At The End Of A Rope, A Trickster God Is Found

by BarbaraKaterina

Summary

Loki is posing as Odin, trying to ensure the Nine Realms are prepared for the arrival of Thanos. What he sees on Midgard irritates him, and he looks for a way to fix it.

Tony is simply at the end of his rope, betrayed once again, dying in a deserted base in Siberia.

Their meeting spans changes that affect all the Nine Realms, and more.

Notes

I know I'm a couple of years late with this kind of fix-it, but it just wouldn't leave me alone
and it was the most Valentiney idea I had. Still not exactly Valentine fluff, but oh well.
It was pure accident that Loki even noticed – one of his courtiers was late to a meeting, and so with some time on his hands, Loki used the all-seeing capability of the throne to check on some of the projects he hadn’t looked at for a time, projects that were essential if they were to defeat Thanos once he came: Frey’s progress in Vanaheim with the new training regimen for his mages, the unification of Alfheim, and the heroes of Midgard.

The heroes of Midgard had been perhaps the most satisfying of these projects lately, their numbers growing and some very intriguing powers among them...but now, as he looked, he was shocked. They were fighting each other.

And not in a way that would suggest training either.

The courtier arrived at this point, and so Loki had no more time to devote to it immediately, but as soon as he was free again he checked once more, and his worst fears were confirmed.

The group was fractured.

Loki swore.

Damn mortals, there wasn’t a single thing one could trust them with. Not even the most essential ones.

He spent the next few days intermittently checking and trying to come up with a way to bring peace. He knew that if he appeared there publicaly, as the original villain that brought them together, it would very likely solve the problem, but unfortunately, it would also cause many more for him – Thor would find out he survived, and it could endanger his entire ruse in Asgard.

No, he had to find another way.

It was when he was checking on the heroes again that the opportunity presented itself.

He saw a plot and a betrayal, he saw the Man of Iron and the soldier out of time fighting in a manner even more vicious than what he had witnessed before, and he saw Stark being beaten and left in his broken armour by his supposed ally and friend, expression of such open despair on his face it simply spelled vulnerability.

Loki hurried from the throne room, considering his options.

He could, of course, go as someone else. But given the kind of betrayal the Man of Iron had just been subjected to, he couldn’t really afford the risk that he would need to use some of his powers and the mortal would put two and two together. That would lose him any chance he had.

He could also simply make himself unrecognisable, blur his features – at least there would be no lie in that – but again, immediately after a betrayal, the mortal was unlikely to appreciate any kind of hiding.

No, absurd as it was, his best bet was going as himself.
It was worth a try. He could always scramble the man’s memory later, if worst came to pass.

This was his last thought before he took the hidden path to Midgard, teleporting to where he needed to go.

It had all taken mere moments, and Stark was still lying exactly as he had last seen him, his armour broken and the man desperate and numb.

When he spotted Loki, he laughed bitterly. “Great,” he said. “If I have to have a pre-death delirium, couldn’t I hallucinate something else? Though I suppose it does make a twisted kind of sense – you were what brought me together with Rogers, after all.”

“I assure you, Stark, I am very real,” Loki replied.

“Yeah right. I have it on good authority that you died a heroic death some time ago.”

Loki shrugged. “I very nearly did. In fact...I found myself rather as you are now.”

“So, what? You became a ghost that shows to people in similar situations or something?”

Loki shook his head, bemused and wondering if the man truly was delirious. “I am as alive as the last time you saw me – more, perhaps – and came here of my own volition.”

“To gloat?” Stark asked, still prone on the ground and his voice strangely disinterested given the topic. “Or to help me to my death? If the second, there was no need, though I suppose I should be grateful – there are probably better ways to go than bleeding to death or freezing.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I have no intention of killing you. If I did, I wouldn’t need to wait until you were weakened.”

“Gloating, then? Don’t try to tell me you wouldn’t do that. The satisfaction of watching the team that united against you fracture...” Stark paused, and frowned. “Wait- were you behind this? Did you put Zemo up to this?”

Loki smirked a little at the idea. He could, he supposed, allow himself this honesty – it would go well with what Stark expected, after all, and so make him more trusting in other matters. “No,” he said, “though I do have to admit to certain admiration of his work. It was very well done.”

Stark snorted. “It was, wasn’t it? He played us like a violin.” He considered for a moment. “So is that why you’re here? To admire another master’s work? Or is it simply for the satisfaction of watching us fall apart?”

Loki frowned. “The first might have been a factor – not the second, though. I derive very little pleasure from this.”

“What, because you like me so much?” Stark scoffed.

“Because I dislike betrayals.”

Stark choked on a laugh. “You have got to be kidding me. You? Dislike betrayals?”

Loki shook his head. “Trick and lies are my trade, but true betrayals of deep trust given – I have experienced it, and since then at least I have profound hatred of it.”

A deeply bitter expression settled on Stark’s face. “Then I guess there’s only the satisfaction of watching me die left here,” he said at length.
Loki rolled his eyes. “You won’t die.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but the cold and the bleeding out aren’t really doing it for me.”

Loki considered him for a moment, his head tilted a little to the side, and then he made a small gesture with his hand. A dome of golden shimmering light appeared above Stark, and as Loki made the air inside it warmer, he waved his hand again and Stark’s armour fell away from him.

Stark gave him a slightly wary look, though there was still more resignation in it. “What are you doing?”

“Ensuring my words remain true. It is hard to stop bleeding through armour.”

Stark blinked. “Why?”

“Well, the access is rather limited.”

It was Stark who rolled his eyes this time. “Why are you trying to save my life?” He clarified.

“I told you,” Loki said after a moment’s consideration of the best answer, “I dislike betrayals. I dislike them succeeding, the traitors getting what they want.”

Stark scoffed. “You help all betrayed people across the world, then?”

“No,” Loki admitted, and after another moment’s hesitation, asked: “You remember the Chitauri invasion well, I assume?”

“You mean the one you headed? The one that was the first encounter Earth had with aliens? The one about which I’ve been having nightmares ever since? Yeah, it rings a bell.”

Loki grimaced. “My apologies.”

Stark looked at him for a moment, seeming to try and gauge his sincerity. “Yeah well,” he said then, “you were probably no better off – that is, if Asgardians get nightmares.”

Loki ignored the assumption about his origin. “What makes you say that?” He asked curiously.

Stark shrugged. “I know the current situation I’m in doesn’t exactly indicate it, but I am a genius. I saw the state you were in when you came through in that SHIELD base. I saw the mood swings you had, between relaxed and bantery and desperately melodramatic. Whoever you were working with, whoever gave you the Chitauri, I don’t think it was a very pleasant experience.”

“You are right,” Loki admitted after a moment. “It was not. In fact, it was perhaps the most unpleasant experience of my life. And you flew a bomb in the portal, destroying the entire Chitauri fleet. I was...very glad that you did. I...respect you for that, shall we say. I would not wish anyone I respect to fall to low betrayal, even less than I wish it on anyone else.”

“Really? Respect?” The bleeding was stopped now, and the air around Stark was warm, meaning there was colour returning to his face once more, and some animation with it, allowing him to express surprise more fully. “And here I thought that, however much you dislike the Chitauri, you’d still despised me for daring to fight you.”

Loki shrugged languidly. “If I would despise someone, it would be the beast. It was not you who shattered my spine. And you might have shot at me a few times, but you also offered me a drink, did you not?”
“I guess I did.” Stark smirked, though it was more of a grimace. “Sorry, none on hand right now to make good on the offer.”

Loki waved it aside. “I can collect later, if it comes to that.”

“Will it?” Stark asked shrewdly.

Loki merely raised his eyebrow.

“I mean,” Stark elaborated, “you saved me from dying of betrayal. We’re even, I guess, for me helping out with the Chitauri. Someone will probably eventually find me and bring me back home. There won’t – I hope – be any more reason like this to come. So...will it come to me having a chance to offer you a drink? As a thank you, perhaps?”

Loki didn’t let even a hint of the triumph he felt show on his face. “Perhaps,” he merely said. “After all, I am not certain you would have died without my help, though I grant you you would have been in danger of it and I certainly made you more comfortable. But I am not so certain about being even, and the effects of the betrayal do not end with you lying here. So yes...perhaps.”

And with that, hearing a helicopter in the distance, Loki disappeared, the effects of the warmth spell lingering behind him.

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Loki knew he needed to press the matter while Stark was still raw and while his intervention was fresh in the man’s memory, so he returned to Midgard mere few days later. He was vary of the creature that grew around the Mind Gem, but managed to cover his tracks from it – he hoped – as he appeared in the home Stark shared with him.

“So,” he said, “could I have that drink now?”

Stark startled, but not too badly. He turned back with a smirk that looked a little more natural than the last time Loki had seen it, though his eyes were still hollow. “Sure,” he said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“You have?”

He shrugged as he poured out. “I figure, whatever you said about being grateful for the Chitauri, there’s gonna be something you want for saving my life.”

Loki considered as he took the first sip. It was very good. “It would be...preferable if you did not inform Thor of my being alive,” he said at length.

Stark shook his head. “That’s not a return favour, that’s just common courtesy. I’m hardly going to snitch on someone who just helped me. I’m sure you can understand that I’m not too fond of betrayals myself.”

There was a hint of warning in Stark’s tone, and Loki gave a very small, pleased smile. “Indeed,” he said. He hesitated, but he would have to tell Stark sooner or later and waiting with sharing the information could probably be read as dishonesty, the chief thing he had to avoid displaying at this time. “There is something.”

A look of resignation flashed behind Stark’s eyes for a moment before they hardened. “Yes?” He only said.
“You...know that the threat the Chitauri represented was not eliminated.”

“I do,” Stark confirmed warily.

“It will not be too long now – year or two at most – until the threat reaches the Nine Realms. I need Midgard to be prepared.”

The hard thing behind Stark’s eyes became even more prominent. “You want me to make pace with Rogers, for the good of the world.”

Loki didn’t try to mask the look of revulsion in his eyes. “No,” he said, with emphasis. “I would ask you to refrain from killing them, if I thought you were planning to do so, for they truly can be useful when Thanos comes, but apart from that, no. I would never ask something like that of you.” Yes, it would be better if the ragtag group of heroes had never split in two. Much, much better, in fact, and if Loki didn’t need him, he’d be inclined to kill Rogers just for this inconvenience. But if wishes were horses… The split did happen, and Loki wasn’t so naive to think he could unmake it. Before the betrayal, perhaps. But now? He could – maybe, with some effort – force the two groups back together. But that alone would not make a team, and even if Stark could forgive Rogers one day, it would certainly take longer than what time they had. A team where people did not trust each other was worse than useless. And he would lose all ground he had gained with Stark so far, giving him much less chance to influence the way Midgard prepared for Thanos. No, there was nothing to gain from such an attempt, and much to lose.

And that was leaving aside how personally distasteful he found it. Had someone asked him to embrace Odin like a father after the lie had been discovered, he would have stabbed them with his favourite dagger. This, he imagined, was similar.

“Then what?” Stark asked sharply.

“Some still remain by your side,” Loki explained, “and more can be recruited. I understand you could normally be….hesitant about allowing yourself to become entangled in another group. If there is a favour I can ask, it would be this: as soon as you can, overcome this hesitation and gather another group of heroes. Midgard will need them.”

Stark stared at him. “So the favour you ask of me...is for me to protect my own world?”

“I suppose.”

He shook his head. “You must have been more out of it during the invasion that I ever imagined,” he muttered.

“I was,” Loki admitted freely, something he never did, hardly even to himself, but it served him well right now. “It was not only Thanos, it was also the things that happened before I fell into his clutches. I was...in a place, I suppose, that was not unlike how you were in Siberia. It made rather more vulnerable to his...insistence than I would normally be.” The parallel that this painted made Loki’s stomach gave a sickened lurch. The last thing he wanted to be in any way similar to Thanos, but what choice did he have?

The similarity did not escape Stark either. “So,” he said, “what nefarious plans do you have with me?” Loki could tell the question was serious, but he could also tell Stark was more resigned and uncaring than angry.

“You surprise me,” he said. “I would expect more outrage at the notion.”

Stark shrugged. “You saved my life. You don’t seem to want me to ‘come to my senses’ as regards
Rogers, which everyone else seems to want. Honestly, as long as you don’t mean to try and turn me against my own – the precious few that are left – or make me go against the few principles I have, feel free to exploit my vulnerability.”

“And if I did mean just that?” Loki couldn’t help asking.

“I guess I’d have to fight you every step of the way,” Stark said, the tiredness that had until now mostly hid in his eyes suddenly suffusing every word he said. “I’m really hoping you won’t,” he added unnecessarily.

“I do not intend to,” Loki assured him. “It is only truly your fitness against Thanos that I desire.” He hesitated, but then decided it was his best bet, and said: “It was, in truth, the main reason I helped you in Siberia.”

Stark frowned. “You should have just said so.”

Yes, just as Loki had suspected, even this hint of dishonesty made Stark strongly irritated. “I apologize,” he said immediately. “I did not lie – the other reasons I spoke of were perfectly truthful – and I did not believe that mentioning the deathly danger approaching Earth was what would aid your recovery.”

“You might be right,” Stark admitted grudgingly. “But now I’m out of danger, so...should we make plans? What can you tell me about him?”

Loki shook his head. “There is time, Stark. No hurry. You can rest some more, finish you recovery, gain new allies.”

Stark frowned. “So why did you come, then? If not to plan. Just to tell me about Thanos?”

“I wasn’t sure I would, when I decided to come,” Loki answered, honest once more. “Chiefly, I wanted to check on you. And finally take you up on the offer of a drink,” he added, raising his empty glass.

Stark rolled his eyes. “Like you can’t get one on your own.”

“Not such a good one, perhaps,” Loki replied, tracing the glass edge with his fingertips. “I’m no expert in Midgardian beverages, but I like them, and your taste ensured that I would get the very best.”

“Yeah, I can definitely arrange that. Next shot of the very best coming right up.”

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It was several shots later, and Stark was more than slightly drunk. They had been discussing the progress other realms were making against Thanos in general terms, and the heroes that stayed on Stark’s side, but there was a short silence now. They sat opposite each other at the bar, and Stark raised his head and squinted at him. “You know,” he said, “it just figures.”

“What exactly?”

“That after a supposed friend and long-time colleague and ally betrayed me, an enemy shows up to help. It just – it’s like that mirror universe in Star Trek, you know? Like everyone good is suddenly bad...so it makes sense that everyone bad would suddenly be good...have I fallen into a mirror universe?”
Loki raised his eyebrow. “Following this logic, it would have to have been the soldier out of time who headed the New York invasion, and I assure you, it was not.”

“Crap. That means you were a good guy and he was the asshole all along, and I just didn’t notice.”

“Your morality turns very black and white when you’re drunk,” Loki mused.

Stark shook his head obstinately. “No, see, thing is- if you were just doing the bare minimum to keep me alive to use me against Thanos, well, that’d make sense, I guess, even for a bad guy? But I know what you’re doing, what you were doing. You made me comfortable in Siberia. You distracted me until the helicopter came, so that I didn’t have to think about...things. I still had to think about them later, sure, but away from that base. It was...easier. A little. I had more distance. And now, again, you’re here, keeping me company, distracting me from things. If you actually wanted to get something out of me, that’d make sense, you’d want to ingratiate yourself, but you’re just asking for what I’d do anyway. And you’re the most support anyone’s been since shit’s gone down. Anyone. Of course,” Stark seemed to choke for a moment, “Rhodey’d have supported me, he’d have helped as much as he could, but he’s in hospital and I-” he stopped, unable to continue, and Loki considered. He had seen Colonel Rhodes’ injury from Asgard’s throne, but never gave it much thought.

Now, he contemplated the matter for a moment and then said: “Perhaps my magic could help him with healing.”

Stark, who had been looking down at the bar, whipped his head towards him so fast he must have gotten dizzy from it. “Can you? Could you?”

“I am not certain – I would have to see his injury – but likely I would be able to help at least a little. At the very least with the pain.”

Stark’s eyes were suddenly very wide. “Loki, please- please, I’ll- I’ll do anything you want me to, help you with anything, I’ll- I’ll help you fight Thor if you want-”

Loki considered him with a raised eyebrow. “Would you really help me kill Thor, if I demanded it as my price?”

Stark looked at him for a long moment, intently, and then crumbled. “No,” he muttered, “no, I couldn't do that, I’m sorry, but-”

“Good,” Loki interrupted him. “That would have been a betrayal, after all, and we have already established how I feel about those.” He sighed. “Go to sleep, Stark. You are too drunk now to arrange any such thing. I will attempt to return tomorrow evening, but I cannot guarantee my duties will not keep me away for longer. However, as soon as I can, I will come back and help your friend.”

As he disappeared from Midgard, the last thing he saw was Stark’s half hopeful, half desperate look.

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Loki returned two days later, to find Stark sitting at the bar again, already drinking. “You're back,” he said, sounding surprised.

“Of course I am,” Loki replied. “I said I would be, did I not? Now, are you ready to show me where your friend is?”
Stark got up so fast he stumbled, and they were sitting in his car within minutes.

“I- I didn’t think you’d come back, or not this soon at least,” Stark admitted.

“So I gathered,” Loki replied. “I suppose I can hardly blame you for not trusting me.”

Stark shook his head. “See, no, that’s just it. I really should. I mean, we already established you weren’t exactly yourself during the invasion, and ever since then you didn’t do anything to make me not trust you. So it’s sensible for me to stay on the lookout for any long game you might be playing, but short term, I really should believe what you say. So, you know, sorry.”

Loki frowned. “It seems to me you are asking of yourself what you complain the others are asking of you with regards to Captain Rogers. Whatever my mental state at the time, you witnessed me destroying your city. You cannot simply turn that awareness off, as little as you can ignore your feelings of betrayal.”

“But that’s the point, you never betrayed me. You attacked me, sure, but not betrayed.”

Loki grimaced. “I know Thor told you stories.”

“He did,” Stark admitted. “But that’s just...I don’t know much, but I managed to piece together that there was just some huge family mess happening there when the shit in New Mexico went down. So until I know details about it, I’m not touching that with a ten foot pole. I’ve had enough people believing whatever Howard – my father – said about me when I was young to know it’s best to reserve judgement until I hear both sides of the story.”

“Thank you for that, I suppose,” Loki replied after a moment, “though I should warn you that my side of that particular story is unlikely to be forthcoming.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“At any rate, know that I neither require nor expect you to trust me simply because I have helped you once. It would be exceedingly foolish of me, and that is something I aim to never be.”

“If that’s the case, let me tell you a few things about that invasion of yours...” Stark said with a grin.

Loki let him talk. He did not feel inclined to share the reason for the obvious flaws in his strategy back then. He did not think he would be believed. Perhaps some day he would tell Stark – the truth could only help him in this case, after all – but only when he gained more than a superficial and inaccurate feeling that he was owed trust.

The hospital visit was quick and efficient. Colonel Rhodes was asleep when they came in, and Loki was free to do his evaluation in peace. “His legs are lost,” he said at length, “but as I believe Midgard is able to create substitutes, I would be able to help with regenerating his damaged spine, so that is control of the substitute is better.”

Stark nodded immediately, but when Loki raised his hands, stopped him. “Wait,” he said. “We have to wake him. We need his consent.”

Loki frowned. “Stark,” he said, “are you sure...? Your friend, from what I know about him, prefers to follow the rules. My presence will not be appreciated, and he might decide he needs to report it.”

Stark shook his head. “Not like this. Not when you’re only here to help him.”
Loki did not like it, but what choice did he have? If he backed out now, once again, any ground gained with Stark would be lost. Scowling deeply, he gave a nod, allowing the man to wake his friend and explain as Loki hid behind a spell of invisibility.

He had expected some bargaining, or some need of assurances at least, but Colonel Rhodes simply looked at Stark for a moment before he sharply nodded, and Loki showed himself.

“I expected more resistance to the idea,” he admitted as he approached the man.

“It’s my legs,” Rhodes said simply. “And if you wanted to kill me, you wouldn’t need to go to all this trouble first.”

That was very true, and so without further commentary, Loki began to work.

“It is done,” he declared, some twenty minutes later. “And if I am allowed to use my magic on the replacements you are given, you should be able to control them with similar ease to your own legs.”

Rhodes closed his eyes on a long exhale. “Thank you,” he said.

“Can you take us directly back to the compound?” Stark asked abruptly.

“I can,” Loki confirmed, surprised by the request.

“Do it, then – JARVIS looped the security cameras anyway, so no worries.”

Not sure what exactly that meant, Loki simply shrugged, nodded and teleported them. The spell had been difficult and he was tired, but he did still have enough power for this.

The moment they landed in the Avengers compound, Stark hugged him.

Loki simply stood there, frozen.

Stark let go almost immediately. “Sorry,” he muttered, “sorry, I just...” and then he collapsed on the nearby couch, staring at the ground, and started sobbing.

Loki hesitated for a moment, then sat down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Stark muttered, “I’m sorry I can’t offer to do anything you want for you, because I’d really like to, I’d...I’m so fucking grateful, you can’t...Rhodey, he’s my best friend, and it was all my fault, I couldn’t...”

Loki embraced him. It was strange – it had been such a long time since he had embraced anyone, he hardly remembered how to do it. Yet Stark didn’t seem to complain, sobbing into his chest and clutching to his shirt. Loki wondered if, had he been healthy, Colonel Rhodes would be sitting in his place right now. But now, if it wasn’t for the injury, perhaps Stark wouldn’t have been quite so emotionally fraught.

Then Loki scoffed at himself, recalling his own experience with betrayal. Yes, Stark’s did not go quite as deep, but still. There were enough reasons for a small breakdown for anyone in there. And for Loki, it was an opportunity. He tried not to contemplate how uncomfortable that thought was beginning to make him feel. It did not matter. He needed strong ties to Stark, needed them for a good reason. He wasn’t Thor, to cringe at something underhanded because it needed to be done. He could deal with his own conscience later, in the privacy of Odin’s rooms, when his sympathy was no longer required.
It took a while, but gradually Stark calmed down and pulled away. “Sorry about that,” he muttered, grimacing in embarrassment. “You should have just pushed me away, not...why did you let me sob all over you?”

Loki considered the many possible truths with which he could answer, and at length said: “I told you already that I once found myself in a similar situation to yours. Perhaps I wish there had been someone, back then, removed from it all, to whom I could have turned.”

Stark clenched his fists and turned away. “I think you should go now,” he said, and Loki froze and took in a sharp breath.

Before he could begin to process this unexpected reaction and wonder whether Stark had sensed his slight dishonesty in choosing that answer, however, Stark’s eyes darted to him and then back and he spoke again: “I have this...thing. My shrink says I’m unable to process closeness in any non-sexual way. I just...when I feel close to someone, I want to have sex with them. So- I just want to fuck you, or be fucked by you. A lot. And I don’t- I know you’re perfectly able to put me in my place, but you’ve helped so much and I can’t really give anything back, and you can’t even imagine how much I hate being in that position, so the last thing you need is to be subjected to my unwelcome advances. But I’m a little drunk and completely drained and I have very little self-control now, so just...please go and save us the awkwardness.”

Stark still wasn’t looking at him, and that gave Loki the moment he needed to consider. This hadn’t been the plan, but...the last thing Stark needed right now was rejection, and it had been a long time for Loki. Stark, from what he knew, was used to sex without long-term romantic attachments. It shouldn’t cause any problems.

And so Loki put a hand on his shoulder again, and asked: “What if I don’t want to leave?”

Stark turned his head to look at him, and whatever he read in Loki’s eyes, it made him lunge into a kiss so desperate Loki barely kept his balance.

He did his best to gentle it without even hinting at rejection, meting Stark’s passion with intensity of his own. Stark would have no patience now, he knew. He needed to make this reassuring, without making it slow.

He let go of Stark’s mouth for a moment to focus on his neck, and the moans he got in response made him bite down harder than he had intended. Stark shivered above him, and began to work on the buttons of his shirt.

Loki returned to his mouth to slow him down a little, and his hands found their way under Stark’s T-shirt. Almost immediately, that made the man pull away – just enough to take his shirt off and then latch onto Loki’s lips once more.

Loki got lost in the sensations for a time, Stark’s hands on his chest, his tongue in his mouth, and when focus returned to him, he found he was grinding against the mortal. What was it about slowing down? He hardly remember why that had seemed so important.

Stark was fumbling at the fastening of his trousers, and Loki helped him and then returned the favour, freeing them both from the by now very constricting clothes. Stark looked around, seemingly searching for something. “Lube,” he muttered, “I don’t have lube here...”

Loki made a small gesture and his fingers glistened with slick. Seeing it, Stark groaned and divested himself of his trousers and boxers with impressive speed, and then he turned around, bracing his arms and the back of the couch. Loki smiled and caressed his back and arse with his
dry hand, but then he gently guided him to lie on his back. He knew what Stark needed at the moment, and being impersonal was not it.

Stark blinked, surprised, and then it gave way to a groan of pleasure as Loki started his work. The man was impatient, and at two fingers started to urge Loki to hurry it along, but Loki did not budge, merely kissing Stark. Pain was also not something he needed now.

He was as efficient as he could be, but still did not relent until he was completely certain there would be nothing beyond the inevitable stretch. Then, finally, he sunk into Stark, and the man moaned his name, loud and desperate, gripping Loki’s shoulders. Loki only gave him a moment to adjust before he started to move.

It had truly been a long time, and even longer – much longer – since he had someone with whom he did not aim for as impersonal as possible. In fact, there had only ever been very few such people in his centuries of life, and after so long without any proper physical contact, it was overwhelming. He had to use all of his iron self-control to make it last.

Fortunately, Stark was overwhelmed as well.

It did not take long, for either of them, and Stark’s loud shout when he came was what pushed Loki over immediately afterwards, the world fading for a moment into pure bliss.

Later, when they lay on the couch partly on top of each other, panting, Stark muttered: “Thank you.”

Loki rose on his elbows to give him a look. “Stark,” he said, unable to let this stand, “I am not doing you favours. Not with this, not with healing Colonel Rhodes, not with any of it.”

“What are you doing, then?” Stark asked.

“I am, ultimately, doing things that are to my own benefit.”

Stark just looked at him for a moment. “Well,” he said then, “I wish more people’s selfishness looked like yours. But then again, since we established that selflessness apparently looks like what Rogers does, I suppose it makes sense, in a really twisted way.”

