"

"Do you recall me telling Thor that he could not be allowed to show such bias towards you?"

"... I do."
"Think how it would be perceived, then, if people were to know that the one who granted you Valhalla was the same one who was the leading authority of the court."

"You were their king. Even if they had their doubts, they still wouldn't raise them."

Odin smiled thinly. "You have been gone for some time."

"I doubt that much could change on Asgard in three years."

"When I awoke on Niflheim I was weakened, barely able to channel my magic. I may only have survived due to being encased in less ice than the ones who had been there thousands of years longer than me. And the council... They had grown used to being granted more power. You left the seat of the throne open and in doing so they started to see it as obtainable. When Thor returned to rule, he leant heavily on their assistance and frequently sought their advice. The council now has more influence than they've ever had." Odin saw Loki's face. "Not enough influence to pose a direct threat to my lineage, but enough that they could cause complications if they so desired."

"As they did. But you're still concerned about them."

"Not yet. They have plenty of coin and contacts but they do not have the loyalty of the people."

"Neither do you," Loki reminded him.

"Must you have discredited my name so in such a thoroughly public fashion?"

"What else would you have me do? With you on the throne, I was always going to be found guilty and I was always going to be punished. Therefore, my most logical course of action would be to get you off the throne." Loki could have smiled, then. "And I didn't so much as have to utter a single lie in order to do so. The blame for that weighs more heavily on you than it does on me."

"For someone so familiar with blame, I would have hoped you would be more cautious before placing yours."

The insinuation that their situations were similar was not something Loki appreciated. Odin had, with a disturbingly rational mind, subjugated hundreds of thousands of people for the sake of his own convenience whereas nothing Loki had done ever seemed to result in convenience for himself.

But Odin still hadn't answered his question. Was it a deliberate distraction on his part? Had he the intention to worm his way underneath his skin with words he had to have known would do nothing but antagonise him?

"If the council was such a large factor, that begs the question of what the council would have done if they knew what you'd granted me."

"They would have done nothing quite so blatantly public," Unlike you, the look Odin gave him said. "They wouldn't have stopped the trial. No. They would have spread word about my doings, sowed more seeds of doubt about my capacity to think objectively, made me seem like I was a fool blinded by wishful thinking."

"What a ridiculous thing to attempt to persuade people to believe. Particularly if they've met you."

"A king not being present in his kingdom for a matter of years does little to maintain the integrity of his public image." He paused. "There were even those who forced me to prove my true identity once I returned."
Loki raised his eyebrows. "Asgard has been growing wiser."

"Your tricks would have had something to do with that."

"Not wanting to advocate for my release, I can understand. It would be politically – as well as personally – disastrous. But you were the one who thought of using my scar as proof – not me or Thor or anybody else. You. It was you who suggested it. You could have left it ambiguous or inconclusive as to whether I died but you chose not to."

Odin stared at him for a long moment, quiet in his deliberation. Then there was resolve. "I wouldn't have you imprisoned for a crime you did not commit."

"But you would have no objections to me imprisoned for a crime I did commit?"

"Are you still attempting to justify your invasion of Midgard? Because, no, I do not regret the sentence I dealt. It was your actions that brought you there and–"

"I'm not speaking of Midgard."

Odin frowned. "What, then?"

"If me leaving you upon Niflheim eventually resulted in me being in a position to rid the universe of Thanos, is it justified to imprison me for it? To punish me for an action that led to the lives of tens of thousands of Asgardians being saved from needless slaughter?"

"The number of lives you happened to save allowed me to overlook all the crimes you committed before you died."

Would that Odin had bothered to mention the possibility of that during his trial.

"But my death didn't?"

"You did not escape imprisonment with the intention of saving someone's life – you escaped imprisonment with the intention of seeking vengeance."

Loki's stare was flat. "And me happening to die along the way was entirely coincidental."

"You did not decide to die. You tried to save Thor and you succeeded. It was coincidental that your attempt also cost you your life. You did not leave Asgardian justice with the intention of dying: you left it with the intention of killing a beast and taking the first opportunity you could to escape." There was neither coldness nor warmth in his eye. "And for that, I do not believe your death alone balances all the lives you took and every time you turned your back on Asgard."

"There won't be another time."