Instead of an answer, Loki kissed him, as soothing as he could make it.

“In any case,” Stark added when Loki pulled back, “I also hope it’ll be to your benefit to do this again at some point.”

It would be, Loki already knew it would be, and soon. He just wondered whether he hadn’t bit off more than he could chew.

As he hid his face in Stark’s neck, he realized the thought didn’t bother him as much as he had thought it would.

Chapter End Notes

This started out as a Valentine one-shot. Now I estimate it’ll have about 20-30 chapters, though I have very little planned and no posting schedule...
Loki was kept busy in Asgard for a Midgardian fortnight, dealing with yet another case of seemingly insurmountable conflict between the Seelie and the Unseelie court. He had always loved Alfheim, all his life, but he had to admit that getting them to do something in a timely manner was a pain. Not that it was all easy in Asgard – he had had to replace Heimdall, unwilling to let someone as self-centred as the guard stay in such a crucial position, but he had to concede that Odin might have known what he was doing leaving him in the position even after his arrogance almost got Thor killed (and Loki, and Sif and the Warriors Three, but that would obviously be of lesser concern). Because the problem was, everyone else was ridiculously inept. Loki was on his third watcher now, and sometimes he despaired and considered asking Heimdall to come back. Never for long, but still, that the thought even crossed his mind should show how desperate he was.

But even in the fortnight of being busy with politics, he kept an eye on Midgard, and as he had promised before he left last time, when he saw Colonel Rhodes being released from hospital, he wrapped up his business in Asgard as fast as he could while keeping one eye on Midgard to know the right time to appear.

And so it happened that he saw Stark and the Colonel exit the car that transported them, Stark helping the Colonel to his wheelchair and taking him inside the house. He could tell, even at this distance, that Stark’s mental state was much improved from the complete emotional rawness the last time he saw him. In fact, even though with every glance at the Colonel’s damaged legs there was a flicker of pain in his eyes, there was also genuine gladness, even happiness, in there, which Loki assumed was caused by the hospital release.

The men entered the common space of the Avengers compound, but before Loki could look away again, assured that now was a fitting time to come, he heard the Colonel speak. “Okay, then,” he said, “we’re safe from any bugs or whatever your paranoid ass was worried about, so now you can finally tell me: how the hell did you get Loki to help me out?”

“That’s the funniest bit,” Stark replied. “I didn’t get him to do anything. It was all his initiative from the start. I just mentioned you and he offered.”

The Colonel frowned. “You’re aware he’ll want something in return, right?”

Stark laughed. “Yeah. He wants us to be ready to fight an insane alien guy.”

Rhodes blinked. “Say what?”

“Yeah. You remember how I told you that that alien army I blew up in space was fucking huge and there was no way we got all of them? Turns out I was right. Turns out there was this insanely powerful and just simply insane guy behind it, and he’s likely to show his face here in the next
year or two, finishing what Loki started - not very successfully, I might add.”

“And Loki is suddenly against him because…?”

“Well he wasn’t really on board the first time either, if you catch my drift.”

It took the Colonel a moment. “Tony, if you’re over-identifying...”

“It’s not overidentification if it’s the same exact fucking situation,” Stark replied, and Loki felt his eyebrows rise. What was he talking about?

“You never tried to subjugate a fucking planet!” His friend insisted, which, yes, was effectively what Loki had just been thinking.

Stark smirked without humour. “Well, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m not actually a demigod or whatever the Asgardians are. I play on a bit of a smaller scale. Or I did until this insane alien entered the scene, anyway.”

“You never tried to subjugate anyone else, either,” Colonel Rhodes pointed out, a bit more calmly.

Stark grew serious, and looked directly at his friend. “I couldn’t take the torture,” he said slowly, emphasis on every word. Loki felt an unpleasant lurch in his stomach at this accidental discovery, and considered turning his gaze away, but he was learning valuable things about Stark here, things that would no doubt come in useful later. He stayed listening.

“I guess I never made this very clear when we talked - or not-talked – about what happened in Afghanistan,” Stark continued, “so...I want to make this perfectly clear. I couldn’t take it. I cracked. It just so happened that I had a way to pretend to be working on what they wanted from me while doing something else.”

Loki took in a very sharp breath. The same exact frocking situation indeed. Much more so than Stark knew.

“But if Ten Rings hadn’t been so painfully stupid as to leave me unsupervised,” the man continued, “what do you think would have happened? Best case scenario, I could have provoked them into killing me before I did that, but I doubt it. They were extra careful about that. And there is no way I could have taken what they did to me for those three months. Not even for one, to be honest. And there was a year between when Loki first attacked Thor on Earth and when he came back with the Chitauri army. So I’m not gonna judge that. Not ever.”

Colonel Rhodes exhaled, and Loki did so with him. Suddenly, he found his chest rather tight under the Odin disguise. He also felt just a little nauseous all of a sudden.

“All right,” the Colonel commented after a moment. “But are you sure this is the only thing Loki wants? Even if it’s revenge for him...he helped a lot, and you don’t really know him.”

Stark shrugged. “No, I’m not sure. I’m aware that he might be playing a long game. But so far, his long game got us advance information about a threat, a better chance of healing for you, and maybe saved my life. So I'll take my chances with whatever he’s planning.”

The Colonel straightened in his wheelchair. “Saved your life?”

“Ah. That. Yes. So I have a story to tell you...”

Loki listened with interest to how Stark’s version of events would play out, but it was not
significantly different from his own recollection. “I was half out of it by that point,” he was saying. “With blood loss, for one, but also just with the shock of what just happened. I’d have probably reacted more aggressively otherwise, but as it was, I was just...completely resigned, to anything. The shock of him actually being there to help, though, woke me up a little. Who would have guessed?”

Loki saw the anger on Colonel Rhodes’ face, and knew that the anger wasn’t for him, or for Stark either. Despite his expectations, he rather liked the man, even though the soldier was probably allergic to the mere concept of chaos.

Loki decided to give them a little more time before coming. Well, and also to give himself a little more time. He felt discomposed, both by what he had learned about Stark and what he had learned Stark thought about him. He had to admit he had not expected understanding. In Asgard at least, cracking to pain in any way was considered cowardly and weak, and the Avengers were, when all was said and done, still Thor’s shield-brothers. He had expected some similarity to be found there.

He should not have, he realized. It was doing Stark an injustice. After all, he himself had spent many a century in Thor’s company, and he would resent it rather strongly if someone assumed they thought the same for merely this reason, would he not?

Loki decided to retreat to Odin’s chambers for a time, to regain his equilibrium, before he travelled to Midgard once more.

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When he finally arrived, the atmosphere was much more relaxed. Stark seemed to be enjoying having some proper company in what served as his home for now, and having his friend back where he could talk to him freely. It gave Loki hope that it wouldn’t take long until some progress could be made on rebuilding the Avengers.

There was a slight problem, though, in encountering the Mind Gem creature alongside Stark and the Colonel. Loki was masked and invisible, so he was not immediately alarmed, but still. His time was limited before he was required back in Asgard, and he couldn’t quite afford to wait until it left. He had not discussed with Stark what to do in such a situation, and personally was unsure.

He could leave again and come back in a few days, of course, but he did promise Stark he would come as soon as the Colonel was released, and his main goal here was still building trust. It would not be advisable.

On the other hand, he probably could not scramble the gem creature’s memory, so showing himself to it – contrary to Stark or Rhodes – was a true risk.

Loki considered for a while longer, then retreated to a more distant part of the Avengers residence, recalling one aspect of Stark’s life he had always observed with some intrigue.

“Friday?” He asked a little tentatively.

“Yes, sir?” The ceiling answered.

“Do you have a way of contacting Stark without his companions knowing about it?”

“I do,” the voice confirmed.

“Would you then please let him know of my presence and that I am unsure of the wisdom of showing myself to...what is the creature around the Mind Gem called?”
“You mean Vision?”

“I suppose. The wisdom of showing myself to Vision, then. Once it knows about me, I have no way of...manipulating that knowledge. Will you let Stark know?”

“On it,” the voice simply answered, and Loki waited, impatient and slightly nervous. It would be frustrating, having to abandon his plans on Midgard if this went wrong. And he certainly had no intention of trying to find favour with Rogers instead.

“Boss says it’s fine, that you should come in,” the voice in the building relayed after a few minutes, and steeling himself, Loki teleported to the shared space where the remnants of the Avengers were to be found.

Stark waved at him and the Colonel nodded, and up close their state of increased relaxation was even more apparent. The creature only blinked.

“You are Loki of Asgard, are you not?” It asked.

“I am,” Loki confirmed.

“My information is that you were a hostile force, yet I see that your presence here raises no alarm. Why is that?”

Loki smirked a little despite himself. “You’ll have to ask Stark about that.”

Obediently, the creature turned its head towards the man.

Stark shrugged. “He showed up to help,” he said. “In Siberia, and then later Rhodey. Everyone who shows up to help is good in my book.”

Vision simply inclined his head. “I did not know,” he said, to Loki. “Forgive me if I was discourteous.”

“Not at all,” Loki replied, a little taken aback by the unexpectedly mild reaction. He forced it from his mind, however, and turned towards Colonel Rhodes. “Let us get to the purpose of my visit. You are wearing your prosthetics, I assume?” He asked.

“I am,” the Colonel confirmed.

“Very well. Then if you’re ready…?”

“Absolutely.”

Loki approached him, and touched the metal leg braces, feeling them out, the places where they connected to the Colonel’s body. After a moment, he turned to Stark.

“These are your work, I’m assuming?”

Stark raised his eyebrows. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“I recognize the...imprint of your spirit, shall we say, upon it,” Loki explained. “It will make it easier.”


“I am at least somewhat more familiar with you than I would be with a random manufacturer. It
makes influencing what you created simpler.” The sex they had came in unexpectedly useful, too – it provided Loki with knowledge of Stark on a different level, a level that was very relevant for magic. Not enough to make causing harm easier, no – it required more intimacy for that, otherwise no sorcerer would ever willingly have casual sex – but it facilitated a basic kind of connection, though not a very long lasting one.

“It is also good that this was crafted particularly with Colonel Rhodes in mind,” Loki added distractedly, concentrating chiefly on his work.

“Right.” Stark shifted in his seat, somewhere between impatient and exited. “And why does that help? Why does it help magic, I mean, obviously it’s always better to have stuff custom made, but...”

“What I’m trying to do is make the cooperation between the Colonel and the prosthetics smoother,” Loki explained patiently, still only half his mind on Stark. “There is already a basic connection between them, based on the intent with which you crafted this. I can merely follow an already existing pathway.”

“So intent is an actual factor that counts in magic?” Stark verified.

Loki gave him a short look. “Naturally. Magic is all about intent. All the rest is just…trappings, to make the working easier.”

“Okay, I’d...really like to hear a more detailed explanation of that one day.”

Loki blinked. “Why?”

Stark shrugged. “A few years ago, if you’d told me magic was real, I’d have laughed in your face. But now I’ve seen enough proof to last me a lifetime. So if it’s real and it actually works, I want to know why, because in the physics I know, the laws of the universe and stuff, there’s no explanation for it. But there must be some laws governing it, there must be some way to understand it, and it pisses me off that there’s something about how the world works that I don’t know, a whole huge section of it. That’s offensive, you know? I’m Tony Stark, I’m supposed to understand everything!”

Loki smirked. “Oh my sweet summer child,” he said.

Stark’s mouth fell open. “You...did you just...you know Game of Thrones? How? I thought you Asgardians barely understood how technology works.”

Loki’s smirk only widened. “You know nothing, Anthony Stark.”

Stark groaned.

“I actually second Tony’s question,” the Colonel said from above Loki. “Don’t tell me you get cable reception on Asgard.”

“Not precisely,” Loki admitted, pausing in his work for a moment. “But then I’m not on Asgard now, am I?”

“So, what, you stopped for a GoT marathon before coming here?” Stark asked incredulously.

“Hardly. But when I was less...burdened by work, I used to come to different realms to take a small vacation from the glories of Asgard. A Song of Ice And Fire, the book series, was one of the things I consumed in Midgard on such an occasion.”
“Oh my god, I should have known you’d be one of the insufferable book fans,” Stark muttered.

“Oh? Is reading actual letters too hard for your little mortal brain?”

Stark stuck out his tongue.

Loki turned his smirk on him, and then turned back to the Colonel.

“Why Game of Thrones of all things, though?” Stark asked curiously after a moment. Loki put up his hand. “I need to concentrate on this last part,” he said. “We can leave any popculture discussions for later.”

Stark nodded, and Loki continued his work. It only took about ten more minutes spent in mostly comfortable silence for him to be done, and he rose to his feet and inclined his head to the Colonel.

“That’s it?” Stark asked a little incredulously.

“That was the basis, yes,” Loki confirmed. “Now I’ll need the Colonel to try it and tell me of any issues, so that I can modify it as needed.”

The Colonel nodded, and Stark rose to help him get to his feet, and he hovered nearby as the Colonel made the first steps. The Vision kept to the background, never raising from the sofa it sat on. However, it observed carefully, never taking its eyes off the humans.

“It’s...it works,” the Colonel said with some astonishment when he successfully, though slowly, walked a few metres. After several more steps, he added. “I think the left leg reacts a little slower than the right one…? It might be just my feeling though.”

“No, it is entirely possible,” Loki admitted. “If you’d test it some more to look for other issues, I’d fix it all at once then.”

Rhodes only nodded again, and continued walking around the room with Stark nearby, the astonishment on his face growing. Stark next to him, though, was grinning widely. The Colonel made two rounds before he headed back to the sofa. “I need to rest for a moment,” he said, sounding a little stunned still.

“Of course,” Loki agreed. “Any other problems?”

“Not that I could spot. Maybe I’ll find something later.”

Loki inclined his head and crouched in front of the sofa again, concentrating on equalling out the response time, as Stark plopped down next to Rhodes.

“This is pretty awesome, right?” He said with excitement.

“It’s incredible,” the Colonel agreed, his astonishment slowly fading as he fully took in what just happened, and being replaced by joy. He turned to Loki and added a heartfelt: “Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome,” Loki assured him.

“This calls for a celebration,” Stark declared. “Friday, order us some pizza. A bit of everything, you know how it goes. Drinks?”

Rhodes gave him a look. Stark put up his hands in defence. “Hey, I'm not planning to get drunk. Juts a bit for the mood. Cocktails maybe?”
Rhodes reluctantly agreed, and Stark headed to the bar, returning in a few minutes with glasses, handing one to Loki as well. Loki accepted it with some small degree of surprise, but gladly, reading it as a positive sign regarding his work here.

“So, to Rhodey running again in no time at all!” Stark declared, raising the glass.

“Let’s not overreached, okay?” the Colonel protested. “I’ll be quite happy with walking.”

“It should be no trouble for you to run in time,” Loki assured him. “Once you get used to this.”

Stark smiled brightly. “See? It’s gonna be great.” He beamed at him, and then beamed at Loki. Loki gave him a nod in acknowledgement for the silent thanks.

“All right,” Stark said then, putting his half-empty glass on the coffee table and sitting up straight, rubbing his hands. “Now that’s out of the way, let’s talk about the real issue here: Loki and popculture.”

Loki, who had been expecting a discussion about Thanos, couldn’t help the small laugh this forced out of him. Stark grinned back. “What other bits of Earth popculture you know?” He asked. “Is it all books?” He asked. “Are you a book snob? Wait, do you only read fantasy? Is it only because of the magic?”

Loki considered the last question. “I suppose perhaps partly,” he admitted. “I never thought about it. But yes, literature where magic wielders can be protagonists is pleasantly refreshing compared to what one reads on Asgard. It is also amusing to compare their ideas about how magic works with reality.”

“Oh? So, is Harry Potter accurate?”

Loki grinned. “Surprisingly so, actually. They’d all have to be quite weak mages – they need so many foci – but otherwise, yes.” He did not mention that, lately, the most relatable part of these books for him was Dumbledore’s scheming and treatment of Harry as a mere chesspiece. The depiction was so damn accurate that he sort of had to wonder if that Rowling woman ever met Odin in her life.

“Wanda had said something very similar once,” Vision joined the conversation unexpectedly, in a forlorn tone of voice. Loki saw Stark grimace a little out of the corner of his eye.

“What else?” He asked, clearly unwilling to dwell of whatever the Scarlet Witch had said. “I’m not exactly expert on fantasy books, mind you, but any other stuff that’s near the mark?”

“Some of Tolkien’s work is quite fitting regarding elves and dwarves – The Silmarillion, chiefly, The Lord of the Rings idealizes the elves far too much and the Hobbit mostly makes the dwarves seem like funny little creatures-”


“Naturally,” Loki said, taking care to make it sound obvious, and Stark rolled his eyes.

“All right, all right. I should really stop being surprised by anything. Something else?”

“Well, Zelazny’s books always intrigued me,” Loki admitted.

“Never heard of him.”
“That’s because you’re a barbarian,” Colonel Rhodes commented. He then turned to Loki. “There are no elves or dwarves, though, and there’s not exactly that much magic in them, is there? I mean, leaving aside the Trumps and the Pattern itself....”

“No,” Loki agreed. “Though the Pattern does have similarities with Yggdrassil. But it is for a different reason – the depiction of Amber, and the royal family and the close associates, is so near to Asgard that I have to wonder whether the author ever encountered an Asgardian in their life. Especially as some other things seem to be taken directly from Alfheim, even if there are no elves as such.”

“Hmm, interesting. So any similarities like this in A Song of Ice and Fire?”

Loki did his best not to let it show how he tensed. Oh, there were similarities all right. In fact, he was half-convinced that the fear of the invasion of The Others must be some distant memory of the Jotunn invasion to Midgard those millennia ago. When he first read those books, it had fascinated him. Now, he much preferred not to think about it.

Thankfully, he was spared answering because just in that moment, the ceiling voice sounded once more. “Boss, you have a delivery.”

“Oh, great, the pizza is here.” Stark got up from the sofa, only to pause at the sight of the man knocking on the glass door. “Okay...” He said slowly, apparently surprised at what he saw. “Not pizza.”

The delivery man tapped at the glass once again. “Excuse me,” he said, “is this Mr…er... Stank?”

The Colonel snorted. “Yes. Mr. Stank. You’re in the right place. Thank you for that. Never dropping that by the way. Table for one, Mr. Stank...right by the bathroom...”

Stark laughed in response, and went to open the door and accept the delivery.

The smile slid off his face the moment he unwrapped it and took out a letter, with a handwriting that must have been familiar to him.

It must have been familiar to the Colonel, too, because his face immediately lost its good humour as well. “What does he want?” He asked with disdain.

And suddenly Loki knew exactly who it was from.

“Do you intent to open it?” He asked, his own repulsion showing.

“Might as well...” Stark muttered after a moment of staring at the letter.

But then he opened it and began to read, and his face grew even more drawn. Loki and Colonel Rhodes moved as one, to read over his shoulder, and Loki helped the Colonel stay steady on his feet as Vision floated over to join them.

Tony, the letter read, I’m glad you’re back at the compound, I don’t like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself. We all need family. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine. I’ve been on my own since I was 18. I never really fit in anywhere – even in the Army. My faith is in people, I guess. Individuals. And I’m happy to say for the most part, they haven’t let me down. Which is why I can’t let them down either. Locks can be replaced, but – maybe they shouldn’t. I know I hurt you Tony. I guess I thought – by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but... I can see now I was really sparing myself. I’m sorry. Hopefully one day you can understand. I wish we agreed on the Accords, I really do. I know you were only doing what you
believe in, and that’s all any of us can do, it’s all any of us should. So no matter what, I promise if you -- if you need us. If you need me, I’ll be there. Steve.

“That son of a bitch,” the Colonel swore almost as soon as he took one look at the letter. “You’ve got to be kidding me, oh God, how dares he...who does he even think he is...”

“Captain America,” Tony muttered, tilting the box the letter came in until a small mobile phone fell out.

“Stark,” Loki said slowly, his own anger more controlled than the Colonel’s, simmering. “Would you give me the letter for a moment?”

Bemused, Stark handed it over. With a flick of his finger, Loki set it on fire.

Stark stared, whereas the Colonel laughed, distracted from his rage.

“Why didya…?” Stark didn’t even finish his question.

“Having to read that rubbish once is quite enough. I fear any more exposure could permanently damage your brain, and that’s hardly in my interest, is it? If I could, I would destroy the ridiculous phone as well, but unfortunately pragmatism is called for at this point. However, I hope you will place it somewhere far away and only use it when Thanos comes back.”

Tony sighed. “He did say he was sorry.”

“Yeah, in the most condescending way possible, and seemed to put in as many digs as possible,” Colonel Rhodes replied in a tired voice, carefully returning to the sofa. “Forget that asshole, Tony. I guess I see Loki’s point – if Thanos really is all that, we might need Rogers – but until then, if I see his ass anywhere near, I’m hailing it to jail.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Stark waved his hand. He headed back towards the sofa, but then stopped and shook his head, picking up his glass from the table instead and draining it. “I guess you’ll have to have the pizza by yourselves,” he said, replacing the glass and turning away. “I’m no longer in the mood.”

He walked away through a corridor that led away from the common space, muttering: “Have a good night, I guess,” over his shoulder.

The Colonel sent a frustrated look after him, waiting until he was out of hearing range. “This was the first time I’ve seen Tony in a decent mood since Siberia,” he muttered then. “I could kill Rogers right now.”

“Believe me, Colonel, you’re not the only one. If you’ll excuse me.”

Loki turned to walk after Stark.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” the Colonel called after him. “He wants to be alone right now.”

“If he truly wishes to, he can send me away,” Loki replied with a shrug. Rhodes merely nodded, and leaned back into the sofa with a tired sigh.

“I do not believe the Captain meant it badly...” Loki heard Vision say behind him as he walked away.
“Not now, Vision,” Rhodes replied, his voice tired.

Loki found Stark in his rooms, sitting on his own couch with a bottle of whisky in hand. “I thought I made it clear I didn’t want company?” He asked when he saw Loki, but there was no bite in it.

“If you truly don’t, then I can leave,” Loki replied calmly. “However, I thought you could use a distraction.”

Stark gave him a very half-hearted smile. “I’m not sure I could get it up right now, to be honest. The mood is too ruined.”

“I would have though this final proof that the man you parted ways with is an idiot would be gratifying.” Loki had thought no such thing, but it was a different way to distract. He hoped Stark would not mind such a small, innocent lie.

“The only thing the letter proves is that he still thinks he was right, in almost everything,” the man replied, too focused on Rogers to contemplate whether what Loki said sounded likely.

“Which makes him an idiot,” Loki pointed out.

“Or it makes me wrong,” Stark countered.

Loki frowned at him. “No, Stark.” When Stark’s expression didn’t change, Loki sighed and sat down next to him without waiting for permission. “Let us go over what he wrote, shall we?” He said, no actual question in his voice. “First he expresses concern for your psychological well-being after leaving you alone in Siberia. Extremely hypocritical, and probably an attempt to establish himself as a good person. It falls rather short, however, when he seems to believe you would have company at this compound. He knew Colonel Rhodes was injured and in hospital, and everyone else left with him,” Loki ignored Stark’s flinch at this and continued, “so did he believe Vision to be the company you so desired? Vision, who speaks in the voice of your old servant in the walls, but is clearly not him? Even I noticed the tension in you when you look at him, and I’ve known you for a much shorter time, and understand much less about the situation. Either Rogers is stupid, or he is being intentionally cruel. Given how the letter continues – with stating that Avengers are your family – I am leaning more towards intentional cruelty, since he just took them from you, after all.

“Then he continues to try and garner sympathy for himself, and for him being a misfit – after just reminding you that most of your colleagues chose his side over yours. It is a blatant lie, as you are well aware. If he never fit in, he would have had no following.

“He follows with hinting that you should override the punitive measures in place for breaking the Accords, so in other words, accede to his wishes. Then, I grant you, he does apologize, only to put the burden on you for getting over it, though in not so many words. Then he reiterates the basic line of his side of the argument – that it is only important what one person believes in – and uses it to condescendingly forgive you daring to have a different opinion from him. And – the coup de grace at the end – he magnanimously offers his assistance should you need him. Again, perhaps it did not occur to him that you needed him in Siberia?”

By this point, Loki had to keep very tight control over himself not to let his rage show. He had no often encountered such repulsive examples of attempted emotional manipulation as this letter, and it reminded him of his last three conversations with Odin, in all the worst ways. Especially the one in the weapons vault. He was beginning to truly wish he could go and kill Rogers, if only to vent the anger he could not unleash on the All-Father.
Stark only sighed. “He is right though – he was doing what he believed in, and so was I.”

Loki hesitated. If there was one thing he hated discussion, it was this, but he needed a visceral example, and could think of no other on the spot. Here’s hoping this won’t break the alliance, he thought. “Did Thor ever tell you what happened before I...fell into Thanos’ clutches?”

“No?” Stark asked, apparently a little confused why Loki was bringing it up now.

Loki did his best not to visibly tense up as he said: “For reasons I have no intention to go into now, I thought it was my sacred duty to destroy Jotunheim, one of the realms of Yggdrasil.”

Stark blinked, taking a moment to digest this. “...a planet? You wanted to destroy an entire planet?”

“More than wanted,” Loki admitted in an even voice. In truth, of all his past this was the deed he was most ashamed of, but it would not do to show the his cards so entirely. He was telling Stark more than he was comfortable with by far as it was, not need for the man to know how deep this cut. “I started to work on it, and would have done it had Thor not stopped me. I believed it an obligation, a thing necessary to ensure the safety of Asgard. I was doing what I believed was right. Did that make me in the right?”

“Well, no...” Stark replied, with a strong undercurrent of ‘obviously.’

“There you have it, then. Rogers’ rhetoric can he used to justify absolutely any kind of violence and hate. It is enough to believe to be in the right – and most of the worst criminals usually do.”

Stark exhaled. “When did you become an expert on morality?” He asked rather bitingly.

Loki hesitated over his answer once more. “When you do enough reprehensible things,” he said at length, “and have been accused of more, you need a screen to sift through them to try and understand what you are and what you are not to be blamed for.” He paused, and decided it was time to redirect the conversation before he got too entangled in it. “And I have been an expert on manipulation for a very long time, of course, so spotting that aspect of the letter was no hardship,” he added.

Stark shook his head. “I don’t think Rogers was intentionally manipulating me. He’s not the type.”

“Perhaps not him personally,” Loki conceded, “but the Black Widow ended up on his side, did she not?”

Stark scowled. “Do you think she’d- no, of course she would, who am I kidding. Do you think he...? F*cking hell!” Stark put the bottle on the table with force and stood up to pace. “She just f*ckin’ can’t leave well enough alone, can she? What is even her goal in this?”

“I suspect the same as, from what you have said, everyone else’s,” Loki commented mildly. “She wants you to feel a combination of enough guilt and loneliness that you will make peace with the captain.”
“Like hell I will. And of course, Rogers has his head so far up his ass that he can’t see all the ways in which the letter is a pile of horseshit.” Stark strode towards a wall, only to punch it with his fist and barely even wince, not paying attention in his anger.

Anger was certainly better that the self-hatred Stark had been feeling before, but it was still giving the traitors more attention than they deserved. Loki glided behind him. “I believe,” he said smoothly, “that now might be the time for that distraction, yes?”

Stark turned his head. There was some consideration, and then a sharp glint in his eyes. “Only if you don’t mind bottoming,” he said.

Loki grinned at him. “It would be my genuine pleasure.”

It was true. He only very rarely had this opportunity. In Asgard, he could never afford to do that at all, but even in other realms it was only when he was travelling completely incognito and there was no chance of anyone guessing his identity that he let himself enjoy the position. It was enough that people liked to claim he was argr just because of his magic, the last thing he needed was someone having an actual witness, a man able to claim that he had penetrated the second prince of Asgard.

And for the last few years, it had been completely out of the question, of course.

But Stark had little chance to talk to anyone beside Thor, and he already promise not to let him know Loki was alive, so it was safe. And Loki meant to make full use of that.

Stark turned around and pulled him into a kiss, and soon enough Loki found himself with his back pressed to the wall, and Stark’s mouth on his neck. His fingers clench on Stark’s shoulders before they wandered under the man’s shirt and over his nipples, making the mortal moan. Stark was incredibly sensitive, and it was more than a little rewarding.

He broke away from Loki for a moment, panting. “I just- in case it wasn’t clear. I’m gonna be rough. I can’t.”

Loki moved his hands to Stark’s hip and pushed them sharply towards himself, making Stark his at the friction. “Get on with it,” he growled.

Stark laughed and tugged impatiently at Loki’s tunic and Loki helped him remove it, taking off Stark’s shirt soon afterwards, enjoying the press of their naked skin on naked skin before he made their trousers follow with a wave of his hand.

“Wow,” Stark muttered against his lips. “Handy, that.”

In response, Loki took the man in hand, and was rewarded with another sharp breath.

“Way to take me literally,” Stark said with a breathless laugh. “Got any more of that magic lube?”

“Give me your fingers,” Loki muttered, and touched them with his free hand, making them glisten with slick. Stark hummed, and Loki turned around without having to be asked, bracing himself on the wall and spreading his legs.

Stark clearly knew what he was doing, and Loki soon found himself panting, breath leaving him in short gasps. He was never very vocal in bed – another thing having to hide his preferences has taught him – and from him, this was as much as screaming would be from some others. “Stark,” he muttered, “I said get on with it.”

Stark snorted. “As you command, your highness.”
He did obey, though, so Loki forgave him the snark.

And then he forgave him pretty much everything, really.

It had been a very, very long time since he was last fucked against a wall, and it had certainly not been half as good then.

It cost Loki some effort to remain standing after they were done, even bracing on the wall as he was. Stark did not bother, and simply slid down to the floor. After some consideration, Loki followed him.

“Well,” Stark said when he caught his breath, “you certainly distracted me.”

“And not well enough, if you already remembered.”

“Remembered what?” Stark asked him with a grin.

Loki returned it. Yes, that was as it should be.

Chapter End Notes

I still don't know how long this is going to continue, or how frequently I might update, but I do have ideas, and a bit of chapter 3 already written, so...yeah. I have no self-control.

As for Loki's popculture knowledge, look at him on Earth, even in Thor 1 when he goes to see Thor in the SHIELD holding cell. He's dressed perfectly in accordance with current Earth fashion. He must have been a frequent visitor. And of course he would get books, and books about magic while he was here. What else would you expect him to do?

(Also the Amber royal family does genuinely remind me of the Asgard one in some ways, and the idea of Loki comparing himself to Jon Snow in his mind as he tries to destroy Jotunheim breaks my heart.)
Chapter Summary

Things are looking up for once. There's still some angst, mind you - Tony is messed up.

Chapter Notes

I figured I might just give up the idea of self-restraint in writing this altogether. At least I'll get a little more done before the Infinity War inevitably ruins everything (and makes AUs in even higher demand)...

Loki gave himself another two Midgardian weeks before coming to see Stark again, and to ask Colonel Rhodes if there was any other failing he noticed about his prosthetics. He was in the midst of discussing details of planned defence with Vanir mages, and while this was one of the most interesting aspects of his work as the king of Asgard, it was exhausting in its own way – hours and hours of detailed discussions and extremely specialized presentations on new spells being developed and old ones being tweaked, and Loki having to pretend to have Odin’s limited understanding of magic. He could, he decided, use a break, and so he called for one and departed to Midgard.

He found all three heroes together once more when he appeared. The mood was less fully relaxed than last time, but he detected no specific tension as he was greeted. It merely seemed he had interrupted a serious discussions.

“Pardon me,” he said. “It seems you were in the middle of something? Should I come at a different time?”

Stark waved his hand. “Nah, we can finish this conversation whenever. It’s not an issue, though I do wish we had some timeframe for your visits.”

“My schedule is not entirely predictable,” Loki replied. “I cannot quite-”

“Yeah, I get it. It’s not a big deal.”

Examining him for a moment to make sure it truly wasn't, Loki then turned his attention to Rhodes.

“Have any new issues with your prosthetics appeared, Colonel?”

The man frowned a little. “Well...I think the response time gets worse when I walk for a long while? Dunno if it’s just me getting tired or the magic failing somehow though...I’d say it’s me, only it doesn’t seem to have the same problem when I run for a short while, even though I’m equally tired...”
“No, it is possible the spell is not as sturdy as I intended. Let me check.”

He approached the sofa Rhodes and Stark were both sitting on, and turning to Stark, added: “It has been a month since your return from Siberia, yet it is still only the three of you present here. I understand your reluctance, but...You should start looking for allies.”

“Way ahead of you,” Stark replied as Loki knelt down in front of the Colonel.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. And speaking of. Do you think you could look at Rhodey’s suit after your done with these?” Stark asked, watching him work intently as always. “I figured it could use the same upgrade of improved cooperation.”

“Certainly,” Loki agreed. “In fact, I could look at yours as well, if you wish.”

Stark’s eyes widened. “Whoa! Magic in my suit...let me think about it. I mean, on one hand it would be awesome, but...”

“He’s very protective about that suit,” Colonel Rhodes explained.

“No, I understand.” It was not as if Loki would simply allow anyone to tamper with his daggers. “It might become necessary once Thanos arrives – you might require magical protection – but until then, it’s up to you.”

“Yeah, alright.” Stark still looked a little uncomfortable, though also intrigued, “But, anyway, allies,” he said, clearly eager to change the topic. “So there’s the three of us – or will be after you fix up the War Machine suit, anyway – and there’s Spider-Man, the kid, I dunno if you know of him...”

“I do.”

“Yeah,” Stark shifted, now seeming even more uncomfortable. “I...really, really don’t wanna employ him unless it’s absolutely necessary, because, well, the kid’s fifteen. I really shouldn’t have involved him in that scuffle with Rogers – if I had known how deadly it would get, I wouldn’t have,” he added, shooting a sideways look at Rhodes’ legs. “Too late for that now, I guess. There’s a lot of things I’d have done differently. But at any rate, he’s our very last resort.”

“I understand your concerns,” Loki replied, and that seemed to surprise Stark some. But Loki had been fighting at what equaled Midgardian fifteen years of age, and looking back, he knew he had not been ready for it. Not for the fighting itself – he could have done that at ten, with his magic – but for the things that inevitably came with it. Killing people. Seeing people on his side killed. He might not have particularly liked most Asgardians, but it didn’t mean his barely fully developed self bore the sight of their bodies torn to pieces easily. Well. That, at least, was certainly one thing age had cured him of – any kind of squeamishness.

Loki shook himself out of this thought and continued: “However, he might become necessary. Or do you have anyone else to take his place?”

“You bet,” Stark said with a smirk. “For one, there’s Hope.”

“Hope?” Loki asked, uncomprehending, even as he located the problem Colonel Rhodes had referred to and set to correcting it.

“Hope Van Dyne,” Stark elaborated. “She was a kid I used to know – out of all the children of my
father’s business associates, she was the only moderately tolerable one. Mind you, she’s ten years younger than me, so it’s not like we played together or anything, but even when she was seven she was smarter than most of the teenagers I was expected to associate with at my dad’s parties. Sharp business mind, too. Pepper likes her a lot. When I was still my own CEO, I often did business with her. Anyway, the weird ant guy Rogers managed to get on their side at the airport? Turns out he was using particles her dad developed, and she and daddy aren’t too happy about it. So she offered me cooperation. Apparently daddy has issues with that too, but Hope managed to shout him down. Never doubted she could. And you know what? She has her own suit like the ant guy, only hers is a wasp.” Stark rolled his eyes. “Don’t ask. Anyway, now she’s about to sign the Accords and join forces with us, so yay!”

“That is good,” Loki agreed a little distractedly, still working. “You know her and know her background, so she should prove a reliable ally. However, she is still only one person. Anyone else?”

“She’s the only one certain,” Stark admitted reluctantly. “There’s others I did preliminary work on, though. A bulletproof guy in Harlem, a super-strong chick in Hell’s Kitchen...and rumour has it Danny Rand, who half-owns some relatively big corporation, has some superpowers too. I’ll talk to them, see if they are interested. And I absolutely have to talk to Charles Xavier, but I haven’t managed to set up a meeting yet.”

“Charles Xavier?” Loki was done now, and turned his full attention to Stark in time to notice the strange emphasis with which the name was uttered, as if this Xavier merited special attention, as if he was a personage of more value than the ones mentioned before.

“Yeah. He’s this super strong telepath and directs the biggest group of superpowered people we have,” Stark explained, his tone making sense now. “They won’t outright join the Avengers, that much is clear, but they certainly should be able to cooperate on Thanos.”

“That does sound truly valuable,” Loki agreed, getting up and nodding at the Colonel to indicate he was done.

The man stood up, carefully testing whether something hadn’t gone wrong in Loki’s adjustments, as Stark grinned. “I know what I’m doing.”

“There is only one issue,” Loki said as he sat down – a little reluctantly – to the other sofa, next to the mind gem creature. “The telepathy. If he is as powerful as you imply, he might be able to learn of my association from your mind.”

Stark frowned. “Damn. You’re right. That’s probably not the best first impression to make. I guess I could try and duplicate Magneto’s helmet – that’s, like, Xavier’s sworn enemy and he has a way to protect his mind from him – but I have no idea how to get my hands on any kinds of plans or scans...I guess if I set FRIDAY to hacking various secret governmental databases, she might come up with something...”

Loki shook his head. “That would hardly be the best first impression either, appearing in front of him with his enemy’s technology, would you not agree?”

“You have a point, but...”

“I can protect your mind from his telepathy, or I can simply shield the knowledge of my own involvement,” Loki offered.

Stark exhaled, frustrated. “And here we are at the using magic on me bit again. I just...”
“You didn’t have any worries when I used it on your friend,” Loki pointed out, tilting his head towards Rhodes who was just finishing his test walk and sitting back down.

Stark grimaced and shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah, makes me sound like a real asshole, doesn’t it? But I was desperate for help, and besides, rationally speaking I know I can trust you in this. I know I should, and that I’m being an asshole, and that if you wanted to hurt me you’d have no need to be so elaborate about it. But...I always had trust issues, all right, people wanting to talk to you only for your money will do that to you, and after Stane it turned into huge trust issues, and after Rogers...there are no words. So it’s really not on you, it’s on me, but...”

Once more, Loki could relate. He considered the problem. “If Vision did it, would it make you feel more comfortable?” He asked after a moment.

“Er- sure, but I didn’t know Vision could...”

“I don’t believe I can,” the creature replied.

Loki scoffed. “Of course you can. The Mind Gem is in your core, is it not? There is not effect on the mind you are incapable of.”

Stark set up straighter, his discomfort apparently forgotten at this information. “Wait...you mean Vision could do telepathy?”

“Naturally,” Loki replied. “You truly know very little of the gem, do you?”

“How come you know so much?” Rhodes asked.

Loki hesitated about how to phrase it without lying, but without revealing too much. “I was...in close proximity to it for quite a time.”

Rhodes nodded. “Yeah, I know it was in your spectre, but from what Tony told me, you mostly just shot people with it and did the mind control thing. So it’s not like you got up to that many sophisticated uses of it. There were no sign of telepathy, from what I know.”

Again Loki hesitated. “Understanding the potential,” he said at length, “doesn’t mean I was capable of using it to its full. However, Vision is the Mind Gem, in many ways. He will be capable of this, if he only learns to unlock it. In this, I can help.” It would be beneficial to him, too, to get an opportunity to study it in detail. He was wary of it, extremely so, but he would need to be in contact with it from time to time and for that, he needed to overcome his discomfort. There was no better way to do that, he knew from experience, than in-depth study.

The creature seemed to consider the offer. “I have desired to understand it better ever since I was born,” it said at length. “If you believe it secure...” He turned to the two men in the room.

Stark put up his hands. “Hey, don’t look at me. I think we’ve firmly established that I can’t be trusted with questions like this.”

“But it’s up to you,” Rhodes pointed out. “We’re gonna need Xavier, and waiting won’t help any. Either you let Loki use magic on you, or you let him help Vision get better control of his abilities.”

Stark exhaled sharply. “Great. I just love being backed into a corner.” He got up and began pacing.

“If I may,” Vision interrupted them. “If we are to fight Thanos, surely me being able to use the full range of capabilities of this gem would be beneficial?”
“I don’t know!” Stark almost shouted. “That’s what I thought about Ultron, all right? That it could save us all, and look where it led us!”

“You were compromised at the time,” Vision pointed out softly.

“That’s no excuse,” Stark replied sharply. “I won’t turn into Maximoff, refusing to accept any responsibility for my mistakes.”

Vision flinched. It was a strange sight, on such a creature. “She felt the death she caused very deeply,” he said quietly.

“Sure didn’t affect her actions much, did it?” Stark replied sharply. “Oh, woe is me, I killed a bunch of people and I’m grounded, how fucking unfair!”

Loki considered the frustrated mortal, and considered different strategies and approaches, before he asked with clinical curiosity: “Did you ever face any sort of imprisonment for Ultron?”

Stark gave another sharp exhale. “No. There were hearings though, lots and lots of preliminary hearings, but it turns out I broke no laws. There’s no official rules for experimenting, as long as you’re doing it with your private resources you don’t actually need any kind of approval unless you’re going against some specific laws, and..well, there was that one trial for endangerment, but my lawyer successfully argued that there was no way to say what I did was against the law without saying that any scientific exploration of unknown and alien technology is against the law, so...what I got was probation. I got a UN-assigned panel of experts to whom I have to submit any research ideas that aren’t entirely within normal scope of research. I was the first step towards the Accords, I guess. While I waited for the verdict, I was banned from research work, and was assigned a probation officer of sorts, who kept an eye on video surveillance of me to make sure I didn’t dab into anything new. Not that I needed it – for half a year after Ultron, what time I didn’t spend in hearings or with my lawyers, I spent in Sokovia, trying for some kind of restitution. Well, that and planning BARF out in my head, waiting to be able to implement it once the trial was over.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “BARF?” The idea the All-Tongue conveyed to him was convulted and unclear, as it happened with unknown phenomena.

“It’s a...shrink program, basically,” Stark explained. “I can’t really trust any real shrinks, too much classified information, so...”

Loki nodded in understanding. He had no need to ask why Stark needed it. He also had to resist the urge to ask to try it on himself. With his luck, it wouldn’t work on him anyway, his braint oo different. “What would have awaited the Scarlet Witch?” He asked instead, aiming for the same clinical tone.

“An overview of her actions by the committee. I’m pretty sure they’d have found no fault, or at most she’d have gotten a slap on the wrist. But of course, it was too much for the mighty heroes to wait for the verdict.”

“She was afraid,” Vision said quietly.

“Do you think I wasn’t?” Stark asked. “After Ultron, I mean? Do you think I wasn’t afraid of being locked up? But I promised myself that beyond getting a good lawyer, I wouldn’t try to get out of it in any way. I promised myself accountability, for once in my life, because clearly without it there were no bounds to how much I could fuck up. But apparently, not everyone thinks like that.”

Vision sighed. “I had hoped to suggest Wanda as a possible candidate for the new Avengers –
“I believe,” Vision said then, “that it would be better if you allowed Loki to use magic on you. In this context, I do not believe you trust me enough to-”

Stark immediately turned to him. “Vision, no. We disagree about Wanda, all right, but I have nothing against you. I trust you. It’s my own capabilities to decide this I don’t trust.”

“Let Vision decide it himself, then,” Loki suggested.

Stark nodded. There was a moment of silence.

“Very well,” Vision said then. “I want to know.”

And so Loki took a deep breath, steeled his nerves for another full contact with the gem that had cost him so much, and set to work.

It was more complicated than he would have thought.

He did some preliminary spellwork to make certain the stone was wholly present and not connected to Thanos’ mind any more, or to any other curious onlookers who could notice him through it. Stark watched him like a hawk the whole time. Loki would have been irritated, except there was more curiosity and fascination than suspicion in the man’s gaze. Noticing this, he took his time, letting Stark forget his frustration as his mind latched onto something else to occupy it.

“Can you sense the stone?” He asked Vision when he was done with the initial spells.

“I am unsure what you mean exactly,” the creature replied. “I sense the power that resides in it...”

“Yes, so do I, but you should be able to sense it from the inside, not just from the outside,” Loki explained.

“Then I am afraid I do not.”

Loki frowned. “This should be natural to you, even more natural than the primitive shooting you have been using it for. But I cannot understand your artificially created mind, so I cannot tell what it is that is preventing it...”

“Hey, I might know a way around that!” Stark said, sounding excited that he could get involved. Like a child, Loki thought, but without any rancour. He liked children, after all, better than most adults.

“Vision, can you project your thought process into my tablet?” Stark asked the creature.

Vision nodded. “It is done.”

“That is seriously weird,” the Colonel commented, looking up from his own device he had
apparently pulled out and began to study in the meantime. He was clearly less interested in the proceedings than Stark, but still paying attention.

“It is no different than analysing brain waves, Colonel,” Vision said serenely, as Stark stared at his tablet.

“Could you take me to the section that’s, as near as you can tell, the part that concerns the gem?” The inventor asked, concentrating on his work and oblivious to what was going on around him.

“Here it is,” Vision said simply, without making any obvious adjustment.

Stark peered at it for a while, and Loki found himself watching him as he had been watched before. He could see as little of what Stark was doing as he imagined the man had been able to see when he was spellcasting, but there was simply something intriguing about that look of absolute concentration on the man’s face.

“All right, I think I see it,” Stark said at length. “If I’m reading this right, Vision has a kind of shield put up around it, protecting himself...”

Loki frowned. “I assume you did not create it intentionally?”

“No. I have been unaware of it until now,” Vision assured him.

“In that case, it might not be wise to undo it. It might be...instinctual defence, of sorts. Perhaps it would be too much, seeing the power of the gem at once in its entirety.”

Stark frowned. “Do you think that is what broke Ultron?”

“I do not know,” Loki replied truthfully. If he were being completely honest, he would have to say he doubted it – there was a different, more likely explanation – but he was not prepared to speak to Stark about that, so he focused on the problem at hand instead. “I am unsure how to circumvent it – with my own power, I cannot influence his mind, and while the gem would be perfectly able to create a partial barrier that would only let some information through, Vision cannot utilise it and I fear I cannot show him while being entirely certain I would not accidentally make the entirety of the knowledge accessible...”

Stark waved his hand. “Easy. You might not be able to access his mind, but me and Vision totally are. So, what do you say, bright boy? Ready to work on your shields?”

“I am,” Vision replied serenely, as if the thought of adjusting his own mind with someone else’s help presented no discomfort to him. Perhaps it didn’t. Stark created the part of him that was not the Mind Gem, after all. He must be used to the idea of his influencing his mind.

“Loki, can you describe what we need to do?” Stark asked, his focus once again sharp. “Maybe say what you’d do if you were creating a spell like that in a human, and we’ll try to replicate it in code here...”

Loki considered how to phrase it. “A spell like this,” he said at length, “is crafted by creating a complete barrier and then making a hole in it – as big as necessary. Since here we know what kind of information we want to get through, I would...pull at the information behind the barrier and where it resisted, I would weaken it.”

Stark considered his words. “All right. So we already have the barrier, right-”

“Yes, but an intuitively created one-”
“Yeah, sure, we have to check if it can take the poking. Then the hole, that’s easy enough, but I’m not sure about the pulling of information- I mean Vision can’t access it, so…”

“I believe you would have to get to it without my knowledge.”

“Hmm, but the Mind Gem is not a program, so I can’t exactly have it display itself in code…”

“That is true. Perhaps if I tried to access the knowledge, it would highlight the relevant parts of the shield for you?”

“That does sound like what Loki said...all right, let’s get to work.”

Loki watched their back and forth with interest. He startled a little when Stark rose from his sofa and simply wedged himself between Loki and Vision, without any regard for personal space, and shared what was on his tablet with the creature. Loki observed them from this close distance, unable not to think about the previous times when he had been this close to Stark and how he would quite enjoy another opportunity for that, as they worked for near half an hour. Finally Stark pronounced: “I think we’re done.”

“I believe so as well, yes. Let me absorb these changes.” Vision simply stood for a moment, blinking. “Yes, it is done,” he confirmed then. “Mr. Loki, if you would…?”

“Are you certain?” Loki asked, a little unnerved by this change which he could neither see nor sense.

“Yes, quite.”

“Very well then. What I have to do is call to the gem’s mental powers. They’ll become more manifest, and easier for you to see. I will call upon the ones you will need for this, and so it should doubly ensure that it will be them what will become visible through the shield.”

“I understand.”

Loki tried to mask the deep breath he took once more to steel himself. This was going to be even more...unpleasant. But needs must, and so, keeping his face a calm mask with utmost effort, he sent his mind back to the times when he was Thanos’ puppet, and remembered what the mind gem could do, and thought about mental shields.

The gem in Vision’s head began to shine, more and more bright, and then Vision said, quietly, “oh”, and Loki let go.

“There is so much...” the creature muttered. “So much...but I understand now.”

“Do you wanna get used to it a little before you mess with my mind?” Stark asked him a little cautiously, but also looking at him with the same fascination he had watched Loki work before.

Vision considered, his eyes distant. “It might be best. But I would prefer if Mr. Loki stayed for the procedure, to monitor if I am proceeding correctly.”

“As you wish,” Loki agreed easily. In fact, he would have insisted on it in any case. The last thing he needed was Stark going insane. “I can adjust the Colonel’s armour in the meantime,” he offered.

And so the armour was dully flown in and Loki did his work, with Stark’s and Rhodes’ careful observation.
And then it was him watching again, while Vision created a shield in Stark’s mind around the knowledge of Loki’s secrets.

“Perfectly executed,” Loki commented when it was done.

“Awesome,” Stark said, clapping his hands together. Then he hesitated. “Maybe at some point we can hide other stuff?” He suggested tentatively. “I’m not afraid of Xavier, but he’s not the only telepath out there, so...”

“I will be at your disposal,” Vision agreed easily. “And perhaps, Mr. Loki, you would consent to show me more in time?”

Loki inclined his head. “Certainly - when you have had time to adjust to this. There is much power in the Mind Gem, and as you have said, it would be a waste not to use it to its full capacity against the Mad Titan.”

“Right,” Stark muttered, suddenly looking a little uncomfortable. “That reminds me.” He turned to Loki. “I need to talk to you. And the work seems pretty much done now, so....”

Loki, wondering, agreed wordlessly and followed Stark out of the common space and into his rooms once more.

"Listen," Stark said when they arrived there, plopping down on the sofa and gesturing next to himself for Loki to sit as well, "there’s something we need to discuss, and it’s making me restless that we haven’t yet, especially now that we’re empowering Vision. Not that I don’t agree with it, but it’s making my position in this even more precarious. But even without it...I’ve kinda been avoiding it the last couple of weeks, but you know what the whole mess with Rogers was about. The Accords, I mean, not the...rest of it. So you know I'm not exactly an independent agent any more. And this superpowered alien danger? Yeah, I need to let the Accords council know."

"You do," Loki agreed. "In time."

Stark frowned. "No, not in time. In fact, I'm already way too late."

"You are bound to inform them of any heroic activity," Loki reminded him. "We have been doing no such thing."

Stark’s scowl deepened. "Assuming I'm the best person to prepare a plan of action for a large-scale alien threat is even worse than assuming that 'the safest hands are our own' when it comes to using our powers. I won't turn into Rogers."

"Nor would I ask you to," Loki replied a little sharply. "But, tell me, what protocols are in place for top secret information within the system?"

"Well, all information on superhero business are secret..."

Loki just gave him a look.

"Fine, okay, there isn't much,” Stark conceded.

"In that case, sharing what you know with a bureaucratic apparatus is an unacceptable risk."

Stark considered this, still frowning, but now more in thought than in anger. "All right," he said at length. “You have a point. Tell you what. We'll try to think of something to improve secrecy, and when we do, I'll tell the Council about Thanos – and inevitably about you, since they will want to
know where I got the information. Acceptable?"

Loki kept the scowl he wanted to turn to Stark at this question to himself, and said smoothly. "Mostly. I certainly agree about Thanos, but all the other realms are preparing for him without knowing of my survival. I see no reason why Midgard should be any different."

Stark shrugged. “It’s the same thing as with Thanos. I can’t just assume I’m the best person to decide it’s all right to trust you, not when it’s not just about my personal life, but about the security of the whole world.”

Loki gritted his teeth. This was entirely unacceptable, but he could hardly flat out refuse at this point. “Tell them about Thanos first,” he said instead. “We will see how well they manage to keep that secret truly secret, and if that part is successful, we will discuss revealing the source of information again.”

Stark sighed. “They won’t take me seriously unless they know where the info is coming from.”