"Because you've turned your back on Asgard for the last time, have you?"

"I've done more than my share of protecting it. I'd say I've earned the right to turn my back on it."

"I'm not debating your right to walk away from Asgard. If your Midgardian associate is to be trusted, what you did for this realm amounts to a great deal. So for that in conjunction with the circumstances of your death – as long as it was definitively and objectively proven – I would have allowed the sentence for your previous crimes to be nulled."

Would he? Would he have forgiven him for his crimes, just as he had done for Thor? Thor had an object that measured worthiness within arm's reach but Loki had nothing to prove such matters. Not
even the Tesseract could be seen as a legitimate measure of character, even if it had, for whatever reason, chosen him. And yet, despite Odin never having given Loki his equivalent of Mjolnir, he had spoken as if he believed it himself.

Loki cocked his head to one side. "You would forgive the crimes I committed before I died but not the ones I have committed since?"

"You left me to freeze, Loki. You did that before you knew how close Thanos was to arriving and so you cannot claim that you did it for altruistic purposes. So for that, no, I would not have forgiven that particular crime."

Attempted genocide, numerous disturbances of the peace between realms, and various other crimes that resulted in the deaths of many would have all been swiped to one side. But not when he'd laid a finger on the Allfather. How ironic it was that this was the same man who had berated Thor for showing too much bias during his trial.

"It is as I said," Odin continued. "I would have – without regret – given you a fair punishment for your last treason." The unflinching unapologeticness morphed into something gentler. Then, quieter, much quieter, he added, "But I meant it when I granted you Valhalla, Loki."

Something inside Loki twisted and he hoped it wasn't his resolve because he was past this, he had to be past this. But then wasn't it just like Odin, in a manoeuvre far from the reaches of his usual callous self, to say something that could be detrimental to that?

No. Loki wouldn't allow it. He'd come too far for his resolve to be swayed by one line that had been spoken far too late.

"Regardless of what happened afterwards, you earned Valhalla. Not for setting out to do what you did because that was never your intention. But because even when you became aware that you were dying, you did not regret it." The lines in his face looked deeper than before all of a sudden. "I would not have anyone believe that your death was anything but sincere." Odin reached for the goblet of water that was sitting on the table nearby and took a sip. "And I wouldn't punish you for the way you died either."

The question was out before Loki had time to process it: "So what would you have done?"

"What does it matter?"

"It doesn't." Or so Loki hoped. Or if underneath it all it did matter to him then he'd be able to overcome it eventually, given enough time. If his indifference towards Odin wavered more than he'd originally thought it would, at least he was still closer to it than he'd ever been and surely absolute indifference was not such an unobtainable goal. "But since you have talked about it at such length, I can only assume you had something in mind."

"For your near regicide – imprisonment."

"You would lock me up for the rest of my days? Again?"

"Imprisonment for near-regicide is far more lenient than the standard sentence for regicide."

"My point remains the same." The feeling was too icy for apathy. "I would have been in precisely the same position I would have been in had I never left my cell, had I never hunted down–"

"Not precisely the same position," Odin corrected.
"Oh?" Loki raised his eyebrows. "Tell me: would I have been generously granted a room with a larger bed? Perhaps a balcony? Do you call that fairness?"

"You wouldn't be in there for the rest of your days."

"How... lenient."

"I would have granted you opportunities to prove yourself. To prove that you can be trusted. And eventually..."

"If I did as you commanded for an indefinite number of years, like dangling a piece of fruit in front of an animal, you would have eventually allowed me to go free."

Odin nodded.

"Then I wonder," Loki continued, "what sentence you would give someone such as yourself."

Even though Odin's jaw tightened, he did not appear abashed. "It is not my decision to make."

"No. It's Thor's." And then, as an afterthought, Loki added, "And the council's."

"They'll be more lenient than I would be."

And since they were speaking so truthfully, Loki replied, "You haven’t earned it."

"So now we come to the crux of the matter, the real reason why you came here: to tell me what I do and do not deserve. Has saving our lives inspired a streak of self-righteousness?"

"Having enough self-righteousness to constitute an entire streak would be a blessing, I think."

"Then why are you still here? It may not have been what you wanted to know, but I answered your question as truthfully as I could."