Loki considered. That was a real issue. “If I could get Odin to confirm it?” He asked.

Stark blinked. “That would help, sure, but how? I thought he believed you were dead, too?”

This was balancing on the edge of a knife between truth and lies, but Loki saw no other way. “He does,” he confirmed.

“So how do you...”

“Please.” Loki put all of his smugness and superiority into that one word. “I’m a trickster. I have my ways.”

Stark put up his hands. “All right, all right, I won’t ask. So just...come over in another fortnight, and I’ll try to have the secrecy protocols implemented? And you can use that time to somehow convince Odin to let us know?”

“Very well.” Loki agreed, thinking of what he would need to do to make it all seem natural. “Was that all?” He asked, his mind half on Asgard already.

Stark smiled a little nervously. “Ah, not quite. There’s also...” He vaguely gestured between them.

“Yes?” Loki asked, a little amused, his mind snapping back to the here and now, suddenly much more interested. Perhaps he could allow himself to stay here just a little while later...

“Just...what is this, exactly?” Stark asked. “I mean, the first time we slept together, I was pretty sure it was a pity fuck on your part. But last time was a little different. Still, you were clearly trying to help me out, so...”

Loki frowned, his mood souring a little. “I told you plainly the first time I wasn’t doing you favours by this.”

“Yeah, yeah, but it’s a little hard to believe given the circumstances. So I was just wondering – is it reserved just for the times I’m exceptionally messed up? Because you looked hot as hell when you were fixing up Vision,” and that confession put Loki right back in the right mood, “so...can I initiate something as well, or...I don’t know, what’s Space Viking rules for hookups?”

“Get drunk on ale and mead and put a wench over your shoulder,” Loki replied drily. “But as for the two of us,” he grinned sharply, looking Stark directly in the eyes, “certainly you can...initiate
something, if you feel like it. I admit I was...particularly appreciative of watching you work as well. So believe this could be simply a pleasant benefit to our association. Do you not agree?”

Stark’s answering grin was no less sharp. “Oh no, I’m all for that. Except, you know, I take offence at the word pleasant. It was pretty great both times as far as I recall.”

Loki simply hummed noncommittally.

“What?” Stark asked, offended.

“Oh, it was good enough,” Loki conceded with a glint in his eyes.

“All right, now you have done it,” Stark said, fake outrage mixing with amusement, and moved surprisingly quickly on the sofa so that he was straddling Loki. “I was holding back, you know – didn’t wanna overstep-”

Loki raised his eyebrows at him. With Stark in his lap, they were exactly eye to eye, and he could appreciate the humour in his eyes to its fullest. “You?” He asked sarcastically. “The man who questioned my sexual prowess in the middle of me conquering his world? Didn’t want to overstep?”

Stark grinned even wider in answer. “Apparently even I have some sense of boundaries when it comes to Space Viking ex-world conquerors. Who knew?”

“Who indeed?” Loki gave him a shark smile, and saw the heat in Stark’s eyes grow.

“But they are disappearing as we speak,” the man muttered, leaning closer to Loki.

Closing the distance, Loki took him by the hips and kissed him.

While their kissed the first time had been tinged with desperation and the second time with anger, this time it was enthusiasm, pure and unfiltered, and simply joy that Stark took in it. It was rare for Loki to experience that – the few times he had had partners in Alfheim, he had experienced that, but in Vanaheim there was usually still enough stigma tied to two men together that there was too much shame mixed in. And the less said about Asgard, the better. In Midgard, too, the quick dalliances he had had were usually with his partners drunk or under the influence of another sort.

But Stark was like the most enthusiastic of elves Loki had ever bedded, and it brought his own almost forgotten enthusiasm to the foreground as he explored Stark’s body with his hands while biting on his neck.

And then Stark slithered down to the floor and Loki could only blink at him in surprise. Stark grinned again, and with his mouth swollen red from the kissing, it looked obscene.

“I told you I had been holding back,” he said, and then he undid Loki’s fly and Loki could only thump his head back on the sofa and close his eyes to ensure this didn’t end too soon.

Afterwards, they lay entangled on the sofa, both tired out enough that they ad to take a moment before doing anything else. Stark had been very appreciative of Loki’s super-human speed of recovery, and Loki had been glad to demonstrate the advantages in practice. It had been...very good, but now they were paying the price by bodies unwilling to more even an inch, and Loki’s mind, at the very least, was also feeling pleasantly sluggish.

“There’s something I’ve been curious about ever since we first spoke in Siberia,” he said slowly, unable to think of a reason not to ask right now. “How did you realise I wasn't a willing ally of
"Wow, you’re really good at pillow talk, aren’t you?” Stark asked with sarcasm, but not actual upset in his tone, so Loki let it be. Perhaps Stark’s mind was too slow to be upset, too. "Anyway, the answer is I didn't, not at first. But after the invasion, I was a little...eh. Obsessed? I kept thinking about it and how to prevent something like that happening again, and obviously that led to thinking about why you did it. Thor didn't tell us much, but he did make it clear you weren't always insane. And I also heard him say that you fell. So...a sane person falls, and a year later an insane one returns with an army. It didn't seem very likely that you went crazy and then someone just happened to give you an army, so the conclusion was kinda obvious. I mean, I guess you could have gone insane after you got the chitauri, but. You know. Ockham's razor."

Loki raised his eyebrows. "You knew about my sending the Destroyer. I'm surprised you considered me sane at that point."

“I told you I was unwilling to make any judgements about that family mess of an episode,” Stark replied.

“It must have factored in your analysis at least somehow.”

"Yes, fine, Jesus. You really do want to destroy the afterglow, don’t you? So yeah. That was actually my first theory - you go insane, fall somewhere, get an army - but aside from the glaring question of why would anyone give an army to a clearly insane guy, there was the fact that...with stuff like the Destroyer at your disposal, you could have definitely tried to control Earth. But you didn't. You just went after Thor. So at the very least the desire to rule Earth was a new development, possibly suggested by the guy who gave you the army. So my final guess was that something happened that started when Thor was first on Earth, and that culminated with you being sent here with an army. Am I close?"

In a way, Stark was spot on, but in the way he believed. "Not quite,” Loki replied, somewhere in the back of his mind wondering if he wasn’t revealing too much, but in the end letting it be. If nothing else, this would help further in building trust, and sooner or later he would have to talk about what exactly happened with Thanos, if he wanted to have Midgard properly ready for him. Better work up to it in increments. “Ockham's razor failed you this time,” he explained, his mind slowly waking up as he considered how much to say. "It was actually two separate occurrences that led to my loss of sanity."

“Seriously?” Stark gave a laugh without any mirth. “When it rains, it pours, right?”

“Indeed. Though the occurrences were connected in a way – the first was the cause of my...fall, and that, in turn, led to my capture by Thanos. So it was not entirely accidental.”

Stark opened his mouth again, but Loki shook his head even as he stretched and sat up. He had at least come to his senses enough to know he could not trust himself to speak wisely in this state. “I have to go back, Stark,” he said. It wasn't even a lie - the Vanir mages would be getting impatient soon. “Save your inevitable questions for next time.”

Stark mock-scowled. “All right,” he said. “But prepare your answers. In two weeks, right?”

“Yes, Stark. In a fortnight, give or take a day, I will be back here.”

And with a slight bow of his head, Loki stepped onto the dark paths, and headed towards Asgard.
This is the first time I'm writing a multi-chapter story without any kind of plan. It's terrifying. But I think I can relatively safely say that there will be at least a few more chapters. Still no posting schedule though - I never manage to keep it for more than a few months anyway.
When Loki next arrived to Midgard, he found Stark in a mood markedly worse than the previous two times, apart from the moment after Rogers’ letter arrived. The contrast was so pronounced to be almost staggering. There was less fragility, less sense of being seconds from falling apart at the seams, but except for that, it was almost as bad as when they first began their tentative alliance.

Loki was surprised to note that he was actually...upset at the realisation. Beyond the mild irritation that his plans were not progressing as linearly as he’d wish them to, that was. He frowned a little, hidden behind his invisibility, and considered. He was angry, he decided, and also just a little worried. That, in turn, made him even more irritated.

The anger, he supposed, made sense. He exerted quite some amount of energy in his efforts to stabilise Stark’s mental state, and it would simply not do to have his work ruined once again. The worry, though...worry for losing the Midgard alliance would have been understandable, but Loki knew himself well enough to be aware this was not just it. There was something more personal in it, and in that anger, too. It was...disconcerting.

Unfortunately, he also found Stark in the company of a red-headed woman, so he could not immediately enquire what was wrong and distract himself by conversation. He had checked whether Stark was free from the throne before coming, but sometimes the situation changed in between, and this was clearly one of those cases. Given this, Loki could only observe to try and find out whether the woman was the source of Stark’s black mood, and at the same time, try and puzzle out his own reaction.

Stark, he decided, was watching the woman with an interesting mix of regret, frustration and bitterness, and while her presence was definitely not helping his mood, it did not seem to be the cause of it. Especially as they were discussing solely business-related matters. The woman tried to turn the conversation to something else a few times, but Stark blocked her very efficiently at each turn, causing her to look as frustrated as he did.

No, this puzzle was not too hard for Loki. His own mind, on the other hand…

What, he wondered, was Stark to him that he would actually care about his comfort?

He was not in the habit of caring for those he slept with beyond making sure they enjoyed
themselves, and he had not worried about another’s well-being since his mother’s death. So why in all the Nine was he suddenly personally interested in Stark feeling worse for wear?

Keeping one eye on the conversation in the room, he went over their past interactions and tried to find traces of the same. A word jumped at him, a word from that spied-on conversation between Stark and Colonel Rhodes: over-identification.

Was that what was happening here?

He was not fool enough to imagine his sympathy towards Stark in Siberia was not based in seeing parallels with himself. In fact, he had effectively admitted as much to Stark. Was that continuing in some way? Did he still see a mirror in Stark? And if so, was it a problem?

He thought back to Rogers’ letter, and the parallels with Odin he had noticed. Yes, perhaps this was the crux of the thing.

Considering this, Loki decided that this small degree of sympathy was hardly harmful. After all, with Stark being the only one to know Loki was alive, he was also the only point of potential interpersonal contact Loki had, if he chose not to regard the man as a simple tool. And while he would be all too glad if he could say he had no need of anyone, his own history of insanity spoke differently. Using Stark as an anchor was giving the man too much power, of course, but as long as Stark did not know about it, there was little danger, and it wasn’t like Loki was spoilt for choice. No, Stark would do.

Happy with this answer to two of his conundrums at once, Loki turned to watch the woman leave with perfect equanimity restored, showing himself when she departed.

“Jesus,” Stark said when he noticed him, jerking a little, “how long have you been here?”

“Some minutes,” Loki replied. “I did not wish to intrude, and let me assure you I heard nothing particularly personal.” He hesitated for a moment, wanting to confirm his observations. “If I am not mistaken, she is your partner, is she not?” He asked.

Stark winced and headed towards the bar. “She...was. She was my partner. Now we are...broken up. I think.”

That did partly explain the darker mood, then. “You think?” Loki enquired with a raised eyebrow at the phrasing.

“We were...on a break, that’s what you call it?” Stark began to explain, pouring himself a drink and offering Loki one as well. “A convenient enough way to lie to ourselves, I guess. Anyway, a couple of weeks ago, when she heard what went down in Siberia, she came here to offer support and...I think, to offer to get back together. I know that if I asked for it, I would have gotten it. But...” Stark drank deeply from his glass, “it occurred to me, pity is not a great reason for someone to be in a relationship with me. So I let it be.”

“I see.” Loki had been wondering whether Stark was in an open relationship, or merely a cheater. Somehow the second didn’t seem to fit, but it was not like he knew the man perfectly yet. Still, he was glad to have an explanation.

“Should I call Vision?” Stark asked after a moment, finishing his drink. “You’re here for his lesson, aren’t you?” His tone was a little strange and off, likely another sign of his mood.

“Among other things, yes,” Loki confirmed.
“FRIDAY, would you get Vision for us?” Stark asked his construct.

“Sure thing, boss,” came the reply.

Stark nodded. “In the meantime, what other things were those?” He asked then.

“First, tell me about the developing situation with your allies,” Loki redirected, sipping from his own glass. “I take it Colonel Rhodes is not here?”

Stark grimaced and tried to mask it with pouring himself another drink. “Nah, pretty much as soon as he was able to operate the suit again, he was pulled back to active duty. Mind you, he’s still an Avenger, so no sending him to Afghanistan or anything, but he does still work in the army, so they have him jump through the hoops of getting back to army-fit shape and flying some missions confined to the Americas. He’s back to living on base now.”

Another reason for the dark mood, then. Loki started a mental tally, and also decided to prod a little: “That seems to...irritate you.”

“It does,” Stark admitted. “They should have the decency to give him a bit more recovery time. His spine was broken, for fuck’s sake! But, well. I’m actually generally in a shitty mood.”

So they could talk about it openly, then. Good. “The additional reasons being? If there are some, that is.” Norns knew Loki was aware it wasn’t always like this. Even in his youth, when he still dwelt in the bosom of the Asgardian royal family, he frequently had dark spells with no discernible explanation behind them.

Stark, however, sighed, nodded, and took another drink: “Boy, are there some. Because speaking of allies...let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was this wise king of a poor country who was a major proponent of the Sokovian Accords, you know, of openness and accountability, all things good.” Stark’s bitter, cynical voice was strangely jarring with the words of traditional storytelling he was using. “Just as he gave a speech to that effect, he got tragically killed by the Winter Soldier. It led to quite a mess, his son and heir bent on revenge and all that, but that’s beside the point for now. What is the point of this story, though, is that it was revealed a few days ago that this poor country has actually secretly been this super rich, technologically advanced place this whole time, they have assloads of vibranium and all these advanced ways of healing, and they kept it secret from the world this whole time because...they’re assholes, I guess. So, you know, the amount of hypocrisy in that, given their position on the Accords...it pisses me off. A lot. Especially as Ross, who apparently played a crucial role in having them reveal themselves, now wants me to make nice with them and exchange our technological savvy, and all I wanna do is tell those guys to piss off.” He took another drink.

Loki considered the information. These were shoes it was a little harder to imagine himself into, always having been on the other side of that equation. “They sound rather like Asgard, to be honest,” he commented, “except at least they do not use their advancement to conquer others.”

Stark snorted. “Private word from Ross is it almost happened, though the guy behind it was actually US reared, so it’s not like that part was their fault. But, yeah, I’m pissed.”

Another strike, then. “I understand,” Loki conceded, “but your frustration notwithstanding, it will come in useful.”

“Yeah, and it would have about a million times in the past. But, granted, being able to count on them against Thanos will probably be a major advantage, from what I can tell. I promise I’ll start working with them as soon as I’m a bit less pissed and so inclined to say things one probably
Loki couldn’t help the amused snort at that.

“Oh, right,” Stark realized. “Sorry. I am aware you and Thor are princes, like, in theory, but given the way I met you...”

Loki shrugged languidly. “I understand.” At this time, he had quite enough servile respect as Odin to require it from Stark, at any rate. “And the other allies you mentioned last time?” He asked, hoping to direct the conversation to a topic more likely to improve Stark’s mood.

The man finally left his position behind the bar and sat down on one of the sofas instead, with another full glass in his hand. Loki was still nursing the first one. “Hope is fully on board, like I said,” he began, “but she has a job she’s not willing to leave behind, so like Rhodey, she’ll only be a part time Avenger. She won’t be living here, only coming for training from time to time. It’s good though, because she’s based on the West Coast, so we have someone on the other side of the country for first response, too. Not everyone can conveniently attack New York,” Stark added with a significant look at Loki. “As for the new guys, super-powered chick and bulletproof guy both told me to go to hell. The guy, I think, would help out when Thanos came in, but until then he said he has enough on his plate. Her, I’m not sure about even if it came to Thanos. Danny Rand looked interested and asked for time to consider it, but...”

“But?” Loki asked with a raised eyebrow.

“But the guy is such an incredible moronic ass!” Stark exploded. “I swear I have never met such an unlikeable person in my life, and trust me I’ve met a few. I think I’d rather work with Rogers than with him – well, no, that’s not true, but with Barton or Romanoff? Yeah.”

“Unlikeable as in morally-?” Loki asked. He could see the reasons for Stark’s frustration adding, one after another. Being rejected by two candidates, and the only one who accepted being someone repulsive to him...although it did call into question his continued association with Loki...

Stark scoffed, interrupting his thoughts. “God, no. He’d get on great with Rogers in this sense, I’m sure. So full of his righteousness. No, he’s just-” The man paused. “I don’t think there is a way to explain this to you, actually. I mean, it’s probably an Earth-specific kind of douchbaggery. He just...spent some time in a different culture and now he’s obnoxiously displaying his otherness to everyone, making it obviously how he doesn’t jive with our evil Western world and how he had assimilated the Eastern enlightenment, and-”

“Oh, I do know what you mean,” Loki interrupted.

“You do?” Stark asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Loki said with conviction and deep distaste. “It is the Asgardians – usually the good for nothing ones, those who are bad at fighting but unwilling to accept that and devote their time to something else sensible – managing to get to Vanaheim somehow, and coming back in wide flowing robes, their hair dyed black and talking about peace at anyone willing to listen, while not actually doing anything to undermine Asgard’s military politics. Mostly, they use it as an argument whenever someone takes issue with their insufferable attitude – we should never be sharp towards them, you see, because Asgard needs more peace.” Or they went to Alfheim, alternatively, and then they came back in revealing clothes and speaking of freedom and self-sustaining small communities, but what they actually wanted was nobody limiting their behaviour in any way as they did whatever they would. Their own mind was as narrow as ever, and they would still sooner spit on a male magic user on the street than acknowledge him as an equal. But that part was too
personal to discuss with Stark.

“Oh my God,” Stark said, some of his frustration disappearing in discovering this shared woe. “That is so spot on. I wouldn’t have thought this’d be so universal? I’m sure Pepper explained this to me at some point after the whole Mandarin mess – it had to do something with the Western colonial history, I’m pretty certain.”

“And what do you think Asgard has?” Loki asked, amused. “Only it is not in the past, it is in the present. Vanaheim and Alfheim are both satellite realms to Asgard still. They were conquered ages ago.”

“Right,” Stark said with a sharp nod. “To be honest, a lot of people say it’s in our present too. This was actually a huge part of the Accords discussion. Let me tell you, I heard a lot about how Captain *America* being unwilling to sign was all kinds of telling.”

“I do not wonder at that.” In fact, it was all kinds of telling. Steve Rogers was this world’s Thor, and Loki knew perfectly well how Thor would react if anyone tried to curtail his power. He knew how Thor had reacted, the many times Loki had tried to curtail him. “But back to this Rand personage,” he said, not wishing to think of the past. “Is he worth the trouble?”

Stark shrugged. “I don’t know exactly, but I mean, we do need to pad the ranks. I’m renewing the Iron Legion once more, but still...”

Loki considered the problem. “Well, I suppose if he did not live here, but merely attended for training like this Miss Van Dyne, you would not have to get on so well with him,” he said slowly. “I understand the Avengers worked on the basis of friendship, but...”

“Yeah, look where it got us,” Stark said bitterly. “I see your point.”

“Perhaps something more professional would not go amiss,” Loki chose to phrase it diplomatically.

Stark shrugged again. “I guess we can try it, at least. He wouldn’t want to move here anyway, I think – fortunately.”

“Why do you live here, of all places?” Loki asked before he could stop himself. It was none of his business, but he had been wondering about it ever since Rogers’ letter.

This time, Stark seemed to shrug with his whole being. “My Malibu house was blown up,” he said in a bitter, resigned tone. “I sold the Avengers tower – too many memories of Rogers and the others.”

“And here, you do not have them?” Loki asked curiously.

“I actually never lived here,” Stark explained. “I was off the roster when this came into use. So yeah, I came here to see them a bunch of times, but...it was never quite the same, after Ultron, and like I told you, I was in Sokovia whenever I could at the time. So...yeah, there are some memories, but not that many, and my other options were moving into one of the old family houses. I...don’t like the idea of going back that far in my development, if you know what I mean.”

“I do.” Oh, how well he did know, locked into Odin’s chambers and into his politics. But sometimes, needs must.

“Perhaps I should build a new house,” Stark continued. “I just...don’t really see the point. Chances are I’d lose it again soon enough, so...”
There was a short silence. Loki had many things he could say to that, but there was no need to get even more involved and interested, and so he kept his mouth shut.

“What news on your end, anyway?” Stark asked after a moment. “Convinced Odin to let us know? We implemented the secrecy protocols a few days ago.”

“Walk me through them, then,” Loki replied. “If I am satisfied, I will arrange it so that Thor comes back to inform Midgard of the danger of Thanos.” Given the time dilation, he had already had Thor transported to Asgard, but he could still send him away again.

“You know where Thor is?” Stark asked, surprised.

“Not precisely at present,” Loki said – not technically a lie, and such that shouldn’t matter, anyway, “but Asgard has means of finding out.”

“Right. So let’s look at the secrecy protocols…”

Vision arrived in the middle of Loki’s intense scrutiny and offered his own comments and observations. In the end, they agreed on a few more improvements that should not be hard to implement, and Loki promised to dispatch Thor as soon as he could.

“I will send him to you first,” Loki warned. “He would find it strange otherwise. You can direct him to the Accords council.”

“All right,” Stark agreed reluctantly, apparently having his misgivings. Loki did not wonder – Thor had left Midgard over a year ago, and as far as Loki knew, he had not seen his shield brothers since, even though he had visited Jane Foster a few times. “Now what’s on your program with Vision today?” There was some healthy curiosity in Stark’s tone this time, which pleased Loki, as he noted with renewed surprise.

“I do not know,” he replied honestly. “Which part of the gem’s powers do you wish to understand next, Vision?”

The creature considered. “I believe I should learn more about shielding. I know how to conceal specific thoughts, but not how to protect a mind entirely. Is there a way to do that?”

“Naturally,” Loki replied. “Both against casual mind reading and against more vicious attack, including attempts to control.”

He saw Stark straighten up at this, clearly interested. He wondered whether it was solely motivated by his own invasion of Clint Barton and Dr. Selvig, or other experiences as well, ones that would be more personal for Stark.

“I believe we need to widen the breach in your own shields first?” Loki remarked, turning to both of his companions.

“Right,” Stark said, already reaching for his tablet. “Let’s do this. Like last time, right?”

“Exactly like last time.”

Stark and Vision worked together for a moment, with Loki’s help at the crucial point, and then Vision blinked, absorbing the new knowledge.

“I will need some time once more,” he said, rising from the couch. “I will come back when I am ready.”
Loki and Stark both nodded at him, and as he drifted away through a wall, Stark turned to Loki. “So,” he said. “We’ve discussed allies and letting the Accords know, and you talked to Vision. Was there anything else you needed?”

“Not particularly, no,” Loki said a little hesitantly, wondering whether Stark was trying to kick him out. And then, quite amazing himself, he added: “But you did ask for answers last time.”

A gleam of excitement appeared in Stark’s, until then mostly bleak, eyes. “So I did. Ready to deliver?”

Loki gave a small sigh. He spent most free time he had while away thinking about how to answer the questions that were coming. He was ready, he supposed, or as ready as he could be, though he wasn’t looking forward to it and couldn’t for the life of him understand why he reminded Stark. “Ask,” he said, and it cost him some effort not to make it either curt or resigned.

Stark bit his lip, hesitating a little. “I feel like my first question won’t be exactly popular, but I can’t help it, I have to. Just...all I hear about is your fall, or simply the fall. Nothing more.”

Loki winced, internally. He had feared this would come, though hoped it would not all the same. But Stark, of course, was too sharp for his own good and would not miss something so obvious.

“Generally,” Stark continued, “when people fall they don’t end up with crazy torturers with armies. I mean, Rhodey was messed up physically after his fall, but it would have still taken some doing to kidnap him, and he’s not a prince. No one could have just come and snatched him. And I feel like this is kinda relevant if we’re to know Thanos’ power. So how the hell did he get to you?”

“The Void,” Loki answered simply, keeping his tone as cool as he could. “I fell off the Bifrost.”

“The Bi- wait.” Stark blinked. “You fell out of a wormhole? How’s that even possible?”

“No, not while it was in operation,” Loki explained patiently. “I fell off the platform that leads to the mechanism and is part of the construction.”

“But in that case...what’s the problem, I mean...wait.” Stark’s eyes widened. “Wait, is Jane Foster actually right and the thing you guys use to transport yourself through space is an Einstein-Rosen bridge?” He almost shouted the end of his question, all bad mood apparently forgotten in his excitement. Loki wished he could say the same about himself.

“Yes,” he answered simply. “I was unaware Jane Foster realised this, but it is true.” Apparently, there was more to Thor’s Midgardian than a pretty face. Who knew?

“So...there is an actual, legitimate black hole somewhere on the edges of Asgard.”

“Yes,” Loki said again.

“And Asgard doesn’t get sucked inside because...? And please don’t say magic.”

Loki frowned at him. “Of course it is magic. What else? In particular, it is because Asgard is rotating it.”

Stark blinked. “What does that have to do with magic?”

“It is part of the magic of Asgard.”

Stark frowned. “No, no, we seem to be talking at cross-purposes here. When I say magic, I mean
you waving your hands and making yourself invisible or whatever. What you’re talking about is basic relativistic equations.”

“Very different branches of magic, I grant you, but still all magic all the same.”


“It is the understanding and manipulation of forces that are outside the Newtonian physics framework.”

Stark scowled. “Now I know you are bullshitting me. Asgardians define their hocus-pocus by using the word ‘newtonian’. Right. Am I supposed to believe old Isaac was actually one of you guys or what?”

Loki scowled in turn. “I believe we may need to take another step back. What language do you think we are conversing in, Stark?”

Star stared once more, uncomprehending. “Is that a trick question? English, obviously.”

Loki smirked, amused by the misconception from the self-proclaimed genius. “You are only half-right. You are speaking in English, but I am answering you in All-Speak. I do not know what words you actually hear. So I have no idea who ‘old Isaac’ is supposed to be. Your mind simply translated the concept I mentioned into your language.”

Stark blinked. “Okay. Okay. I knew you guys had All-Speak, but somehow I never really considered the implications,” he said slowly. “So can you describe this Newtonian physics somehow?”

“It is the laws that govern objects when magic is not involved.”

Stark snorted. “Circle definition much?”

Loki was not offended. “It is difficult to avoid. Our understanding of the world is divided into two parts, magical and non-magical. How do you define light without darkness and darkness without light?”

“Well actually you can define light as a form of radiation which-”

“Stark,” Loki said, just barely preventing himself from an eyeroll. “You know what I meant.”

“Okay, okay, fine,” the man said, putting up his hands. “So...anything on the quantum scale and on the relativistic scale would be magic to you, do I get you right?”

“Yes.”

“And you can manipulate things on the relativistic scale?”

“Not easily,” Loki admitted. “Certainly no one single mage can do it. But a group of powerful mages, collectively...yes we can. That is how Bifrost was built, after all.”

Stark gave a low whistle. “Wow. Okay, seriously, wow.” There was a short silence as he absorbed it, and then: “But, yeah, back to this Bifrost thing. So a black hole on the edges of Asgard, and Asgard rotating around it. Do you guys have a sun?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Naturally we have a sun. Where would we get light that produced a day and night cycle? It rotates Asgard in a manner not dissimilar to the cycle of rotation of your Earth.”
Stark’s mouth actually fell open. “You...have a star...rotating...your planet. How big is Asgard exactly?”

“Not big at all. Smaller than Earth, in fact. But very heavy.”

“Heavy enough to...I assume your star is a white dwarf?”

“Yes.”

“Still...that’s...wow. And a black hole to boot...there must be some serious time dilation between here and there.”

“There is indeed.”

Loki expected him to ask more about that, but instead, suddenly, Stark laughed. “The old idea that Sun orbits the Earth...did people get it from you guys?”

Loki smirked at him. “You will not blame your planet’s lack of scientific thinking on us.”

“Well, it was worth a try. Buut back to the Bifrost...if you fell off that, shouldn’t you just have been sucked into the black hole, and, you know, gone through the wormhole anyway?”

Loki had hoped the conversation had turned away from that. In vain, of course. Just his luck. “The Bifrost wasn’t activated at the time, as I have said,” he explained.

“Right. It’s controlled by exotic matter, isn’t it?”

Loki was actually almost impressed. Clearly, he chose his link on Earth well. Not many knew this even in Asgard. “It is,” he confirmed.

“Riight, so exotic matter wasn’t stuck in...but in that case...if there was no wormhole, it had to be a regular black hole. So you should have just gone there,” Stark insisted.

“I did.”

“That...should have killed you.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed calmly. “It should have.” Oh, how he had wished it had. He sometimes still did.

“So the Thanos guy...you met him beyond the event horizon,” Stark realised.

Loki tilted his head. “What did you think the Void meant?”

Stark shrugged. “I dunno, okay? Not a black hole, that’s for sure! How the hell did you get out? I mean, that’s kinda the point of a black hole, you know, people can’t get out...”

Loki gave him a look. “What do you think I needed the Tesseract for? It is a space stone, Stark. A space stone. So when you find yourself in a spacelike area, where space turns into time, effectively, what you sorely need...”

“Is a bit of regular, old fashioned space. Gotcha. But if Thanos is there...how will he get out? Without the Tesseract, I mean?”

“He is not there,” Loki explained reluctantly. “We do not keep pet titans in the singularity of Asgard’s own black hole. He simply...had access, shall we say. I have very little desire to speak of
what I found in the Void and the horrors that I encountered through his care, but suffice it to say, he is not entrapped there the same way I was.”

“He couldn’t have gotten you out, then?”

“No. Not without the Tesseract...But enough. I said I would not speak of this.” Loki had prepared in advance how much he would say, and he had already said more. There had to be some limits to how much he would reveal, even with this anchor plan in motion now.

“All right, all right. Just...you don’t meet a guy who fell into a black hole every day, you know?” Stark paused. “Oh my God, you have got to watch Interstellar! If you like nitpicking Harry Potter for magic errors, I just can’t wait for your opinion on that! Do you think we have time, before Vision comes back? Friday, how long did this take last time?”

“Thirty-seven minutes, boss.”

“Ah. Not enough time, then.” Stark hesitated. “You don’t wanna talk about what happened there, but are you willing to tell me more about the science? Or magic, or whatever you call it?”

“Certainly. What interests you?”

Stark laughed. “Everything! How it works, how the Bifrost was built, what else can your mages do...”

“We would be here for a very long time for all of that,” Loki replied, amused.

“Well, I’m not objecting.”

“Unfortunately, my time here is not unlimited. But I can tell you something at least...for instance, you asked about a sun ‘rotating our planet’. Well...Asgard is not a planet.”

Stark blinked. “What is it, then?”

“An asteroid, I suppose, technically. It is a piece of rock flying in space, though it is, I grant you, an extraordinarily dense piece of rock.”

“Okayy...and it has atmosphere because…? Not to mention, why the hell did you guys settle a rock? Or did you evolve there?”

“No. It used to be part of a much larger body a long time ago. Partly as a result of some magical experiments, it came to be in danger of collapsing upon itself. A group of mages, however, managed to separate part of the original body and escape with it, including the atmosphere and everything, and Asgard found its new home.”

“So...you exploded your old planet and flew away on part of the wreckage.”

“Effectively, yes.”

“The escape velocity must have been...yeah, no, I don’t doubt magic has ways of dealing with that.” Stark suddenly gave him a very intent look. “Could you do that?”

“Like I said, this is too much to do alone, and large-scale control is not my speciality...but I do know the theory behind it, and if I had enough mages at my disposal, then I suppose that yes, I could arrange it.”

“You. Could make. A black hole in the making explode. And then fly away on a chunk into the
sunset?"

“With some effort and cooperation, yes.”

Stark kept staring. “Can I kiss you?” He asked then.

Loki blinked.

“No, because this is probably the hottest thing I’ve ever heard,” Stark insisted, “and I really really wanna kiss you. And, you know, do other unmentionable things to you.”

Loki raised his eyebrows at him, though he was smirking a little in self-satisfaction. Again he thought of Alfheim, where, too, his knowledge of magic was considered attractive. “There is a high probability Vision will come back any moment now,” he pointed out.

“Do you mind?” Stark asked, sounding simply curious, but Loki noticed a certain hidden tension in the question. It surprised him, to say the least.

“I would have thought you would,” he replied quite honestly. That was how it often went, after all, and Stark of all people he could hardly fault for it, given their situation.

Stark, however, only shrugged. “Nah. He knows you come here, whether I sleep with you or not doesn’t matter. Rhodey knows, anyway,” he added, surprising Loki even more. He would have expected minding such private information shared, but...Midgard did not have the same prejudice Asgard had, or not as much of it anyway, and just like Stark, Rhodes had little opportunity to tell anyone who mattered. And it would be difficult for Rhodes to humiliate Loki with this information without harming his own friend as well. No, it was safe enough, and Loki actually felt a twinge of satisfaction at not having to hide quite so intensely.

Stark continued: “Vision doesn’t know only because...well, it’s just not the kind of thing you discuss with him, you know?”

“I can imagine,” Loki muttered, and then he had Stark lightly pecking his lips.

“So?” The man muttered against him. “Up for a quickie?” He kept his tone light, but still there was that something else lurking, and Loki thought he detected a shade of the same tension that was present when he first arrived.

“Stark-” He began.

“Could you call me Tony?” Stark asked, still in the same tone of tension underneath a careless veneer. “At least in bed? This surname thing is kinda unnerving.”

“Anthony, then,” Loki conceded to what seemed like an adequate compromise between his need to maintain some distance and Stark’s quite justified demand. He could see the man's eyes dilate at the sound of his given name and smiled a little to himself. “And yes,” he added in an intentionally purring tone, “I would dearly love to enjoy a bit of time with you – as long as you do not call it a quickie.”

Stark snorted. “What did the All-Tongue translate it into, I wonder.”

“Something truly repulsive, trust me,” Loki replied and shut up the question he could see forming with a kiss of his own.

There was something intoxicating about kissing Stark. Loki didn't know if it was only the time he
had gone without the indulgence, or if it was the man's enthusiasm and lack of shame, or a combination of both, but he found he could not get enough. But still, neither of them were very patient and it grew too heated for just kissing soon enough. Ashamed of Stark or not, however, Loki was too used to hiding his erotic encounters to relish the idea of being caught directly in the act, and there was not enough time left. Taking all this into account, Loki slid to his knees in front of the sofa.

Stark blinked at him, clearly surprised.

Loki grinned. “An Asgardian always pays his debts,” he intoned, and interrupted Stark’s laughter by swallowing him down in one go.

The sounds Stark made were truly exquisite, and would make this worth it even if Loki did not, in fact, enjoy giving head almost as much as receiving. Anthony soon graduated to shouts, in fact, and when he came, it was with nothing short of a scream.

“I can see now,” he said a bit later, still breathing hard, “why they called you Silvertongue.”

Loki did his best not to tense. The nickname was meant to be pejorative as it was, but if anyone in Asgard ever actually ascribed it this meaning, his life would have become even more torturous.

Fortunately, Stark distracted him from that path of thought by reaching for him with a hand that shook slightly, intent on relieving Loki’s now rather uncomfortable state. And Loki had to grant that his fingers, while not quite on par with his mouth, were really very skilled, too.

Thankfully, Vision came back when they were done and their breathing mostly composed, though by their dishevelled state, it still could not be doubted what had just passed.

He did not seem too surprised, but then Loki didn’t know if he could be.

“I am ready,” he simply announced, and Stark moved closer to the side of the sofa, clearly expecting Loki to press closer to him so that there was enough space left for Vision. After a small hesitation, Loki did so, and then turned to the gem creature.

“The first and most important thing I have to teach you about shields,” he began, “is to prevent people from doing what I just did an hour or so ago, and the previous time we attempted this. From simply reaching for the Mind Gem’s power. My control over it like this would never be complete, it’s too entrenched in you for it, but it would be enough to be...extremely uncomfortable for you, potentially. And for all of us, if Thanos could do that. Now, do you feel me reaching for the Gem’s power?”

“I do.”

“And does the gem let you understand how to lock it?”

“I...if I understand it correctly, I have to pull the power as if into myself?”

Loki nodded. “Precisely. You need to concentrate on containment. Imagine the fixed borders of your body, and not an ounce of this power transcending them.”

Vision concentrated for a moment. “It does seem to be difficult for me,” he said after a moment, “to regard my body as something fixed.”

Of course, it would be. Well, that complicated matters. Even Loki, ever-changeable, was used to having fixed boundaries. “Is your mind more clearly defined?” He asked.
“Somewhat, I expect,” Vision replied, and concentrated again. “That does seem to be working better,” he observed then. "It is much like a firewall, is it not?"

It took Loki a moment to parse out what the All-Speak was telling him with this. When he did, he answered: “Only in the sense that it is, I suspect, the visualisation that works easiest for you. The principles behind it would be mostly different, but fortunately, detailed understanding is not needed in this case – nor, I suspect, entirely possible. It is the Mind Gem, after all. Now, is the shield ready?”

“I believe so.”

Loki pulled at the Gem again. He felt resistance, and pulled harder. It took some effort to break through, but he did, in the end.

“Oh,” Vision said. “I see the fault now – just a moment.”

“Make it much sturdier,” Loki advised. “I was doing my best not to harm you. Thanos will have no such compunctions.”

“Of course.” There was a moment of silence. “Could you try again, please?”

Loki did. This time, the barrier was impenetrable. “Very good,” he commented. “Now, given the method you used, I believe you already protected your mind against mental attacks as well. Unfortunately, I cannot see it as I normally would, for your mind is impenetrable to me. I would need to test it, but if I am wrong, this will be...extremely unpleasant for you.”

“I understand. Go ahead, please.”

Loki did. Thankfully, the shield held. He gave a small smile. “So that is you made safe,” he said. “Now, if Stark will volunteer, we could try and see if you are ready to apply shields to others?”

They worked for another hour or so, and at the end of it, Stark’s mind was protected from cursory telepathic scanning, and to some degree even against attack, though that would require more work. Unfortunately, Loki’s time was up.

“All right then,” Stark said when the Asgardian announced it, then hesitated. “You know...thanks for today. Not just for the shields, but...I was feeling like shit when you came, so...great distraction. I don’t only mean the sex, either, just...all of it.”

Loki inclined his head. “You’re very welcome, Anthony. I will attempt to come again in another fortnight, though I am not certain how long I can keep this frequency.”

Stark shrugged. “If you can’t, you can’t. I get it. Just...I’d be...glad to see you.”

A little stunned, Loki could only nod and disappear to the hidden paths. He had planned to speak to Thor immediately after his return to Asgard, but now he thought he might need a moment to regard his equilibrium first. *Glad to see him indeed. Well, that would be a first.*

**Chapter End Notes**

In spite of this story being Loki’s POV, it’s written in English, so I write his All-Tongue as it manifests to Tony in English. Imagine all those physics terms having very
poetic magical sounding names to Loki.

As for Pepper and Tony, I normally love them together. But. They’re on a break in Civil War and together again at the end of Homecoming, which is supposed to take place not three months later. Tony even considers proposing. That doesn’t seem entirely healthy to me, and it seems clear enough that getting back together was part of Pepper offering Tony support, which...yeah. This is meant to be mostly a single point of departure AU, the single point being that Loki noticed the civil war happening. So my idea here is that thanks to Loki’s emotional support, Tony is in a slightly more stable place to be able to have some distance and tell that getting back with Pepper for this is a bad reason to do it...

And yes, I’m on the “Loki calls Tony ‘Anthony’” team. 100%.

Happy Easter/Hanuman Jayanti/Pesach Sameach to all whom it may concern! The rest of you in northern hemisphere can enjoy the days finally getting warmer, at least. :}
Diplomacy

Chapter Summary

Communications between Midgard and Asgard get a little more official. Communications between Wakanda and the rest of the world get a little more fun.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Interstellar spoilers. Yeah, yeah, I know.

The conversation with Thor was not particularly pleasant.

It never was, these days, if only because it tasked Loki’s art of imitation to its fullest as he had to remain unnoticed by one he had been raised with, and had to pass for his father.

Thor wasn’t making it any easier for him, either, by being...well, Thor.

“The danger you tell me of is grave indeed, All-Father,” he declared boominngly when Loki finished summing up the Thanos situation. “I would remain here and help protect Asgard.”

“And I would have you remain, too,” Loki answered in the most solemn tone he could manage, “but I would not have my own son become an oath breaker.”

Thor stared at him in indignation. “Why would you accuse me of such?”

“You gave up your crown, my son,” Loki said in a tone that fairly rang with paternal love, “but your oath to protect Midgard still stands, does it not?”

Thor blinked, surprised. “It does,” he admitted. “You believe it to be in danger?”

Loki had to exert quite some amount of self-control not to roll his eyes. “I do,” he replied heavily. “The Mad Titan made an attempt on it in the past, and it would provide him with an excellent basis for attacking Asgard. He will come for them, and if he succeeds, he will come for us.”

“Then I will go to Midgard, and stop him there,” Thor promised solemnly. Then he hesitated. “I admit I am surprised, though,” he said. “I do not mean any offence, All-Father, but you never seemed to give that much thought to that realm directly before, not since the war with Jotunheim at least. What changed?”

Oh damn it. Loki had known he should have beat around the bush a bit more, but he simply wanted to have this conversation out of the way as soon as possible. “You are the only family I have left, Thor,” he declared, laying the melancholy and grief on thick. “I am trying to be a better father to you, and caring for the things you care for seems one of the few things I can do for you even at a distance.”
Now Thor looked moved. “Thank you, Father,” he said. “I will depart with all haste. Midgard needs to be warned. I will remember this kindness.”

Loki only regally nodded, and then watched Thor go with a profound relief he did his best to mask.

Thor was sharper than he used to be, he decided, more observant – but still as easily swayed by sentiment as ever. It was comforting. Without ways to manipulate his once brother and distract him with it, keeping up the charade would become much harder.

Loki would have dearly loved to rest a little after this effort, to get outside the space in his head that represented Odin’s personality, in which he had to entrench himself deeply for every conversation with Thor. And he had promised himself he would not abuse the throne to watch Stark too often, too – he could ill afford to do so, anyway, he did not have the time. But his meeting with Thor, he did need to see. And so, taking a deep breath and quickly shaking off some of those mental shackles at least, he focused.

He was just in time to see Bifrost put the thunderer down directly in the front lawn of the Avengers compound. With a brief look around the space unfamiliar to him, Thor entered. “Friday?” He asked tentatively.

“Boss is on his way,” the voice answered.

Indeed, Stark arrived mere minutes later, to find Thor standing awkwardly in the middle of the room and looking around. “Thor!” He exclaimed, with what was evidently false cheer. “I haven’t seen you for quite a while, buddy. What brings you to this edge of the universe?”

“I apologise for my long absence, Tony,” Thor said solemnly. “I was tracking dangers to the Nine Realms, only to be called back to Asgard for one danger I was unaware of, but my father kept in mind. I advise you sit down – this will not be a pleasant talk.”

Stark did, and gestured to the opposite sofa for his guest to make himself comfortable. Thor then proceeded to tell Stark all Loki had told him mere hours earlier. The man looked appropriately horrified in all the right places, and all in all put on a very good show. “This is big, Point Break,” he said then. “Way bigger than me. I dunno if you’ve been keeping up with Earth news…?”

“I had not had the time, unfortunately, and Father did not tell me much.”

No, Loki had not – he had wanted to leave that up to Stark, to decide what exactly he wanted Thor to know and how he wanted to put it. “Ah,” Stark muttered. “Well, let’s just say that after Ultron, people were…wondering and asking questions, about superheroes and accountability. After a year of negotiation, the result was a bunch of rules everyone who wanted to do the superhero jig had to sign. It put some oversight over us, since the force we were dealing out was basically that of armies, but we had none of the usual checks and balances in place.”

Thor nodded easily. “I understand. In Asgard, too, warriors cannot ride out to battle without the Allfather’s blessing.”

Loki on his throne almost snorted. Yes, because Thor was such a shiny example of always respecting this rule.

“Yeah, it’s kind alike that,” Stark agreed. “only given that Earth doesn’t have one ruler, it’s much more complicated. But in the end these Accords were put together, and some of us signed, while some of us didn’t. The half that didn’t sign refused to retire, though, and the rest was asked to stop them when they were about to set out to their next bout of superheroing. Some personal issues
between me and Steve Rogers got into it, too, and the end result is, he, Wanda Maximoff, Sam Wilson, Clint Barton and one other guy you’ve never met are all hiding somewhere, and technically they’re fugitives from law after Steve broke them out of prison. No one is looking for them too hard though – the people who got involved in enforcing the Accords at the very beginning were frankly messed up, so the general consensus seems to be that as long as Rogers and company don’t make any trouble, we let them be.”

Thor was frowning. “This pains he greatly to hear,” he said. “Bonds of brotherhood in arms should not be so easily broken. May I ask what was the personal matter between you and the Captain?”

Loki grimaced. Perhaps he should have told Thor something, at least – Stark didn’t need to go through all this once more. It would have been rather hard to make this degree of interest convincing on Odin’s part, but Loki was sure that with enough sentiment thrown in, he could have pulled the wool over Thor’s eyes in this, too. A lesson for next time, then.

Stark shrugged, the discomfort in his expression masked well enough Thor wouldn’t spot it, though Loki could. “You may, but I might not answer,” the man replied. “When I say personal, I mean personal.”

“Very well then,” Thor agreed reluctantly, clearly discontent. “But it is grievous news, you must admit that – Earth will need all the help it can get against Thanos.”

Stark waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah. I have a way to contact Rogers if it comes down to it, and I’ll work on thickening our ranks.”

Thor scowled. “Work as in-”

Loki cursed his once-brother in his head, as Stark frowned. “As in hire new people, Thor,” he said with some sharpness, understanding the implication immediately. “I won’t be attempting another Ultron.”

Thor put up his hands. “Peace, Stark. Forgive me, but I had to ask. Are you certain you should not call Captain Rogers already? You will need time to prepare and to train together once more...”

For a moment, Loki contemplated whether coming down as Odin in person would not have been less mired in disaster then sendign Thor. But Stark simply said, still sharp: “Yeah, I’m certain.” He rose from his sofa, clearly as impatient to end this conversation as Loki had been with his. “Anyway, the point of why I was telling you all this was that as it’s bigger than me, you’ll have to speak to the council.”

“Council?” Thor asked in confusion, still sitting.

“Yes, I’m sure you have something like that in Asgard too? A governmental body that decides stuff...”

“Like the Thing, then,” Thor said in sudden illumination. “I understand. They will form battle plans?”

“And suggest more people to recruit and coordinate things, stuff like that, yeah,” Stark confirmed, shifting in place a little impatiently. “So...you free this afternoon?”

Thor frowned. “If it has to be done, then yes, though I had hope to go see Jane...”

Stark rolled his yes. “Jane can wait a day – unless you plan to leave in a few hours?”
“No, I am here to stay,” Thor conceded. “Father reminded me it was my sworn duty to protect Midgard.”

A grimace Loki couldn’t entirely identify ran over Stark’s face before he said: “Well then. Do your sworn duty, and Jane will kiss it all better afterwards, I’m sure.”

Thor nodded grimly and rose, and Loki left the throne, equal parts amused and frustrated. He truly should stop expecting more from his so-called brother.

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The next time he came to the Avengers Compound, Loki managed to arrive at an inopportune moment yet again. This time, he found only Vision in the communal area.

“Mr. Stark – forgive me, Tony – is busy at the moment,” the creature said, drifting towards the sofas. “Perhaps we could proceed to my instruction in the time until he comes?”

“We could,” Loki conceded, sitting down, “but you know I am not able to restructure your shields to have the appropriate holes in them without him.”

“Yes,” Vision agreed, settling opposite to him, “but I believe there was still a number of things about shielding left for us to discuss from the last time?”

“Indeed. It will be more difficult to explain without a willing test subject, though. Theory can only take you so far - you need to use your powers in practice to learn.” It went without saying Loki was not willing to offer himself.

Vision nodded. “I understand. I often served as such model for Wanda Maximoff when she learned new things, though not even she could affect my mind with her magic.”

Loki swallowed any comment he might have had on the ‘not even she’ part of the statement, and instead used this moment to sate his curiosity on a matter he could not discuss with his occasional bedmate, asking: “You were on better terms with her than Stark, I gather?”

“Oh, yes,” Vision confirmed. “Very much so. We were...friends, if such a term might be used for one such as me.”

“Whereas her and Stark...?” Loki prompted. “Before the Accords disaster, I mean.”

“She grew up hating him. When she joined the Avengers, she tried to fight it, but...it was difficult, for her, to get rid of this hatred. I know that for her, the Accords were partly so unpalatable because it was he who was behind them.”

“And Stark?”

“From his side...she influenced his mind, once.” Ah, Loki thought. Here was the probable source of Stark’s interest in mental shields. “It was...shortly before Ultron, and the lingering effects of her spell contributed in a crucial manner to Ultron’s creation. Tony refuses to accept that this absolves him of his guilt, but he does blame her for it all the same.”

“Does she blame herself?” Loki asked, immediately sensing where the problem lay.

“To a degree,” Vision replied. “She feels guilt for her and her brother joining Ultron, but not for him coming into existence at all.”
Yes. That would have sealed the antipathy. Stark would have known she took no responsibility, and it would have irked him to no end. “And what is your own opinion on this matter?” Loki asked curiously.

“From all I know, I believe it is...difficult, for humans, to let go of hate they have nurtured for so long. I believe that for Wanda to admit her fault in the creation of Ultron, she would have to confront things about herself and Stark she is not ready for, or was not when I last spoke to her. She is still very young, though I know Tony hates that excuse.”

“Does he?” Loki thought of his own youth, and the many follies contained therein.

“To his mind,” Vision elaborated, “either she is a child and should not be allowed to take part in any violence, or she is old enough to fight and should take responsibility for her actions.”

That did make sense, and Loki found himself agreeing to a degree. Certainly he should not have been allowed to take part in many things he did in his youth, and he never should have been handed the throne the first time around. “And you do not agree?” He asked Vision with curiosity.

“What else was there for her to do, but to join the Avengers and fight?” Vision riposted. “Her brother was dead, she disavowed her previous associations, and without the Avengers’ protection she would likely be considered a criminal. At the same time, she was very young when she joined – just barely of age – and she was greatly influenced by Captain Rogers and Clint Barton both, whom she considered her personal heroes. Their stance on the Accords was crucial in forming her own opinion, and so was their stance on her imprisonment around that time. As I understand it, it is not easy for humans to shake away the influence of one they consider an important role model.”

Loki gave him a long, assessing look. “You have been thinking about human nature a lot, have you not?”

Vision did his equivalent of a shrug, which was a slight movement of his head. “I mostly lack intuitive understanding of it, so I have studied a number of books, yes. It gives me many disadvantages, but it also gives me the advantage of clarity gained with distance, I believe.”

“Indeed. So if I were to ask why Stark does not take these things into consideration...?”

“Well, he does not posses the distance required to-” Vision trailed off. “He approaches,” he said.

Loki smirked a little. “Shields, then?” He asked, and they spent the few moment until Stark came in with shield theory.

“Sorry to be late,” Stark said the moment he saw Loki. “But I was on the phone with Shuri, and I just can’t make myself cut one of those short.”

“Shuri?” Loki asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, right, that was after you were last here.” Stark was full of enthusiasm as he walked to the bar to bring drinks and snacks, talking excitedly all the while. “So she is a princess of Wakanda, the super technologically advanced country I told you about, and she is one of the most awesome people I have ever talked to. She is the absolute queen of tech, and she’s sixteen or something, I think? I hate to say it and you’d never hear me admit it outside of these walls, but I think I didn’t come anywhere near her level at her age. Sure, I didn’t have access to the kind of resources she has, but still...incredible. In fact, I feel kinda tempted to try and get them together with P- Spider-Man, since he’s a tech whiz too, though nowhere near her playing field...but I guess royals have rules for who they can dawdle with.”
“So I take it your frustration with the country has disappeared?” Loki asked with some amusement.

Stark shrugged, on his way back with the refreshments now. “Eh, I still think her dad was kind of an ass, and to be honest her brother is the kind of stupidly solemn character that really gets on my nerves—”

“Sounds like Thor,” Loki interrupted, the recent encounters still fresh in his memory.