Loki forced a pleasant smile. "It just so happens that I came here with more than one question."

"... I see."

There were more goblets on the table. Loki poured himself his own cup. "Why did you do it? You had an entire kingdom at its knees. Why give it up? Why banish your greatest weapon? Why the sudden change of heart?"

"I have an impending trial, do I not?"

"Yes, but I won't be here to witness that."

Odin looked surprised. "You have something better to do than see me dealt the justice you no doubt believe I deserve?"

"I'm sure Thor will share the details once it’s over."

"Yes. Thor has been advocating quite strongly for your cause as of late."

"I'm aware." Loki took a sip of the water and when he placed the goblet back down the metal rang against the glass on the surface of the table. "Why did you do it?"

"If you're hoping for satisfaction you are unlikely to receive any."
"Your trial hasn't begun yet, there's no need to remain so characteristically evasive."

Odin took a long sip and slowly lowered his goblet. "The answer to most of your questions is that I couldn't stop her."

"I doubt that very much."

Something in Odin expression caved, just ever so slightly. "I couldn't stop her without killing her. Banishing her somewhere where she should never have been able to return or fight her way out of was the only other solution."

"Why stop her?"

"She wasn't satisfied with conquering just the Nine Realms. She wanted to conquer more."

"Odd how you'll draw such a distinction between nine and any other number."

"Nine is a finite number. The rest of the universe does not have a finite number of worlds. And she knew this well."

"Go on."

"She also knew that attacking worlds outside of the Nine Realms would break the terms of the treaty."

"You made a treaty? With who?" And then it came to him. "Ah. The Collector."

Odin nodded. "The Collector is a more powerful being than he likes others to know. I had two options: break the terms of the treaty and have him slaughter our people without mercy, or remain true to the treaty and continue our distant alliance.

There were already Asgardians who had invaded worlds near to his upon Hela's command before the treaty was made, and it was her who directed his attention towards me.

The treaty was made. The Collector displayed a great deal of interest in Mjolnir and as such, in the contents of Asgard's vaults. We kept... an open line of communication.

But when Hela defied me, when she refused to stop, when she was planning to launch an attack at the heart of Knowhere... I had to prevent it. I'd tried preventing her before and failed. I'd tried punishing her before and failed. I tried teaching her sound political strategy and why more realms would not be good for us at such a time and failed. I tried using the power of the Mind Stone on her but its effects were never permanent. I needed something that could not fail, that would be guaranteed to last. I could not have The Collector viewing me or my kingdom as an enemy. I did not want Asgardians to be the next display in his museum.

It was not a decision I made lightly, to do what I did, but there was no reasoning with her. As a sceptre of Asgard's king, the Sceptre already had access to send souls to the realms of the dead. I hadn't tried it with a live soul, but all it needed was some augmentation. I believe you are familiar with how Infinity Stones can augment and enhance pre-existing powers and abilities?"

Loki nodded.

“After that... then I banished her,” Odin finished.

"But that's not all."
"Other people... were not happy with my decision."

"Such as?"

Odin fingered the handle of his cup. "Her mother, in particular." Ah. "And there were those that accused me of being too lenient because the punishment for treason – the punishment for disobeying me and waging unnecessary wars – should be death." Odin swallowed. "So I used the Mind Stone. I started with those who were opposed to my decision but found if other people happened to mention her then they began to suspect their minds had been tampered with upon becoming aware of the holes in their memories."

"So you increased the scale to affect the whole of Asgard."

Odin confirmed it with a nod. "Then the rest of the Nine Realms for good measure."

"And that was it?"

"Her mother... She began to suspect. She found the Sceptre within my possessions and she couldn't shake the underlying feeling that she was missing something, that something had been taken from her. Eventually, she confronted me. I told her the truth. She left. She left both me and Asgard. There was no love lost – she had no objections to my growing affections regarding Frigga so long as I did not act upon them. It was a purely political marriage, one that she'd agreed with to guarantee the benefit of Alfheim."

"And after she left Asgard..." Loki began to ask, though he suspected he already knew the answer. "Where did she go?"

"To raise the only army who were not yet cowed by Asgard."

"The Jotuns."

"Yes."

"You didn't invade Jotunheim to prevent them from attacking Midgard, did you?"