“Yeah, in fact, it’s a whole lot like Thor,” Stark confirmed, with a grimace indicating he was thinking of them too, “only with less enthusiasm for fighting. So, yeah, it’s not like I’m suddenly in love with the entirety of Wakanda, but Shuri is my new child hero, and the other scientists I’ve seen once or twice were pretty cool, too. In fact…” He frowned. “I’m pretty sure some of the stuff they do would qualify as magic in your view of things. I’d love to hear you discuss it with her, but there is that whole wanted criminal thing…”

“I could wear the illusion of someone else,” Loki said with a shrug. “The bigger problem is the Earth’s relative lack of mages. I would be immediately suspicious.”


Loki simply turned a questioning look towards Vision, who said: “Well…if I could learn to – if you do not mind, I would like to learn to read surface thought when I will it. It seems like a useful skill and I swear not to abuse it…”

Stark waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah, I believe you. Let’s get to it.”

They did.

The process of adjusting Vision’s mental shield went just as it usually does. Afterwards, Vision retreated for his usual solitude to sort through his newly gained insights.

Stark turned to Loki, taking a sip from the non-alcoholic drink he had brought for himself before. “So, there’s some little news on my side. Thor will be coming to live nearby, I suppose you know?”

Loki shook his head. “I knew he was coming to Midgard, but I was not aware of the precise location he meant to settle. In fact, I suspected he would live here.”

Stark snorted. “Yeah, that would’ve put a damper on things, wouldn’t it? Nah, when he came he explained how his relationship with Jane Foster was strained by all that long distance and that he might not be so immediately available as an Avenger because he would live with her where her job took her. So I offered her a position with Stark Industries.”

“That was…very generous of you,” Loki said with some surprise. “I did not…get the impression you were particularly close or cordial with Thor.”

“With him? No. But I like Jane a lot, actually, and was always sorry we only saw her very rarely when Thor was still around, because of her job demands. Besides, your last visit made me very interested in all that physics magic stuff, you know, so I’m really curious what she can tell me. I mean, she travelled by Bifrost, as far as I understand. She is probably the only human alive to pass through a wormhole, and a black hole to boot. How did she even survive it? So many questions…” Stark shook his head and took another sip. “So, anyway, yeah, they got a flat in New York proper and Thor’s just going to be coming for training, like Hope and that Rand idiot.”
“The matter with Rand was settled, then?” Loki asked, grateful to redirect to something that wasn’t his once brother.

“Yes, thanks for the tip. And come to think of it, since he and Thor will both be in NYC, maybe they could form a kind of sub-group? How is his tolerance for this kind of douchebags?”

Loki scoffed. “He never even noticed the problem with them in Asgard, so I sincerely doubt he would in Midgard. It was the only conflict he and Hogun ever had.”

“Hogun?”

“One of the Warriors Three, Thor’s best friends. He is Vanir himself, and had very little patience for this kind of Aesir idiot.”

“Whereas Thor didn’t even notice.” Stark shook his head. “Typical. But it works out well enough for now, I suppose...I’ll set them up together. Maybe I shouldn’t have sold the tower...oh well. I’ll just buy some other property.”

“Any other allies on the horizon?” Loki enquired curiously.

“Eh, not really. I still have to talk to Xavier, but I’ve been kept busy with the Council finding out about Thanos and Thor coming here and all that jazz. And also Shuri. A lot of Shuri.”

Loki smirked at him. “You know, I do not know what the customs are about this on Midgard, but in Asgard, such admiration for someone so much younger than you could be considered...uncouth.”

Stark made a face. “Ugh. No. Just...she’s a kid, for crying out loud! It’s like suggesting I want to get it on with Spider-Man.”

“Which I might still do – you did, after all, seem so very worried about him possibly getting hurt in a fight,” Loki said teasingly.

Stark tried to smile, but it mostly failed. Clearly, he still felt guilty about that.

“You never meant for him to fight,” Loki reminded him.

“No,” Stark admitted. “In fact, not that I told him, but I only asked him to come with us because I heard his spiel about great responsibility always going hand in hand with great power, and I thought it was basically made for the Accords. Rogers would never buy it from me, but from an earnest kid, I thought...well. It didn’t work out, did it? Shows what I know. I actually imagined he’d speak and Cap would listen and we could all go home in peace.”

“That, in my experience, hardly ever happens,” Loki commented drily.

“Yeah.” Stark exhaled. “Speaking to Thor again reminded me of Rogers a lot. Your not-brother isn’t quite the same kind of goody-two shoes, but...”

“Neither is Rogers, as I believe was shown quite clearly. But they do both firmly believe in their righteousness, yes.” Loki, too, was reminded of his last talk with Thor, and suddenly was filled with distaste.

Fortunately, that was when Vision came back and distracted him, and Loki spent a short time explaining the theory – it wasn’t too complicated in case of mind-reading, effectively simply directing the gem’s power to one particular person or a group of people and then listening to what they had to say – before they came down to practice.
“You will have to take down the shields you put in Anthony’s mind the last time, first,” Loki reminded.

Vision simply nodded and turned to it. Stark began to look a little nervous.

“Um,” he said, “my surface thoughts might not be super secret, but I might sometimes prefer not to make all of them public? I don’t really mind Vision knowing, so much, but...”

Loki determinedly squashed the little spark of offence he felt. It was not like he was willing to share his own surface thoughts with Stark. “I understand,” he said. “Perhaps Vision can tell us about one or two harmless ones, just to make sure he picked up the basics, and then you can practice more in private?”

Stark nodded gratefully and then his shields were down and Vision concentrated.

A strange expression ran over his face, but at length, he said: “You seem to be craving the chips that are on the table, and your mind also keeps returning to the all with Princess Shuri, in particular to the medical applications of Vibranium and whether they could further improve Colonel Rhodes’ condition.”

Stark grinned, seeming rather relieved. “Right and right again.”

“Has Colonel Rhodes’ state worsened?” Loki enquired.

“No, no,” Stark assured him. “But you know how it is. It’s not the same it used to be, and I’m always looking for ways to make it just that. Though he is even better than he was in the suit, thanks to you.”

Loki merely smiled.

“If this is all for now,” Vision said, sounding a little more stiff than usual, “I believe I will go.”

The others both simply nodded at him, and then Stark turned to Loki and asked: “So, do you still have a bit of time? About three hours of it? Because I really do think you’d enjoy Interstellar, you know, that movie I talked about last time, and I’ve been wondering what you’d think about it for the last two weeks...”

Loki considered the proposition. He realised with some surprise that he had never actually taken the trouble of watching a Midgardian film. Given that he prided himself so much on understanding the cultures of the Nine Realms, perhaps this was a good opportunity to rectify this grievous oversight.

“I don’t see why not,” he declared, and Stark grinned.

“Wait just a minute, I’ll get us popcorn. Friday, prep the movie.”

And so they watched Interstellar. Loki was fascinated.

“These are concepts that are only familiar to our more learned magic masters,” he muttered at one point. “I thought films were a popular form of entertainment here? Is this truly so widely known?”

Stark snorted. “Hell no. In fact, there was an embarrassing incident where they dragged some bigshot British astrophysics guy on the BBC to explain these concepts without giving him enough advance warning, and he couldn’t. Hell, I had to ask Bruce for explanation on some of the more complicated stuff, and for the gentle singularity thing, we actually had to call Jane Foster.
Watching it with her was a delight, I can tell you. So, no worries, you haven't underestimated our puny mortal science – not much, anyway."

As reluctant as Loki was to admit it, Thor’s chosen sounded more and more fascinating. “So how do these concepts find themselves in a film, of all things?”

“One of the guys who produced it, and who came up with the idea for the plot, is one of the world’s foremost astrophysicists.”

Loki blinked. “...and he produces films?”

“Just the one. Wanted to see his black hole baby on a big screen. Now hush, you need to watch this part carefully.”

Loki did. When he observed the fate of the protagonist after he fell into the black hole, including his happy ending, he snorted bitterly. “He should be so lucky,” he commented.

“So it’s nonsense? It’s probably one of the two things this film was most criticised for.”

Loki shrugged. “No, it's not nonsense. His fate was merely leagues luckier than mine. Luckier than most would be, I would say.”

Stark frowned at that. “So if Thanos can reach beyond the event horizon...can other supervillains do it as well?”

“In theory, I suppose, and given the proper artefacts or enough of a power boost. Relativistic scale magic was never my forte, but it is actually an interesting question, so I will consult with the Vanaheim experts when I next see them.”

“Did Thanos need artefacts?”

Loki’s bitterness increased. “Oh yes. Very much so.”

“Can he use the same ones again?” Stark insisted.

“Not the same one, but he could get his hands on others equally powerful. That is what worries me about his plans, in fact, not just related to possible black holes.”

Stark was clearly caught on the first part. “Not the same one? Does that mean you destroyed it?”

Loki smiled a little sarcastic smile. “Not precisely.”

Stark frowned. “What is it? What aren’t you telling me?”

Loki exhaled. He had not intended to share this bit of information so soon, but in the end, what did it matter? He would have to tell it sooner or later. Vanaheim, Nidavellir and Alfheim knew already, in any case. “It was the mind gem.”

“...what?” Stark was staring at him in incomprehension.

“What allowed him to reach me in the Void,” Loki elaborated. “It was the mind gem. The sceptre was his creation, the casing around the gem. He lost it, a long time ago. I found it, in the Void. Thanos still kept his ties to it, or to the casing at least, and the casing was connected to the mind gem. He spoke to me through it. Gave me...visions. Pain, of course, is only ever in the mind. He made full use of that. In the end, he...convinced me to reach out for the Tesseract and transport myself.”
It took Stark a while to process this. “Why didn’t he just mind control you?” He asked at length. “Because you weren’t, were you? I’m pretty sure you were at least partly in control when you were trying to conquer us.”

“Partly, yes,” Loki confirmed. “Being a universe away from the sceptre weakened his control, and my mind is not so easy to break. But with enough pain, he weakened it sufficiently to...well. You know what came after.”

Stark suddenly looked a little sick. “Oh god, and you’ve been working with the gem all this time, when you work with Vision...how do you even...?”

“The first experience was not pleasant,” Loki admitted, “but it is actually therapeutic in a way. I could never work with the Sceptre as it originally was, naturally, but the gem itself...it helps, to see how very different it is from my own experience with it, filtered by Thanos’ casing.”

“If you say so,” Stark muttered dubiously. Then he stopped. “Wait...so if the casing was Thanos’ work...does that mean when I created Ultron...?”

“Yes. Essentially you gave life to the kind of...partial mind control I was under.”

“I think I am going to be sick,” Stark said weakly, looking, indeed, even more green.

“It is not a pleasant thought, no,” Loki agreed. “I must say I am...very glad I was not in Midgard when Ultron walked it.”

Stark hesitated for a moment. “Are you...sure it’s all right, with Vision? You taught him the basics and even that was more than we ever expected, you don’t have to...”

“I am aware. There is very little I have to, these days. But the gem’s powers are one of the strongest weapons we will have against Thanos, and it would be a great shame not to use them. And I did not lie, it truly is therapeutic by now.” It was also true that Loki still had the nightmares that were triggered anew by his first work with the stone a Midgaridian month ago, but Stark did not need to know that.

The man sighed deeply. “Just...Is there something I can do for you? And I mean like...actually do for you, not that fighting Thanos stuff. I know you keep saying you aren’t doing me favours, but all I see is one favour after another and...”

Loki looked at him attentively. Stark sounded far more frustrated than the topic merited, and it took a moment to glimpse the underlying problem. Self-worth, or rather lack of it. Feeling useless. Loki exhaled. This looked like it would necessitate another very uncomfortable confession, but the last thing he needed was for Stark to revert to the state he had been in in Siberia. He could never reveal the extent of it, but perhaps a grain of truth would not hurt?

“You are doing something,” he said. “You are aware that the whole of Nine Realms believe me dead?”

“Yeah...”

“I very rarely have a chance to speak to someone as myself. Mostly, I use a guise. Even for a trickster like me, after a time it becomes...a little too much. You can lose yourself in a guise. So you are, in fact, providing me with something...relatively important.” As crucial as breathing, Loki would have said if he were being honest. Only after his decision a Midgaridian fortnight ago, he realised how much he had been using Stark as an anchor even before then, and how much less tense and constantly on the verge of a breakdown he had been feeling since then. He still had no
intention of sharing that piece of crucial information, but Stark had been entirely open to him the moment they met. Giving this little back put Loki in very little danger, and made the anchorage more stable. Or so he believed, anyway. It was not as if he had anything like experience with honest interpersonal relationship.

In fact, he realised – bitterly amused – he was much like Vision in this. His knowledge of anchors and how they worked came entirely from the reading he did after returning to Asgard in his new guise. Maybe he should ask the creature for book recommendations.

“Um,” Stark said. “Okay then. I’m...glad to be of some use, at least.”

There was a pause, in which Loki had to fight with himself to prevent himself from reassuring Stark that he was much more than 'of some use.’

“I fear I must leave you now,” he declared a little abruptly, suddenly desiring the safety of being further away. “Duty calls.” It wasn’t even exactly a lie. Duty always called, these days, as distasteful as it was.

Stark frowned. “So you’re just gonna leave without us having sex?” He asked.

Loki gave him a look. "It's not obligatory, Anthony."

"I know, just..."

"Do you want to have sex?"

"Well... I mean, I'm not experiencing any particular desire to, beyond the, you know, usual background hum of always wanting to sleep with you because you're hot as burning...but you're coming back in a fortnight or so and the idea of going that long without having sex with you does not appeal, like, at all."

Now that he said it, it did not appeal to Loki either. But he was also aware that if he stayed, at this point, he would be in danger of saying rather more than he meant, in this accursed desire to reassure. He really needed to get himself in order and keep a firmer control of this anchor relationship.

Nevertheless, looking at Stark’s frustrated face, Loki sighed, leaned over, and gave him a deep, filthy kiss. “Something to think of,” he muttered.

“Now you just made it worse,” Stark complained.

“I’ll try to come as soon as I can, but...you know how it is.”

Stark grimaced. “Oh, yeah. You’re always welcome here, and sorry if I held you from some super-important duties with my movie watching.”

Loki considered explaining the issue of time-dilation, but in the end decided not to for now. He knew Stark would have questions, many of them, and it would just be another way to keep himself from leaving. Perhaps next time.

“It is of no matter,” he said simply, and left before he could let himself be convinced to stay.
Date? What date? What are you talking about?

It love the fics where Thor goes through all this character development and becomes actually self-aware, I really do. But Ragnarok showed, like, negative signs of that, so I’m sort of trying to keep it canon here. (Of course, it also showed zero signs of Loki giving a fuck about anything at all – Loki at the beginning of Ragnarok is basically Icona Pop -, because that film, while awesome in many ways, chiefly sucked with psychology...but Thor consistently lacks self-awareness in every film he appears in, so.)

As for the sceptre, it always bothered me why the hell Thanos would give Loki something as precious as the mind gem. This is one possible answer...
Loki’s perpetual lack of time is explored in detail. Someone might be just the slightest bit compromised.

The next time Loki used the throne to check on Stark before he came over to visit, it was to see the man fighting to hold a ship together.

Loki raised his eyebrows at the image. Things have been mostly quiet in Midgard since the so-called Civil War, and Stark had only been involved in very minor skirmishes, as far as Loki knew. Perhaps this would be an opportunity for the new Avengers to try and test their mettle. At any rate, it looked like Stark was going to be busy for a while, and Loki did not have that much free time, so with regret, he let the image go and busied himself with looking over some reports from his captain of guard to while away the time until his contact in the Seelie court arrived to give her informal report.

It cost him some effort to concentrate, though. All day, he had been looking forward to the evening, when he would contact Stark again and make good on the promise he had left with last time. It helped him get through the tedium of Asgard’s Thing and trade negotiations with Nidavelir, but it also meant his mind was full of images of Anthony in all the possible positions his imagination could provide – and he was very creative. It left him in no frame of mind to read guard reports.

The Seelie spy meeting dragged long into the night, and afterwards Loki was too exhausted to travel to Midgard. In the morning, he was woken by the emergency of a suspected Jotun spy in the ranks of Asgardian army. The irony of this would have probably amused him greatly, if it didn’t touch on so many of his issues. As it was, he did his best not to allow himself to think as he had the frost giant thrown into prison as quickly as he could, and then effectively shut the door to his chambers in his advisors’ face and headed to Stark.

This time, it was him who was in need of a distraction.

When he appeared in the shared space of the compound, he found Stark at the bar, thankfully alone, and marched over to kiss him with all the frustration he felt, and the impatience of a day long wait. He turned Anthony as he pressed him close, pushing the man’s back against the counter to pin him there.

Stark was surprised, but not for long, and soon returned the kiss with no less impatience and even an edge of desperation Loki was in no frame of mind to analyse at that moment as he redirected his mouth to Stark’s neck and his hands to his ass.

“Oh, fuck,” Anthony muttered as Loki put one hand in his trousers. “I’ve missed this so much, missed you, come on-”
That was quite enough to make Loki lose the last remnants of his patience, and so he vanished their clothes at the same time that he summoned lube, and set to preparing Stark as slowly as he could muster under the circumstances.

“Come on, that’s good, that’s enough, I’m ready,” Stark panted in his ear and Loki was in no state to argue with him, so when Stark went on to say, “come on, fuck me already,” Loki obliged.

It was quick, it was hard, and it left them both panting heavily and one of the barstools stained with come.

“You haven’t been here for almost a month, you asshole,” Stark said once he caught his breath, slurring slightly and leaning heavily on the bar. He was, Loki realised, not insignificantly drunk.

“I did try to come sooner,” the trickster justified himself even as he straightened and cleaned himself up with a wave of his hand. “You were too busy doing heroic deeds.”

“I haven’t done anything in- oh. The ferry.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded slightly, settling next to the man and leaning on the bar by his side.

Stark turned his head to scowl at him. “Thanks for the reminder. And here you were being such a nice distraction.”

So apparently, it was mutual this time. Loki should have guessed, from the drink. “What happened? Did you fail?” He asked, rather astonished. He hadn’t even watched until the end, it seemed like a foregone conclusion that Stark would be successful in that simple task. Something unexpected must have happened.

“No, that went fine,” Stark said, waving his hand weakly, uncoordinated, and looking away. “But Spider-Man was involved, and I...fucked that part up. Rather badly.”

Loki frowned. This could potentially be very bad, for Stark’s sanity. “Was he...injured?”

The man shook his head. “Not seriously, but only thanks to sheer dumb luck, and him almost coming to harm was thoroughly my fault.”

Loki decided to save his judgement of that until he heard the full story. “What happened?”

“He...messed up, with the ferry,” Stark explained, pushing away from the bar and wavering a little as he did so, and going to pour another glass for himself and one for Loki as well. “It was in part his fault, though I should have handled communications better there. But anyway, seeing that, it made me...realise again how young he was and how messed up it all was, so I took away the suit I gave him to improve his chances of survival. But of course he didn’t stop being a hero just for that, did he,” Stark gesticulated rather wildly, “that was the argument I gave it to him with in the first place, if he’s gonna do that anyway, might as well be as safe as possible,” some of the whisky sloshed on the countertop with the force of that gesture, “and, well, he almost got killed. So then I offered him all the tech he could possibly ask for and joining the Avengers as a full-fledged member, hoping it would protect him better, but he told me to fuck off. Not surprising, considering the circumstances, but...not the best feeling in the world.”

Loki grimaced. No, he imagined not.

“Anyway, so I’m glad you’re here,” Stark added, leaning at the counter opposite to Loki now and looking down at it. “I was drowning my sorrows, as you might have noticed, but I do actually realise drinking alone is not the healthiest thing ever, so...yeah. Distraction. Worked awesome,
let’s not go six weeks without sex again, all right?”

Loki wondered whether Stark was sleeping with anyone but him. Loki himself wasn’t, but then, he had neither the time nor the safe opportunity to do so. It was different for Stark, but his turn of phrase would suggest he did not make use of the possibilities. Interesting.

“I do prefer to have you more frequently than this last interval as well, yes,” he conceded. “But I often do not have big chunks of time uninterrupted, and it seems impolite to simply drop by for a booty call.”

Stark snorted, looking up for a moment. “Whatever words you used, Allspeak translating it into modern jargon is kinda hilarious. But, anyway, fuck that. Drop by for a booty call any time you want. I already told you that apart from situations so fucked up I wouldn’t be able to get it up, I always feel like having sex with you, so...”

“I’m glad this wasn’t such a situation, then,” Loki commented – a veiled apology for not exactly waiting for Anthony’s consent, especially when the man was inebriated.

Stark scoffed. “After six weeks dry? That would require something of a different order of magnitude. Not that I’m peachy, but, you know...this isn’t exactly new.”

Loki grimaced. He did know that feeling, but he would have preferred Stark not to experience it while he still recuperated from what Rogers did.

“That’s one of the many reasons booty calls are great,” Stark repeated in the tone of stating a piece of great wisdom. “They distract from shit like this. So, do we have a deal?”

Loki hesitated. He felt it would make Stark understand better if he explained the time dilation, but after the unexpected honesty of last time, and the time before that, he had realized he actually felt a compulsion to tell the man the truth. It made sense – Stark was his anchor to reality, so his self-preservation made him want to tell the man as many real, true things as possible, to have him keep as few secrets as possible.

It terrified Loki to no end.

But he could hardly give it up, he understood that now, so he had simply promised himself to examine any such impulse to truth very carefully.

Looking at this one, he couldn’t find any harm informing Stark would do except the generalised ‘knowledge is power’ concept, and even Loki realised that was hardly a way to approach his anchor.

And so, a little hesitantly, he said: “The situation would be clearer, I believe, if I explained about the time dilation in Asgard in more detail. But you are in no state to appreciate it at the moment. Would you allow me to sober you up?”

Stark made a face. “Don’t make me make choices like this! On one hand, awesome magic science. On another, hangover and magic all over me. I don’t know!”

“No hangover – the spell would take care of that as well.”

Stark hesitated. “All right,” he said then. “Do your worst.”

Instead, Loki simply did what he said he would.
Stark blinked. “Wow. Okay, that was...actually rather awesome, and I have to admit magic...might be really practical sometimes.”

“I hope you do not regret letting me, now that you are sober.” Once more, Loki was asking about more than the spell.

“Nah. It’s great. Could you maybe clean me up, too? And, um, dress? And yourself, too? Because you naked are seriously distracting.”

Obligingly, and with a small smirk, Loki did so.

“So, science?”

Loki nodded. “You gathered, I suppose, that I spend a lot of my time in Asgard these days, though disguised?”

“Yeah, you kinda have to, to be able to pull what you did with Thor and Odin.”

“Precisely,” Loki agreed, taking a sip of his whisky. It truly was very good. “And I also told you it was near a black hole, and very heavy itself. Moving fast, too. The compound effect is...profound, compared to Midgard.”

Stark waited for him to continue for a moment. “So?” He said then, impatiently. “How much slower does time pass for you? I need numbers!”

“It is not that easy,” Loki explained. “It fluctuates, given different times of magical connection with other worlds and also purposeful manipulation of Asgard’s speed and mass by our mages, depending on what is more advantageous at the time. When I take the whole of my life, and make it an average...about fifty times.”

Stark stared at him with his mouth open. “I’m sorry,” he said then, “I must have misheard. Did you say fifty times?”

“I did.”

“Oh my god, is this the answer to your near-immortality? Time just passes slower over there?”

Loki inclined his head. “We still live longer than humans tend to, but not by that much. So yes, this is most of the answer.”

“So if I went to Asgard-” Stark began with a spark in his eye.

“But how would you deal with the gravity there?” Loki pointed out. “The forces would tear you apart.”

Stark scowled. “How did Jane Foster deal?”

Loki scoffed. “She was carrying Aether at the time. She could hardly be counted as a mortal. But that is the actual, original reason mortals are banned from Asgard, you know.”

“It kills us. Awesome.” The scowl deepened. “What about the other world in the whole Nine Realms shebang, can their inhabitants go over there or...?”

“They can, mostly,” Loki confirmed. “Their planets are not as heavy and fast-moving as Asgard is, but they are heavier than Earth, and move faster, and are nearer to the black hole in some cases.”
“Right. Jane Foster actually postulated this when she went to that messed up desert world for like thirty minutes and returned six hours later, but no one was sure whether to believe her – she could have simply been unconscious most of the time. Guess she was right.”

“She was. Svartalfheim, where she was transported, does have time moving roughly ten times the speed of Midgard.”

“Great. I love being the sexist jerk who didn’t believe the female expert when she was right once more. If Bruce was here, he’d make so much fun of me...” Stark trailed off, and seemed to consider the situation from a new angle, because he then said: “So, anyway, are the golden apples actually a thing? Can they maybe make it possible for a mortal to live in Asgard, is that the secret?”

“They...cause enough changes in a mortal body that the mortal does not die, yes,” Loki confirmed. “However, even after ingesting them, from what I know, the stay is not actually comfortable.”

“Right, so for emergencies only, I get it. Wow. This explains so much.” Another short silence.

“So...so you and Thor aren’t actually thousands of years old, you’re- what?”

“Thor is roughly twenty-five,” Loki replied, making Stark mutter “so much” under his breath. “As for me, that is...more complicated.”

“Why?” Stark asked curiously.

“I have always travelled as much as I could, and thus spent a lot of time in realms where time passed differently. And then, of course, there was my time in the Void, which was...hard to measure. It certainly felt infinite to me. It was at least somewhat longer than the two years that passed on Midgard, and definitely much, much longer than the month or so that passed on Asgard. I know that I was around twenty when I...fell. After that, it is impossible to say, but it is my belief that I am at least roughly Thor’s age by now – not even factoring in, of course, how different nature of our experience can age us differently.”

Stark swallowed, clearly left speechless for a moment at the implications. Loki drily reflected that his truth filters have clearly failed him again.

Then Stark blinked. “Wait...you said a month for our two years...so the dilation has halved?”

“More than. Time passes about twenty times slower there now.”

“Right. So not such a huge differential anymore, but it’s still so that when you come here, you’re barely absent from over there...”

Stark trailed off, but Loki saw the direction his thoughts have taken in the hurt that began to shine through in his expression and hurried to stave it off.

“Ah, that is not true,” he said. “My situation is such that I have to be readily available at all times, and consider that while for you, a fortnight passes, for me it is only a dozen or so hours. If I went disappearing for tens of minutes two times a day, it would grow obvious very quickly, given the...conditions I live in.”

“You’d have to be really tightly observed for that to be the case,” Stark muttered.

Loki, acutely uncomfortable with this line of questioning, simply nodded. “Trust me that if I could be here more often, I would,” he said a little stiffly. This sort of reassurance was unfamiliar.

Stark gave him a very sceptical look.
“Which part of my explanation do you doubt?” Loki asked, a little irritated.

“They watch you during the night, too?” The man questioned. “Because if not, you could spend a week here at a stretch, without anyone being the wiser.”

“Sometimes even during the night-”

“Don’t tell me you don’t have any alarms set for that,” Stark chided.

“I do,” Loki conceded, and then, watching Stark’s expression carefully, asked: “Do you...actually want me to spend a week here, Anthony?”

“Well, obviously we couldn’t spend all of that time together,” the man quickly back-pedalled, “I have stuff to do which can’t be put on hold for that long, not habitually anyway – but-”

“But?”

Stark exhaled and looked away. “It would be...comfortable to be able to talk to you when I want, not having to wait for you to appear. It...helps me, sometimes. I’m better now than I was when you found me in Siberia, but I’m not exactly good, and with Rhodey away you’re the only one really capable of helping out with this. I like talking to you, and the sex is out of this world. So yes, of course I want you around more. I think I told you so several times already.”

“That is still a different thing from wanting me here for so long at a stretch,” Loki pointed out.

Stark only shrugged.

Loki was...torn about this, and unsure what to think.

Mostly, he was surprised. He was, of course, aware that Stark was chiefly asking for this because he wanted easy accessibility and availability, and less imbalance in who contacted whom. The man had hardly thought it through, as was evident from his backpedalling. But still, it was unexpected that he was willing to ask for this so openly. In fact, Loki wondered whether his sobering spell, when applied to mortals, didn’t leave behind some lingering effects of the intoxication in the form of heightened openness, or a lowered filter. He would have to look into it. He knew better than to mention that possibility, though – Stark would never not believe it was not intentional.

Beyond this surprise...it was, Loki had to admit, tempting. Very tempting, in fact. That was the catch.

It was not that he would not enjoy such a holiday – the problem was the opposite. He feared it would be harder to go back to Asgard afterwards, to the disguise that was growing more difficult for him with every passing day. Ever since his talks with Stark began, the burdened had lessened a little, but not enough that he would not desperately long for an opportunity like this. That alone told him how hard it would be to go back then.

And, of course, there was also the certainty that, given he had not thought the invitation through, Stark would very quickly find he did not actually wish for Loki’s presence for that long. Loki had never spent more than a few hours in his company at a stretch, and they did not know each other well enough to suddenly decide to spend days together. Loki would much rather avoid watching the man struggle to politely tell him to leave.

But on the other hand, he was aware of the unfairness of the situation. He got access to the...benefits Stark’s company provided, sexual and otherwise, once or twice a day. Stark only got the opportunity once in a fortnight, and if he truly was seeking companionship nowhere else...Loki
supposed it would be reasonable to accede to his wishes to a degree, to make the imbalance less marked and to halt the growing conviction that Loki did not appreciate his company, which would harm the plans for Thanos and Loki’s anchorage both.

“My time is too precious to while it away here while you’re busy elsewhere,” he said at length. “But...I might come for a day or two, next time, in the middle of an Asgardian night. We will see how it goes, then.”

Stark shrugged again. “Don’t let ma force you.”

Loki sighed, full of frustration. He reached out and turned Stark’s face to him. “Let me assure you,” he said, “I do not let anyone force me into anything these days. If I come here for a day or two, it will be because I want to – and because you want me to. Do you?”

There was a long silence. “Yes,” Stark said at length, grudgingly.

“Good, because I want to come.” he shrugged. “I merely did not wish to impose.”

That made Stark smirk a little. “You?”

Loki grinned. “I am entirely capable of imposing when I find it necessary for my plans, or for my amusement, but in these circumstances it would be...uncouth.”

“I guess.”

There was a short silence. Loki decided that he did not like self-doubt in Stark at all. It was deeply irritating to know it was him who put it there, but he did not date offer any more reassurance. He was constantly crossing all the lines he had made for himself, but surely he could keep some semblance of control at least.

If reassurance was impossible, he opted for distraction. “Have you any other news, except for the ones that drove you to drown your sorrows?” He asked.

The question seemed to cheer Stark up. “Oh boy, have I,” he said. “For one, I finally talked to Xavier.”

“And?” Loki asked, genuinely curious and interested in this powerful telepath.

“The shields held. I kept both sets, initially, and had Vision long-distance drop the first layer when I texted him. Xavier was duly impressed. I gave all the merit to Vision alone, and he got very interested in the mind gem. He’s currently negotiating with Vision, about conditions under which he could study it.”

That made Loki frown. “You trust this man?”

Stark shrugged. “I do, yes. Not on a personal level, but...with his power, he could have seized control of the world many times over, and he never even tried.”

Loki supposed it was as good a guarantee as he could get, and given that the gem was plain as day in Vision’s forehead and the creature was often publicly visible, he could hardly hope to keep it secret forever. Perhaps a good word from someone who appeared as trusted as this Charles Xavier would help assure Vision’s protection for at least some of the mistrust he inevitably faced. “Very well,” he said. “What did he say about Thanos?”

Stark smiled, self-satisfied. “He was understandably disturbed, but he believed me and promised to
fight by our side and to begin training his X-Men according to the specifications you gave us. He also promised to contact Magneto for me.”

Loki blinked. “Wasn’t that his nemesis?”

“Also his old friend, apparently. I guess that have a bit of a you and Thor vibe to them? Only Xavier is totally unlike Thor, so not really, but there is this...they’re enemies but don’t actually try to kill each other and at least from Xavier’s side there’s a lot of remaining friendship, in spite of it all. And he seems to fully believe that for something as big as Thanos, Magneto and his people would be reliable allies.”

Loki considered. “He will want to speak to you, this Magneto.”

“No doubt,” Stark agreed.

“I note that while you claimed Xavier was unlike Thor, you never made such an exception for him and me. Given this, I confess I regret there being no real way for me being present at the talk. I am...curious. About both of them.”

Stark shifted a little in his place. “Well, Magneto’s not a whole lot like you, but- there are similarities, yes, from what Xavier said.”

Loki simply nodded, though he was still intrigued.

“We might come up with a way for you to listen in,” Stark added. “I’ll try to schedule the meeting for when you’re here for a longer stretch of time. At least that way you’ll have additional motivation.”

Loki gave him an exasperated look. “Let me assure you, I do not need additional motivation. But, yes, I will be glad to be present for that conversation, if possible. And the other news? From what you’ve said, this isn’t the only piece of it you have.”

“Yeah, no,” Stark said, and this time he nearly beamed. “You see, the Council finally came to terms with the idea that Thanos was coming, and started to contact possible allies for us.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It’s quite a collection. Some guy with a sword from Shanghai – and I can’t even tell you how much better it makes me feel not to have all of us involved be from the US, seriously – and then, and this is really weird, some kid with a car on fire or something? He’s in LA, though, so he’s Hope’s problem, mostly-”

“You have established another separate group, then?” Loki enquired.

“Yeah. The one in New York seems to work decently – it’s Thor and Rand and sometimes they work with Spider-Man or the bulletproof guy, when the situation requires it. Here’s hoping West Coast will go similarly well. A few other people who would be closer to that are still being negotiated, including some pretty crazy invulnerable guy and a chick that can put herself on fire. It’s wild, I tell you.”

“The council starts pulling their weight, then,” Loki observed, satisfied.

“Yeah. And speaking of which...” Stark gave him a look. “The secrecy protocols worked. The info about Thanos didn’t get out. So...how about revealing my actual source?
Loki grimaced. He knew this demand would emerge again, of course, but he had hoped he had more time. “Surely,” he said, “there is some tradition in Midgard of crucial information only given on the condition of secrecy, and that secrecy then being respected?”

“Well, there are journalists protecting their sources...” Stark began.

“Then-”

“But they’re journalists. They write what they learn from a source they trust, and then potentially an official investigation starts, and that’s the binding part. No one starts actual official action just based on an article.”

“But this is what happened here as well,” Loki pointed out. “You received confirmation, from Thor.”

“Which you arranged for,” Stark countered.

“I grant it is...difficult, when you do not actually possess the powers necessary to verify,” Loki conceded. “Still, perhaps you could get the Council to treat you as a journalist in this, though I understand that would limit your trustworthiness.”

Stark kept on considering. “I guess there is spywork as well. I don’t know much about it, but from the very little Natasha let slip, I gathered you’re allowed to keep many secrets as a spy, but still there is always a handler who should know all, or almost all. Would that be acceptable?”

Loki sighed. “The problem is I could not trust this handler not to spread the information. Not without magically ensuring that first, at least.”

Stark seemed contemplative. “That might not be as unfeasible as you seem to think. The shields protecting the info about you in my mind still hold, so I can tell the Council that I have an information source who gave me an advance warning of Thanos and that they refuse to share their identity, and that the Council can either hear the info without the source, or nominate one handler who will willingly subject themselves to magical geas preventing them from identifying you. Would that work?”

Loki frowned. “It would, except mentioning magic would put me on their radar as a possibility, given Asgard is already in the picture with Odin and Thor. After all, they know Thor already thought me dead once and he was mistaken.”

“Hmm...would Vision be able to do this geas?”

“He would – I told you he can do anything mind-related. But...I am not certain I would trust him with it, not in something so crucial, without being able to check it for myself.” Loki truly was not trying to be intentionally difficult, but...everything depended on this. If word got to Thor...he would have to flee, and all of his plans for Thanos would be in ruins.

“But you could check it. After Vision was done, we could invite the relevant person in here, and you’d first step in invisible and check the geas. If it’s anything like when you checked my shields, they wouldn’t feel it.”

“Not unless they had magical or psychic talent themselves, no,” Loki admitted. He considered the idea from all sides, and found no faults that would go beyond the general discomfort of one more person knowing. “Very well then. I believe this would be...acceptable.”

“Awesome! I’ll let them know.” Stark smirked at him. “By the way, I assume you put this geas on
both Rhodey and me?”

“...yes,” Loki admitted, doing his best to mask his hesitancy and appear smug instead. Stark did not seem enraged, but the man was good as masks. After so much effort put into this anchorage, Loki truly did not want to lose it over something like this, and he was well aware of Stark’s distaste of having magic used on him.

“I assumed there was something like that at play. You could have just asked, you know.”

“I could have,” Loki admitted, “but did you truly wish me to lie to you?”

Stark raised his eyebrows in incomprehension.

“Ask ing would imply you could refuse and I would respect it,” Loki explained. “I could not afford that risk.”

Stark exhaled. “That sentence is making me all kinds of uncomfortable...but at the same time, if I was in your place, I’d absolutely do the same, so...”

Loki was a little surprised by this admission. Not by the content of it, but that Stark was willing to say so this plainly. “Why did you not ask about this sooner, if you suspected?”

Stark shrugged. “I had no idea about the magic for this, and I didn’t wanna embarrass myself by fishing in the dark when I knew it was done already anyway. I was just fervently hoping it wasn’t an Unbreakable Vow kinda deal.”

Loki snorted. “No. Such spell exist, but they are chiefly a sadist’s way to punish disobedient subjects. When the far more peaceful and efficient geas is available, there is no reason to resort to such brutality.”

“That’s both reassuring and really, really not,” Stark commented.

Loki only smirked. “Still,” he said then, “given your distaste of magic used upon your person, you are strangely at peace with this.” Perhaps he shouldn’t be poking this, but he would prefer not to have Stark realise he was actually furious later – possibly when the side effects of his sobering spell wore off, if there were such.

“You used a whole bunch on me in Siberia, stopping my bleeding and all that. It would be kinds hypocritical to accept that and resent the geas, wouldn’t it? But it didn’t mean I felt enthusiastic about it when I had a choice.” He grinned. “Now, though, I’m beginning to see the benefits. The cleaning up spell was really neat, and the undressing, too.”

Loki only smirked at him. “Now, is Vision here?” He asked. “I could start teaching him about the geas immediately.”

“He is, and I can call him,” Stark confirmed. “He had heaps of questions about shielding, too,” he added, “but first...how much time do you have? Can this be the first one of your experimental longer stays?”

“No,” Loki said regretfully. “It is mid-morning in Asgard. I will have to go back in an hour or so.”

“Oh.” Stark’s face fell almost comically.

Loki raised his eyebrows. “What is it?”
“I’ve just been hoping for another – quickie,” Stark said with emphasis and a grin, “before you have to go, to make up for your long absence.”

“It would be my genuine pleasure,” Loki said, leaning in. There was probably not enough time for actual intercourse, in truth, but that did not mean they could not enjoy some degree of intimacy, and with that in mind, he captured Stark’s mouth.

There was less impatience and desperation, now, so even though time was pressing them, they tended to be languid and thorough, exploring with their hands and mouth, before they finally made themselves desperate enough that Loki, with the advantage of his longer fingers, took them both in hand, and brought them to their peak.

When they caught their breaths, Stark gave him a look. “Is there any part of this you’re not ridiculously good at?”

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” Loki said with a shrug.

“I think we’ve just established it wasn’t the case. Since I’m guessing there haven’t been that many opportunities since your fall from the Bifrost, at least not until your faked death, you’re basically at twenty when it comes to sexual experience.” Stark grimaced. “Incidentally, that makes me feel a little weird. Not that I’ve never slept with twenty year olds, but...”

Loki scoffed. “If it’s my mental age you’re worried about, I assure you my stay in the Void took care of that. And yes, while I haven’t exactly accumulated experience rapidly since then, I started early and gained as much of it as I could when I could, shall we say.”

Stark snorted in turn. “Dude, I started when I was fifteen. It’s not like I waited till marriage. And I basically never stopped sleeping around constantly since then until Pepper, so...”

Loki grinned. “Ah, but you didn’t have the advantage of your lovers being from Alfheim.”

“The promised land, is it?” Stark asked with interest, his fingers trailing lightly over Loki’s still naked torso.

“You have no idea,” Loki replied, his mind drifting to some very pleasant memories. “They have virtually no taboos, in anything, let alone in sexuality. Most my youth, I claimed to study magic there, but the actual chief reason I went...”

Stark giggled, there was no other word for it. “You telling me you were effectively a sex tourist?”

“I suppose, only I never paid for the pleasure. Prostitution is rare in Alfheim, because there are always too many people willing to sleep with you for free for it to be profitable on a larger scale, so it is only he foremost experts who get paid,” Loki explained.

“For real?” Stark’s interest was clearly growing. “Both genders are this open?”

“All genders. Alfheim has many. There is also no risk of accidental pregnancy, no sexually transmitted diseases, no prescribed gender roles in regards to sex, and no patriarchy and the accompanying danger of rape that would make people hesitate. Sex is not so tied to power in Alfheim as it is elsewhere.”

“...all right, how do I get there?”

Loki smirked. “Perhaps if you wished to incur a very large favour, I could take you there.”
Stark seemed to seriously consider it. “And this where your fifteen year old self got it on for the first time?” He commented then. “Wow.”

“Not quite,” Loki corrected. “In fact, for years I merely came for the...literature. It was only when I learned to hide from Heimdall’s sight that I could enjoy more.”

“You travelled off-world for porn,” Stark stated drily, though amusement clearly seeped through.

“Yes,” Loki admitted simply, and added, a little uncomfortable: “When your sexual preferences are disapproved of by society, and there is an all-seeing guardian unflinchingly loyal to your supposed father and king, it...limits your options.”

“Ugh.” Stark looked genuinely horrified, and a little nauseated. “I don’t even want to imagine. But...couldn’t he see you in Asgard too?”

“He could,” Loki admitted, the memories that came to him now much more bitter, “but he wasn’t watching so carefully there, and as long as I kept my relations to the...forms that were more admissible, I was safe enough, though faced with some disapproval – comparable, I believe, to what you would face in Midgard roughly twenty years ago for openly consorting with men.”

“So still sucky as hell, in other words...wait, forms that were more admissible?”

Loki strove for a light tone, unsure how well he succeeded. He was suddenly rather more uncomfortable with being naked, but knew that summoning his clothes would be seen for the hiding it would be. “I believe some cultures in Midgard used to have a similar idea,” he said. “Being the one penetrated is considered dishonourable in Asgard.”

“Charming,” Stark said, the well of his disgust deepening even as his fingers on Loki gained more of a caressing quality. “So, wait, at fifteen and with no experience you were supposed to be the one doing the fucking? Ouch. I kinda pity your partners.”

“Actually, at that age it was mostly hands and the occasional mouth if one of my partners was very adventurous.” Loki had never dared to return that favour until he could hide, it had seemed too reminiscent of the submissive position that was so abhorred. In his efforts to limit the outpouring of personal information, however, he kept that part to himself. “But I read the books from Alfheim. I read a lot of them, and let me tell you, it was...a very strong motivation to practice my magic.”

Anthony laughed. “I can imagine. If our high school boys had the promised land of sex as a reward for their studies, I’m sure it would go better too.” He then gave a small sigh. “I guess, if you want to have some time for Vision, we should call him now. I’ll go work and leave you to it, but...see you tonight? For you, I mean?”

Loki considered even as he dressed them both with a wave of his hand and Stark gave an appreciative grin. “I suppose there is no reason why not,” he said then. “That should mean roughly in another fortnight, for you.”

“Right. I’ll be waiting, and try and arrange the Magneto thing, and the Accords thing as well. Have a good...day, I guess?”

“I will do my best.”

It was already looking markedly better than that morning, Loki thought, watching Stark walk away even as he told FRIDAY to contact Vision. Yes, he had high hopes of this day now – and even higher of the night that would come.
I spent a long time considering the time dilation. I knew I wanted it to be a thing for this reason: Loki in Thor 1 both looks and acts very young, effectively like a teenager. Since he’s supposed to be about a thousand, it would mean the Aesir age very slowly. But Thor is canonically supposed to spend only like three days on Earth, and it changes him drastically. If the Aesier aged, i.e. changed, so slowly, there was no way for Thor to react so strongly to mere three days on Earth. So, to my mind, the solution was obvious: time passes more slowly in Asgard.

The problem was, though, that while to make Loki’s and Thor’s age work, it had to be about fifty times slower, but that was too much of a differential to make any kind of story that takes place in Asgard and on Earth both really workable. I went back and forth on it a bit, and in the end decided to go for a fluctuating time dilation. It detracts from the hardcore scifi elements a little, but it was the only way to still make it work.

As for Professor X and Thor, I also think they have their heaps of privilege in common, as opposed to rather less privileged Loki and Magneto (though of course compared to Eric Loki is made of nothing but privilege). That allows for some similarities in the dynamic even though Thor and Prof X couldn’t really be more different...
Loki was even more distracted than the day before.

Part of it was slight worry – the idea that someone would come to seek Odin in an emergency and it would take him too long to get back to Asgard was disquieting – but part of it, he knew, was also quite simply looking forward to finally, finally having a longer stretch of time ahead where he would not have to pretend to be a man he hated.

He had not realized how much that was weighting on him before he had these short moments of reprieve. Now he was wondering whether he had had a narrow escape from another bout of kingship-induced insanity. Perhaps the Norns took pity on him by sending his gaze towards Stark. There was a first time for everything, after all.

When all his day’s duties were done, he retreated to Odin’s chambers and began to work on the illusions and warning systems that could make his absence of a few hours safer for both him and Asgard. When he was certain of their solidity, and it was late enough the chances of anyone coming to seek him were low, he departed to Midgard, feeling – to his chagrin – almost giddy with the idea of such a long bout of freedom from all his duties. Or, well, from most of them. It was enough.

The compound’s communal space was empty when he appeared there, so he removed his invisibility and asked FRIDAY about Stark’s whereabouts.

“Boss is in his rooms,” she replied. “I’ll send him to you.”

Loki settled himself on the sofa to wait.

Stark appeared in mere minutes, but there was something strange in his expression, something Loki couldn’t quite identify but knew that it wasn’t like what he was used to seeing on the man’s face.

“So, you made it?” He asked. “Here for a longer visit this time?”

Loki nodded. “I am.”

“Good.” Stark moved behind the bar to get them drinks, and then sat down on the opposing sofa. He drank deeply from the glass, and then fixed his eyes on Loki and said: "So, I’ve been chatting with Thor, asked him about Thanos... And would you believe it, he told me pretty much the same things you did about the strategy and such, when I asked what Asgard was planning. Like, very much the same things."

Loki’s poker face was perfect, even though the first tendrils of a foreboding began to spread through him. "Naturally," he said. "You knew already that I had a significant influence over it,
since I could arrange for Thor being sent."

"Yeah... And I kinda wondered about that. Seeing that you're supposed to be dead and all. So I figured, you either had some trusted friend high up - but then again you said I was the only one who knew you were alive, so that seemed unlikely, unless you were lying for some reason, maybe exactly to cover for this - or you were posing as someone high up. And once that thought occurred to me... Given how busy and always needed you say you are, in Asgard... " Stark drank deeply from his glass, but his gaze never left Loki. "You're posing as Odin, aren't you?"

The following few seconds stretched very long as Loki considered how much trouble it would cause him to kill Stark now.

He was unlikely to get out of it without being suspected, even if he conjured an illusion of the man to live in his place for a few days. Too many knew of his involvement with Stark, and Colonel Rhodes especially seemed unlikely to be fooled by illusions of any kind. Additionally, Stark was likely to have made arrangements before confronting him, leaving a message in some undisclosed location about what he was about to do.

The need wasn’t absolutely pressing. He was still not powerful enough to be able to harm Loki, after all, especially now without his suit. And even though he could hint to Thor about the danger he presented, he would have to be so vague as to leave Loki enough space to pull the wool over his not-brother’s eyes.

And there were definitely disadvantages to killing the man. For one, he did not much wish to contemplate what killing his anchor would do to him. Hadn’t he just been considering how narrow his escape from repeated insanity had been? And for another, while the news about Thanos would probably still be believed and Midgard would continue to prepare, Stark was a lynchpin in these efforts and without him they would fall into disarray.

And additionally, there was the fact that Thor hadn't arrived in Asgard to kill or threaten him, and Stark had confronted him alone and unarmed.

It could, of course, be a trap, only waiting for his admission of guilt before other Avengers poured out of some hidden spaces.

The other possibility was that Stark was giving him the benefit of the doubt, giving him the time to explain before he acted, at least.

That seemed brave to the point of recklessness from the man, but given who he was and that he had confronted Loki without armour during the Chitauri invasion as well, it wasn’t impossible.

So Loki decided to test the waters, and with a small gesture of his hand ensured their conversation couldn’t be overheard by anyone, not even FRIDAY.

“Yes,” he said then. “I am.”

Stark blinked at the admission. “Did you kill him?” He asked.

“No. He...sleeps.”

“Is that a euphemism for something?”

Loki considered how to answer that. It was, in a way. “Has Thor ever explained how Odinsleep works?”
“He did,” Stark said with a nod. “That seems awfully convenient, though.”

Loki laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, it is no accident. Emotional shock has a tendency to cause it in him, and the last time he slept, he was awoken prematurely by my insanity, so he was in dire need of some renewed rest. After my mother died, Asgard was attacked and Thor went directly against his orders...when I told him of my own death – in disguise of a guard – it was simply too much. I...made use of the opportunity this provided me.”

Stark gave him a dubious look. “You mean you weren’t counting on it?”

“I was aware of the possibility,” Loki admitted, “but to be honest, Odin’s feelings towards me are an enigma to a large degree. There was never much respect of love that he showed, but still I have managed to shock him into Odinsleep twice now with nothing but dramatic developments in my life. Perhaps it is a little like a favourite pet? I truly do not know.”

At that, Stark took another large gulp from his glass. “Well, I have zero experience with children, but I couldn’t stand my father and still was pretty shocked when he died,” he said then.

“I suppose that might be similar,” Loki conceded.

There was a short silence, then Loki asked: “What do you intend to do now?”

Stark seemed confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you discovered something rather significant.”

Stark shrugged. “As we’ve covered last time, it’s not like I can march to Asgard and wake Odin up. And I have no reason to – I don’t know the guy. I have some idea he was a pretty shitty father, and from what you said about Asgard’s colonialism, probably not that great as a ruler either. I have zero loyalty to him. Sure, you could be lying and he could be murdered somewhere, and that would upset me, I guess, but there’s not much I could do about that either, is it? So it doesn’t really change much, only makes me understand the situation a bit better, and makes me less pissed off about your unwillingness to ever stay here for long.”

Loki blinked. He...had not expected this. Was he still judging Stark by Thor’s standards, a little?

“It must suck pretending to be him, though,” Stark commented, taking another drink. “When I imagine having to play Howard- my father, I mean...”

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “It does, indeed, suck.” There was another silence, as Loki considered his next steps. “Would you allow me to place another geas on you?” He tried then, a little hesitantly.

“What, you’re asking permission this time?” Stark quipped.

“It is less absolutely crucial,” Loki admitted, “but it would be safer.”

“Right, why do you even need it? I can’t tell anyone about you anyway...”

Loki stayed silent for a long moment, but he had backed himself into a corner, and Stark’s look was growing more and more curious the longer the silence went on, making it clear he would not let the question pass, so at length Loki admitted defeat and said: “You cannot, but – as per the conditions of the geas – you could still set up a trap for me, as long as you told no one whom to expect.”

Stark frowned. “So what, you want to put me under a spell that forbids me from harming you?”
“No, these are notoriously hard to fine-tune so that they do not restrict your life overmuch. I merely wish for one that would prevent you from warning anyone about the current ruler of Agard.”

Stark considered. “What would be the specs? I wanna be able to say you’re a dick without a spell preventing me.”

Loki smirked a little. “Yes, that is the sort of fine-tuning I was talking about. Fortunately, it is easier in this case, so I’m sure that can be arranged.”

They worked on the specifications of the spell until it was to both of their satisfaction, and after it was cast, Loki asked: “Why did you let me know you knew? It was...a considerable risk to yourself.”

Stark shrugged. “Until now, you seemed to have no inclination to harm me in any way. I didn’t wanna continue my tendency to mistrust you in spite of it, when I know I’d have trusted Rogers in this situation, if I found out a secret of his – and look like that worked out.”

“You were testing me,” Loki realized. “What if I failed the test?”