"No." A long moment passed. "The last time I used the Sceptre was to ensure no one would doubt your place in our family. After the war I sent Shanta-Faer – Hela’s mother – to her home realm and confessed to Frigga what I had done, The Collector made me an offer that meant I would never have to see it again." His face twitched. "Or so I believed." His eye turned gravely serious. "You cannot comprehend what seeing you with the very same Sceptre I sent to the other side of the universe did to me."

"You used it far more than I did."

"That may be so."

"Well then." Loki stood up. "I suppose that concludes all I wanted to know."

"There's one more thing."

Loki paused. "... Go on."

Odin wet his lips before speaking. "The Frost Giants," he said, staring forwards at the empty chair rather than at Loki. "They didn't abandon you. The temple was supposed to be where they kept those that were too weak or too young to fight."
"And yet you entered it anyway."

"I'd heard that Shanta-Faer had given birth to a son. A son that would be the symbol of the fight against the crown for both Jotunheim and Alfheim. A son that would be able to wield not just ice but also another element."

"I think I would have noticed by now if I was able to—"

"Light," Odin interrupted.

"What?"

"There's a reason you showed such an aptitude for illusionary magic from such a young age. I have suspected for some time now." Odin adjusted his legs. "All elves have their own form of elemental magic. Even those who are not fully elven, as it turns out. And your element is light."

Loki, who had almost reached the door, stopped. "What prevented you from killing me?"

"Pardon?"

"Let's not pretend you entered the temple to do anything but erase the threat. What changed your mind?"

Odin did not meet his eyes. "When you saw me you... changed. You changed to look just like me – to look Asgardian. And I couldn't distinguish between your desire to stay alive and your desire to be accepted."

"I may have taken me a long while," Loki said, and if acid was dripping from each word he did nothing to prevent it, "but now the two are not so intertwined and the latter is certainly not applicable to you."

Then he closed the door behind him.

***

Tony was waiting for him on the Bifrost, the light from the rainbow bridge casting reflections of countless colours across his skin.

He sat with his legs dangling over the edge and looked up when Loki approached. "Someone should make railings for this thing." He nodded to below them. "It's a long way down."

Loki made his way to stand by his side. "You should tell Thor," he half-joked. "He could make that his first act as king."

"Actually, telling you to go fix Niflheim was his first."

Tony was swinging his legs as he spoke and even though he was wearing his armour, Loki knew him well enough to be certain that he'd be doing precisely the same thing even if he wasn't.

The way in which Loki seated himself next to him was tentative, but the caution was not as necessary as he had initially thought. Because, as he was pleasantly surprised to discover, the expanse of space below them did not have the same effect upon his stomach and mind as it once had. It wasn't a comfortable sight but neither did it fill him with dread – the view was nothing more than a view.

"Fixing the problem of Niflheim could take some figuring out."
Tony turned to him and let out a small amused noise. "I'll be honest – as much as I like how you'll be off the hook, I was totally prepared to break you out. I brought multiple suits and everything. It's almost disappointing you managed to handle everything just fine without me blowing up shit up for you and maybe inadvertently starting an interplanetary war. So it's probably a good thing I didn't."

"I'm honoured."

"Good. You should be. There aren't many people I'd start a space war for."

There had been multiple occasions in which Tony had delivered his sincerity masked with offhandedness, but that sentence had to be Loki's favourite by far. The words, coupled with the way Tony was looking at him, made him forget – no, not forget: not care – that the void was below them.

"You came," Loki said.

"Hm?" The trajectory of one of the swings of Tony's legs was slightly misaligned and his boot stubbed the side of Loki's.

"To Asgard."

"Oh." Tony cleared his throat. "Yeah. Well. You know. Thor came down from the sky in the middle of my conference and announced he was gonna scoop me up and bring me up here."

"That can't have helped the public believe the story Pepper invented on your behalf."

Crinkles formed around the edges of Tony's eyes and mouth as he laughed. It hadn't been all that many days – weeks, now – since Loki had last seen those lines and it wasn't until he saw them that he realised how much he'd felt their absence.

"Yeah, you don't say. But neither did me telling them ‘actually, no, I got lost in outer space’."

The last thing Loki had expected to experience while sitting on the edge of the precipice that was the Bifrost was amusement. "Somehow, I think I would have been more surprised if you had kept to the story Pepper scripted for you."

"She's used to me going off-script." Tony readjusted himself so one of his arms was behind Loki, the palm flat against the bridge as he weighted it. "Not that she’s happy about it."

"Speaking of improvisation..." Loki trailed off. "Your bluff was–" Too high a risk? Too much of a gamble? Far too generous for the likes of himself? Perhaps all of them, but also undeniably: "Impressive."

"Guess all our practice playing against each other paid off."

Tony shifted and the side of their arms and legs were aligned. It wasn’t the same as when Tony wasn’t wearing his armour, but Loki was in far too high spirits for it to dampen them.

"How much of Asgard have you seen?"

Tony shrugged. "About as much as from the twink bridge to the room Thor gave me." Oh? Loki thought. That's all? "And I might've flown around a bit over the city," Tony saw the look on Loki's face. "But it's not like I toured the city or anything. I got the satellite view. Nowhere near the same as the walk-in route."
"Well," Loki said after a brief moment of hesitation, "since you're here, I could..."

Tony's face lit up. "You gonna be my tour guide again?"

"I could be." It was hard to resist such enthusiasm. "There's still so much you haven't seen. The reefs of Alfheim, the spices of Vanaheim, the mines of Nidavellir." Loki glanced away, then back at him. Could he...? "I could show you, if you like." And then, hurriedly, he added, "I'll make the journey a quick one – I wouldn't want to keep you from your home planet for too long."


Stop staring. Tony had accepted his offer and neglecting to anything but stare at him in something Loki absolutely was not going to call wonder was not an appropriate response.

It took Loki a moment to summon the courage for his next offer. "Or them, if you like."

And incredibly, miraculously, Tony did not appear deterred. "Oh? We're talking in multiples now?"

Loki's nod was a cautious one. "It could be," he said. "I have the Tesseract, after all. We could go anywhere we want to go without the added complication of having to journey to get there."

"More space adventures..."

"They don't have to be that adventurous."

"It's us. We're not gonna get a moment of peace." Tony must have caught the flicker of concern on Loki's face because he then added, "And hey, just so you know, I wouldn't have it any other way."

The swelling in Loki’s chest increased as he supposed that was just as well. No – better. It was better than just as well.

"So," Tony began. "Where we heading after you show me Asgard?"

"As I recall, Muspelheim is the only other one of the Nine Realms that you have not yet seen."

"I think you mentioned it's hot. Are we talking shades kind of weather?"

"I'd recommend an entire cooling system."

"On it." The speed of Tony's legs swinging had increased with his eagerness. "What’s your favourite dwarven bar? We’ve got Taradaxians to kick back to their side of the universe at some point so I figure we could make a thing out it. And the rats – we could bring them with us. I could make a rat robot to feed them and everything in case we get stuck somewhere. When’s my deadline for the rat-bot? Gimme a time limit here."

"It will have to be once I've dealt with the small problem that is the entirety of Niflheim."

"Oh. Yeah. That. Uh – listen. That wasn't entirely your fault. I mean, I was the one who took the thing in the first place. So I was thinking I could tag along."

“I should warn you,” Loki said, “Thor’s been scheming.”

“Thor can scheme? What’s Thor gonna scheme about except which puppies he gets to pet?"

“He’s been insistent that Hela should accompany me to Niflheim. He thinks it will... sate her if
she’s given a licence to inflict violence.”

“Risky plan.”

“Indeed.”

“Still.” Tony shrugged. “We’re not gonna be bored.”

We?

"You still want to join us?"

"Actually, I'm kinda looking forward to it."

"You are?"

"Yeah, it'll be like our glory days. Except without us thinking everyone died and we've gotta face a big bad and this time we’ll get the goth queen in the flesh along with us. So we can just... Uh... What are we gonna do about Niflheim?"

"If it wasn't for the Tesseract, I'd have very few ideas," Loki said. "However... I do still have the same compass that led us to the Time Stone embedded in my mind."

The way the light hit Tony's eyes made them appear just as amber as the Time Stone had been.

"So we're gonna go on a road trip to get it back?"

"It may not be much of a journey. If the Tesseract decided to come to me... Well, I think it's reasonably possible that there are far fewer limits to what it will allow me to do with it now."

"Meaning you can go wherever the hell you like." Tony was smiling too widely to speak immediately afterwards. "Meaning you've mastered it."

Loki's jaw was beginning to ache for the most pleasant of reasons. "I wouldn't want to make that assumption."

"You don't want to," Tony pointed out. "That doesn't mean you haven't already." He halted his swinging as another thought came to him. "Hey – you think if I got more time with the Time Gem it might've liked me enough to conveniently appear when I needed it?"

Loki had missed this. The easy manner in which Tony spoke – not just in general, but the way he did to him specifically.

"Possibly," Loki replied. Then he amended it. “Probably. It was fond enough of you to slow the rate of your growth without freezing you in the meantime."

"Huh."

Loki didn’t mention how since his trial he’d become aware that Tony could, without being aware of it, still be connected to the Time Stone. He didn’t mention how if they were reunited there was a distinct possibility someday in the future that Tony could master the Time Stone. And most of all, he did not mention how if the two of them were reunited, the effect of the Time Gem slowing Tony’s ageing may become more permanent.

He would mention it one day. A day not too far off. A day in which they weren’t both sitting on such a precipice and on a day in which they weren’t celebrating their newfound freedom.
The prospect of a life longer than the rest of his species would no doubt cause some great conflicts for Tony, and Loki wasn’t certain under what circumstances Tony would accept it. It was likely he’d be more interested in the medical applications and Loki wasn’t going to sully such a moment with introducing the idea that Tony may, contrary to what he’d most likely assumed, outlive all his friends. It wouldn’t be an easy conversation and he wasn’t going to ask him to choose between anything unless he had to, especially not anything that difficult. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t explain the relevant information so the choice would be Tony’s to make.

Another time, Loki decided. They’d already faced so much.

Loki stared below him, at the dust of clouds that lay across the expanse of space, at the stars and nebulae, at the way the angle gave the illusion of his and Tony’s feet hovering next to each other in balance.

They could be on the other side of the void in a matter of seconds, on another realm, on another planet. Even, Loki thought, on another plane of existence. Because if he’d been able to bring Hela back and so long as he was no longer in a position to cause any conflicts with any paradoxes, he could visit Valhalla. And, he realised with an intake of breath, he could see Frigga again.

Tony’s eyes were on him; he could feel the weight of their curiosity.

“What are you thinking?” Tony asked.

“My official freedom hasn’t felt real until this moment.”

The crinkles reappeared, those delightfully happy crinkles, and Tony laid a hand on his sleeve.

“Where we gonna head first?”

Loki smiled then, a full grin that stretched wide across his face. “Anywhere.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand there it is. The ending.

I know that some aspects are left open – what happens with Hela, what happens to Odin, what Tony decides to do about the Time Stone etc – but I’m confirming that yes, at some point Loki would visit his brother on Jotunheim again. And next time he’d get to meet some more of his Jotun relatives too.

I still can’t believe this started off as a 2000 word oneshot which grew into a 50K word fic, which then expanded into... this.

A massive thank you to all of you who’ve left such wonderful encouraging comments – I doubt I would’ve had the motivation to see this through in a way that required this much of my time and energy without you. Especially you saints who’ve left (sometimes, multiple) delightfully lengthy reviews, and you saints who've commented on multiple (sometimes, on every single one of the) chapters. You people have had such a fantastic impact and have made it all the more worthwhile. And in case anyone’s read and enjoyed this fic in the future and is deliberating whether they should comment, I’d love to hear from you regardless of how long it's been since I finished this story.
And before I forget, I'm gonna put a link to the playlist I spent an inordinate amount of time trying to pick the right songs for in terms of how they fit the characters and the mood of the plot. Plus there's some really appropriate lyrics hidden in there that fit some of the various things that've gone down scarily well. I recommend listening to it in order since it's in chronological order of the fic and, similar to the fic, expect a fair share of angst before things start looking up. So here it is: ten 'official' songs (plus a cracky little post-credits bonus type song) on Spotify.

And lastly, my tumblr is here. If anyone wants to shout ideas or questions or meta with me feel free.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!