Stark shrugged again, but examining his expression minutely, Loki suddenly got a very unpleasant feeling that he could read the emotions behind it. It wasn’t quite something so melodramatic as Stark not being interested in a life where he couldn’t trust Loki, but it was similar, in a way, only less personal. You’re the only one to stick around the last couple of months, the look seemed to say. If you decide to kill me at the first hint of danger to yourself, I can just as well say fuck everything.

Loki did not like that line of thought. “Tell me you at least arranged for some precautions with FRIDAY,” he muttered.

“I did,” Stark replied.

Good. It meant he wasn’t entirely resigned, just enough not to worry too much about the possibility of ending up dead. FRIDAY was a kind of insurance, at least enough that Loki would not have gotten away with it entirely. Which reminded him... “I should allow her to hear us again,” Loki muttered, waving his hand to do so.

“Boss?” She immediately fretted. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine. Just a bit of magic, no worries.”

Stark went to refresh their glasses, and Loki decided to redirect the conversation to safer topics. “Did you manage to arrange for the two meetings you talked about?” He asked.

The man nodded, coming back with the drinks. “With Magneto, yeah, I should be able to contact him. The Council is still deciding on who’s gonna be my handler, though, so that’s gonna take a while longer.”

“Then we will get that one out of the way at least. What can you tell me about this Magneto?”

Over the expensive scotch, Stark gave him a life story of a man which made even Loki feel almost sympathetic. It didn’t mean, however, he also did not look for all the exploitable spots it contained.

“We will contact him soon, then,” he said when Stark finished. “But first, any other news?”

“Yeah, we got some of those new allies verified – the invulnerable guy will only join us for Thanos, but the girl on fire will be a part time West Coast Avenger – well actually she lives in New
Mexico, but, you know. Close enough. But there is actually someone for our group here, to join me and Vision at the compound, and it’s super interesting.”

“Oh?” Given his usual company, Loki wondered whom Anthony considered so captivating.

“Yeah. Her name is Carol Danvers, Fury recommended her, and apparently she was mixed up in some alien stuff back in the nineties and got her superpowers that way.”

“Some alien stuff?” Now Loki understood the interest. It was still so very rare in Midgard, after all, and to have happened so long ago was unique. “Do you know more?”

“It’s in the files – I can show you, ‘cause I don’t remember much of it. It all meant nothing to me.” Loki inclined his head in thanks.

“Actually,” Stark added, “I haven’t met her yet, but she’s supposed to show up tomorrow for meet and greet with all the other Avengers – the West Coast crew will come, and so will Thor and Rand. So, I know I said I’d like you to stay for a while, but I’m assuming you’ll want to get scarce before they arrive.”

Loki considered. “Actually, I might stay to watch for a little while. I would likely tend to do so anyway, from the throne, and it is not as if Thor can detect me. It should prove...amusing.”

“Awesome!” Stark toasted him with his glass, looking genuinely excited at the idea.

“Any other potential recruits on the horizon?” Loki enquired.

Stark shrugged. “There are apparently superhero groups being organized in some other places around the world, to become part of the Avengers initiative and fall under the same council. The two teams that are functional at this point is one in Britain and one in the Philippines, so we can expect their cooperation for Thanos, and probably with some big threats if they appear before he does. And Brasil apparently said they know a guy. That’s about it for now.”

“Still, it is promising how the numbers grow, I have to admit.”

“Yeah, it’s looking good, though I don’t know how strong any of them are.” Stark sighed. “I wish we could have Bruce back. That would be worth probably about five of most of these others.”

“He refuses to come?” Loki asked curiously. He hardly had fond memories of the beast, so he had never pressed, but it was true that he would come in useful for Thanos.

Stark shrugged again. “I donno where he is. I tried everything to try and find him, but no luck. The UN claims they know nothing about him either, though they could be lying, I suppose.”

“I can check from the throne,” Loki offered.

“From the throne? You mention that before, and-”

“It is all-seeing, similarly to Heimdall.”

Stark grimaced. “That’s kinda creepy, actually, but yeah, that would be great.”

“Consider it done. Now, is there anything else, or are you ready to contact this Magneto?”

“Nah, that’s all, so if you’re feeling up to it, we can do it right now.” He paused. “It’ll take FRIDAY a moment to set up the encryption, I suppose...”
“Working on it, boss,” she replied.

“Thanks, you’re the best.” Anthony turned back to him. “Do you have a plan of action, Loki?”

“I mean to stay out of sight and watch,” Loki explained. “If I judge it needed for any reason, I will step in – not looking as myself, of course.”

“Ooh, got a look planned?”

Loki considered for a moment, then changed into a short, plump, tan and blonde woman wearing blue.

Stark stared for a moment. “Okay,” he said then, “he’s definitely not gonna guess it’s you. It’s brilliant. I hope the disguise doesn’t make you...uncomfortable?”

Loki grinned, in actual joy at being able to shift for reasons closer to mischief than duty. “No – it is a refreshing one, contrary to Odin’s solemn face.”

Stark looked a little awkward. “That’s not what I meant.”

It took Loki a moment to realize what Stark did mean. “No,” he said then. “I do not mind the female form. I do not prefer it, but it does not discomfit me.”

“All right. Good. So...let’s call, then!”

And without further ado, Stark turned to one of the computers in the room.

It took a while for the connection to be established, but finally a serious, hard voice sounded from the speakers: “Mr. Stark.”

“Mr. Lehnsherr. I’m grateful you could make this time for me.” It was fascinating to see Stark slip on his diplomatic mask. Loki had never had occasion to observe it before, and he had to concede it was almost as good as his own.

“I was assured you had information I would find relevant.”

Stark grimaced a little. “Yeah. It’s not very cheerful, though. Remember the alien attack on New York a few years back?”

“I do.”

“So, turns out the guy behind it wasn’t convinced to leave us alone by our show of defence...and he’s coming back with more and bigger.”

“I was informed Loki of Asgard was dead,” Magneto said still in the same, even tone.

Stark’s poker face truly was very good. Loki was watching for the wince, and he still barely saw it. “So were we,” he said, “but he wasn’t the main force behind the invasion, he was just...the commander of the forces sent to Earth, I guess. Commanders can be replaced. We don’t know who is leading the army now or if it’s the main guy in person, but they are coming and they are dangerous.”

“And you expect me to trust this at your word.”

“I suppose I could have to get Thor to call you – he brought the news to Earth – but fair warning, he has pretty narrow and inflexible ideas about right and wrong and not much knack for diplomacy,
so the conversation would hardly be civil.”

A slight grimace flitted across Magneto’s face, there and gone again in a blink. “It does not matter,” he said, “for in any case I have no reason to trust his word any more than yours – less, indeed, since I know less of him.”

“I guess that’s true.” Stark sighed. “I mean, I suppose you will know when Thanos comes at the latest, and if you trust me enough for that at least, you could train you people according to the specs I give as a sort of just in case scenario, but...I admit, it would be better if we could coordinate, at least a little and in the later stages.”

There was a short silence. “Professor Xavier told me,” Magneto said then, and there was a complicated mix of emotions in his voice at the name that did, indeed, remind Loki of when he had been speaking of Thor in the past, “that he suspects you have a more...personal interest in this, beyond simply being reported this by Thor or the Accords Council. He, of course, assumes nothing sinister, but it would help my trust in your words a great deal if I knew what that personal interest was.”

This time, Stark did not quite manage to keep his mask. Loki assumed it was because he worried for his mental shields and whether the telepath had read Loki’s identity in his mind. Loki did not believe so. Stark truly was very personally involved in this business. Normally, it would have likely been someone from the Council to call Xavier. No wonder the man got suspicious.

“I’m afraid,” Stark said after a moment, “that I’m bound by secrecy regarding this...”

Loki gave a very small sigh, and stepped into the view of the camera. “Now, now, Tony,” he said, coming closer to him and putting a hand around his waist, “surely there can be some exception made for courting allies?”

The trickster had to keep from sniggering at seeing the expression on Anthony’s face. Perhaps it would have been safer to offer him some warning, but he did have to have some fun sometimes, didn’t he?

He turned to Magneto again and said: “Call me Shazad, Mr. Lehnsherr. I’m the source of Tony’s original information on this threat, and the reason for his rather more personal involvement.”

“And you are...?”

“Tony was right – that much truly is a secret, and he is one of the very few who know my true identity. I am sure you will forgive me if I do not make you another such, when this is the first time we meet.”

Magneto inclined his head. “I can, but it does not make my trust go much further.”

Loki made his tone apologetic. “This is all I can give you – this, and all the information about Thanos I have, naturally.”

Magneto gave a sceptical look. “How did you even meet him?”

“That, I am afraid, is part of the classified information, but...” Loki mentally grimaced, but it was expedient in this context. “I can tell you I did not physically meet him. He invaded my mind, via an artefact of his that I stumbled upon. It was...a thoroughly unpleasant experience, and it took a serious injury to free me from it.”

Magneto seemed to consider that, and then accept it as possible. His experience with telepaths
came in useful in this. “And what have you learned when he was in your mind?” He asked.

And so the round of questioning began.

Loki was, fortunately, by now very nearly immune to having to describe Thanos and his forces over and over again. He could detach himself from his memories. It was worse, however, when the goal was still to convince someone, because then it was vital to inject enough emotion into his description to play on the other’s sensibilities. At least, thanks to Stark’s information, he knew where to focus his efforts.

“Thanos likes to bring death to satisfy his obsession,” he explained, “but what he likes even more is death of exceptional, and exceptionally powerful, individuals. He considers them a worthier gift for his love interest.”

“He enjoys killing mutants and supers, you mean,” Magneto said grimly.

“He does,” Loki confirmed. “One of the reasons for my particular interest in this war is his particular interest in seeing me dead.”

Magneto looked intrigued, and after a quick consideration, Loki decided to take the gamble – it was not as if Magneto would go to the authorities, though he could conceivably speak to Xavier – and said: “Not only is Shazad not my actual name, but this is not what I actually look like.”

Magneto seemed to actually relax a little upon hearing that. Well, perhaps it was not so surprising.

“Show me,” he said.

“I told you-”

“Not your true form. Your shapeshifting.”

Loki inclined his head, and changed his colouring to dark. He only modified his shape very slightly, making himself a little taller and changing the shape of his lips. Observing him carefully, Magneto gave another nod.

“I see,” he said, and after a moment of thought, added: “Why did you not contact Charles Xavier yourself?”

Loki smiled. “Unlike Tony, I’m not a hero. I do not believe I would...get on, with Professor Xavier.”

Magneto only nodded. To his credit, he did not ask why he never tried to find him. “And tell me, have you signed the Sokovian Accords?” The distaste in his tone was clear.

Stark grimaced, and Loki suddenly understood. He realized Magneto had never meant to agree to help Stark when he called. He had simply meant to find out the reason for the man’s involvement, suspecting a threat from the Accords Council to the mutant community, or a trick to entrap them. He grinned. “No,” he said. “When I said Stark was one of the very few who know about me, I did not mean that the others were members of the Council.”

“Oh? Is Stark breaking his own rules, then?” Magneto’s tone was still very unfriendly.

Stark sighed. “Look,” he said, “it’s not like I did it for shits and giggles.”

“No, you did it out of blind privilege – not realizing it was merely a first step in what will always
be the ultimate goal.”

“No,” Stark replied sharply. “I did it so that they didn’t feel they would need to reach for that ultimate means of curtailing you – curtailing us.”

Magneto scoffed. “Us? You would always be safe from all this, simply by putting away the suit. It does not truly concern you.”

Stark laughed hollowly. “I tried putting away the suit. It did not go well. It’s part of me now, it’s who I am.”

Magneto’s face was full of disdain and he was opening his mouth to refute it, so Loki interjected: “I am certain, Mr. Lehnsherr, that there are many who would say that if an agent neutralizing the X-gene was found one day, you could simply take it without any loss to your identity. I have been treated similarly in the past – it has been assumed that any...supernatural skills I have are external to my core identity. Neither of us, I believe, appreciated it. As such, I do not think it...courteous to argue with Tony about this, even though he gained his external superpower much later in his life.”

Magneto seemed on the fence, and after a moment of silence, Stark spoke: “I’m not saying it’s the same, all right?” He said. “I’m not saying I would suffer to the same degree you would. But that doesn’t mean I can simply get rid of this part of myself without any repercussions. It was...my life is divided into two halves, before and after Iron Man. I found out the hard way that I can’t go back to ‘before’.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Magneto nodded. “I still don’t agree with your methods or your choices, and I do not believe the Accords are helpful towards the goal you seek...but none of this is necessary to fight against Thanos side by side, I suppose. I will discuss this with others, but yes, I am willing to assist in that endeavour when the time comes. I will contact you again after we have established how to approach this on our side.”

Stark gave a deeply relieved exhaled. “Thank you,” he said, and Magneto merely nodded and disconnected the call.

Loki turned back into himself and watched Stark walk to the bar to have another drink, which he downed in one swallow. “Wow,” he said. “Barring my soul to supervillains? Not my favourite pastime.”

Loki gave him a look, and Stark began to laugh. “All right, all right, point, but it’s not like I consider you a supervillain. When was the last time you did something supervillanous?”

Loki arched an eyebrow at him. “I am certain that Thor would tell you my current actions in Asgard more than qualify.”

“Yeah, getting your kingdom ready for a threat, how perfectly diabolical.” Anthony was sipping from another glass. “You gave him rather more than I expected,” he remarked then, carefully.

“Believe me, it wasn’t out of any desire to do so,” Loki replied with a tinge of bitterness. “But I needed to draw his mind away from the possibility that I could be from a different realm, and admitting the mental connection was the easiest way to do it. And...mutants are his weak spot. Exploiting it was the only way to get him to work with you.”

Stark nodded thoughtfully and finished his drink. “This was exhausting,” he said then. “I’m beat. What do you say to retiring?”

“I have no objection.”
Stark gestured towards the hall that led from the common space, and as they walked side by side, said: “You’re welcome in my bed, obviously, but I didn’t know what you preferred – we never actually slept together – so I set up a guestroom for you as well.”

Loki stepped a little closer to him. “Your bed will do fine, Anthony,” he assured. After all, he was only staying one night.

Stark leaned into him. “So, when I said I was tired,” he began, “I didn’t mean, you know, completely incapable of anything at all...though you really can’t ask too much of me today.”

Loki smirked. “I’ll go easy on you, then.”

Stark put an arm around his waist. “I’ll get you back for that in the morning,” he assured, and directed them to the rooms Loki already knew.

He truly was tired, so when they settled into bed after taking turns In the bathroom, the kissing was languid and the touches slow and unhurried. Then, Loki firmly put Anthony down on his back as he prepared himself, the man watching him with heavily lidded eyes. When Loki slid down on him, it was slow, too, and Stark seemed almost mesmerized by watching his undulations alternating with deep thrusts. But in the end, he grew frustrated with the tempo even in his tiredness and urged Loki to get a move on, so Loki obliged.

When they lay wrapped around each other afterwards, on the verge of sleep, Loki muttered: “I’m surprised that after seeing me in a female form, you didn’t...make a request, shall we say.”

It took Stark a moment to understand. “You said you didn’t prefer it,” he said then.

“Yes, but I also said I did not mind it.”

Stark scoffed. “I prefer my sexual partners to a bit more than ‘not mind’ sex with me, if you please.” Then he paused. “Do you do that? Have sex as a woman, I mean?”

“Very rarely,” Loki admitted. “I tried out of curiosity, naturally, but after that it was only with the very few partners I slept with more than once, as part of particular bedroom games.”

“Their wish or yours?”

“Mutual consensus. I meant it that I do not mind. It can spice things up from time to time. At other times, it is one of the things I do not prefer, but am willing to do when I know it will bring the other great enjoyment.”

Stark considered the problem for a moment. “Oh well. Maybe at some point? But honestly, I’m perfectly fine as we are.” He paused. “Except I want to sleep.”

Loki chuckled. “Sleep, then,” he said, and surprisingly soon after that, and after casting a few spells to ensure his safety, he drifted off himself.

Chapter End Notes

It’s a bit longer today, because the Avengers meetup will take way too much space to include here and this was the best place to break it off.
Loki and the female form: the only interpretation of Loki I honestly despise is a cis straight man, because he’s queer-coded af. I find all the others equally likely, and picked a cis gay man for this story because in the context of Asgard as I imagine it, it would be the source of some unique problems as opposed to a genderqueer shapeshifter (who would thus sometimes have passing privileges, so to speak, and not like that makes everything fine, but it would allow for a small degree of escape, I imagine...though not as long as Heimdall could still identify him, that would probably only make it worse) and they fitted well with what I meant to do in this story.
Loki woke up feeling better rested than he had in a long time...and also wrapped around Stark.

He felt extremely comfortable, but nevertheless, as soon as he realized, his first impulse was to disentangle himself. But...what was there for him to do? He supposed he could tell FRIDAY to get Vision, given they had not worked together the previous evening, but he had most of the day for that. He did not know when the Avengers were scheduled to arrive, but he assumed Anthony would have warned him if it was in the morning. There was no rush, and one of the purposes of agreeing to this longer stay was getting some much needed rest. It really was comfortable here. So, taking all of this into account, he summoned a copy of one of his favourite books, levitated it in the air in such a position that he didn’t need to unwrap himself, and began to read.

Stark stirred about an hour later and peered at him with bleary eyes. “Please don’t tell me you’re a morning person,” he slurred.

“Kingship has clearly given me terrible habits,” Loki replied, amused, and put the book away into his pocket dimension.

“Handy,” Stark commented, and then shifted his morning erection against Loki. “I might forgive you this terrible character trait if you wake me up properly.”

Loki grinned. “Didn’t you say something about punishing me for going easy on you last night?”

“Eh. Later. Right now, I need proper motivation if I’m to be awake at this hour.”

Loki set out to deliver, with his hands and mouth, and in the end Anthony was teased into taking the whole matter into his own hands and other body parts, as he had promised. As Loki’s hands gripped the headboard and his forehead almost touched the bed with every thrust, he considered that he could get used to waking like this very easily. Dangerously easily, in fact. Just as he had suspected.

Then, fortunately, all thought was driven out of his head.

He moaned – actually moaned loudly when he came, and as he returned to his senses, he noticed Stark’s self-satisfied grin. “Yes, yes, you’re very impressive,” he muttered drily. “It is not that you need even bigger confidence in this department, Anthony.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not like I exactly gets lots of compliments from you,” the man pointed out.

Loki thought about it and realized it was true. He could deliver calculated compliments and manipulations with perfect ease, but genuine ones that did not come off as artificial or forced? That was much further from his forte. It bothered him rarely enough, but this was one such occasion. He
couldn’t quite afford for Anthony to know how necessary he was to Loki, but his low self-esteem was something to keep in mind, and in check within Loki’s powers, as it clearly was just now. “I offer honest praise rarely enough,” he muttered into his paramour’s ear, “but I am here, Anthony. Trust that I would not if you weren’t truly exceptional.”

The man sighed. “Yeah, I know – or I try to tell myself that, anyway. Sometimes I even believe it.” He sighed again. “Come on, let’s make ourselves some breakfast. I think we might even have bacon.”

Loki, feeling like he failed at communicating what he meant once again but unable to remedy it, followed him.

The Avengers were scheduled to come in the afternoon, so after the breakfast spent with easy popculture conversation that steered away from any serious topics, Loki spent the morning working with Vision, while Stark partly observed and partly did some designing work on his tablet.

“I am afraid I cannot leave what we do today up to you, Vision,” Loki explained. “Likely, soon enough, your assistance will be required, and so I have to teach you how to create a geas.”

“Ah, for the Accords Council, correct? Tony told me about it. Of course. I am ready when you are.”

The usual manipulation of his shields followed. Vision was getting faster in absorbing the new information, so it was only about ten minutes of him sitting to the side as Loki let Stark explain the suit improvements he was working on based on some new ideas he got from talking to Princess Shuri, before they could proceed to the actual training.

“I believe,” Loki said after about half an hour, “that you are ready. You are getting better at every aspect of this, and soon enough the gem’s power will be intuitive to you.”

“I have already felt that I could, perhaps, reach some of its powers without your guidance, but I did not wish to risk it,” Vision explained.

“Perhaps it is preferable to wait for my presence, indeed,” Loki agreed, “but with oversight, I am certain you could try. In fact, there was something else I wished to teach you if we had time – checking for mind control or other kinds of interference – so if you believe you could try and find the knowledge to do it in the gem on your own...”

Vision simply inclined his head and retreated into himself. Stark was watching intently now, too, and seemed fascinated when Vsion opened his eyes and said: “Yes, I see it.”

“Then show me, please – in Anthony’s mind, if he is willing.”

The man nodded and put away his work, walking closer to them and sitting down on the sofa between them, as was usual by now. There, Loki could observe the tendrils of the gem, directed by Vision, searching, and encountering its own barriers, as well as the two geas placed by Loki.

“I can tell than the magic is different,” Vision said slowly, “but I cannot tell whose.”

“It is mine – you would have to have entered my mind to recognize it.”

“Not that I mean, to, but...could I undo it?”

“You could, with some practice, though normally it is very difficult and requires more power than the original caster have, or some strong supporting artefacts. However, the mind gem, of course, is such artefact. So I will only warn you that I places such spells on it that should you try to remove it,
I will know.” And act accordingly went unsaid.

Stark rolled his eyes at him. “I let you put it in, why would I try to remove it?”

“Perhaps you only let me put it in because you believed it was he only way to survive?”

Stark just rolled his eyes again. “Are we done here?” He asked then. “I want to get back to work.”

“I believe we are,” Loki confirmed, to Vision as well, and went to prepare for the upcoming invasion of this comfortable space by the rest of the Avengers and his not-brother in the very near future.

The first visitors started to drift in for lunch – namely, Colonel Rhodes.

“Loki!” He said, and sounded actually pleased. “Haven’t seen you for a while.”

“Is the armour and the prosthesis still working satisfactorily?” Loki asked with more than merely polite interest.

“Flawlessly. Thanks again.” Rhodes then turned to Stark. “What did you order, Tony? Burgers? I should have known...”

Stark scowled at him. “Hey, burgers are sacred. Don’t dis burgers.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Especially if you got – yas, double cheese, here we go.” The Colonel reached for his chosen food as if it was a golden apple.

Stark grinned. “I could never disappoint you in this, honeybunch.”

The lunch was spent in surprisingly good company, the Colonel telling stories from his recent army missions and Loki and Stark appraising him of their meeting with Magneto.

“Be careful around that guy,” Rhodes cautioned. “He can be sneaky, and pretend friendship like nobody’s business.”

“He isn’t the only one, Colonel,” Loki assured.

“Hey – call me Rhodey, or James. No need to be formal.”

“James, then,” Loki replied, pleasantly surprised. “Thank you.”

“No big deal. It reminds me of this general I was on friendly terms with...”

Loki only retired from the table when FRIDAY warned them that the superhero contingent from LA was approaching.

He had prepared a section in the corner, which he had secured with such spells that only Anthony could see and hear him, whereas he remained unnoticed by the rest. Once the Avengers began sparring and then training, he would have to move with them and rely on simpler spells that allowed for it, but by then they would be distracted, so it posed very little risk. For now, he settled into the chair he had prepared for this and waited.

The three people who entered the communal space did not look outstanding in any way at first sight. Two women, both dark haired, but one fair-skinned and one darker-skinned, were accompanied by a man who looked similar, in coloring, to the darker woman. Anthony, Colonel Rhodes and Vision all stood up to greet them, and Anthony kissed the fair-skinned woman on the
cheek, leading Loki to assume she had to be Hope Van Dyne.

“Hello, Tony,” she said. “Colonel Rhodes, Vision. Let me introduce Bonita Juarez and Robbie Reyes, our two new members of the team. Bonita, Robbie, these are Tony Stark, Colonel James Rhodes, and Vision.”

“Oh, okay,” the man said. “Just...wow.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the Juarez woman chose a more articulate road. “Mr. Stark, if you had a moment, perhaps we could talk about your company’s recent foray into prosthetics? I heard you’re making them very affordable-”

Anthony put up a hand. “First, it’s Tony, please. And second, you’d need to speak to Pepper Potts for things like this, I really have no idea. I just invent the stuff, and sometimes give some general direction – I hardly ever need to, though, Pepper knows me too well – and that’s it. I don’t know anything about how that’s gonna be run, except that yeah, I don’t want to earn more than the slightest profit margin to support further manufacturing on that line. It’s not like I need the money.”

“I’d say,” Reyes muttered.

“Hey, Tony is a spoiled rich boy, but at least he knows it about himself,” James Rhodes commented good-naturedly.

“When is Captain Danvers coming?” Van Dyne interjected.

“In an hour or so,” Anthony replied. “I wanted to get the rest of us together first- and that’s Spider-Man coming, if I’m not mistaken...”

It was. In full costume, including his mask.

Realizing he was the only one, he shifted a little awkwardly and then said to Stark: “You promise I can trust these people?”

“Hey, I just met two of them. I’m not vouching for them to you. It’s your call.”

Spider-Man seemed torn, even through the mask, but in the end he pulled it off and extended his hand. “I’m Peter. Peter Parker.”

Reyes stared at him for a moment. “You’re...really young.”

Parker grimaced. “Tell me about it.”

They all shook hands, and then Stark said in a tone with traces of dread in it: “Now it’s only Thor and Rand left...”

“I’m very interested in meeting Thor,” Reyes declared, and Loki and Stark exchanged a brief, exasperated look.

They didn’t have long to wait. Thor did, indeed, come, deep in conversation with a blonde man Loki didn’t know, and Jane Foster trailing behind them.

“Jane!” Stark exclaimed when he spotted her. “I didn’t expect you! Awesome of you to come.”

“I thought I would drop in to see you before I leave all of you heroes to your business. How are you?”
Anthony led her aside – accidentally or no, it was in Loki’s direction – and said: “Pretty good, though it might get quickly worse now Rand is here.”

Foster grimaced. “Tell me about it. I might never forgive you for introducing him and Thor – they get on like a house on fire, and I can’t stand the guy.”

“You have my sympathy. I owe you lunch, at least – probably several lunches.”

“You just want to argue physics with me, it’s hardly altruism,” she pointed out.

“Guilty as charged...though I think I also owe you an apology,” Stark admitted. “Some new data came in, and...well, sorry I ever doubted you about the Einstein-Rosen bridge.”

She smiled triumphantly at him. “I don’t know what kind of confirmation you got, but you don’t know how much satisfaction these words give me. All right, you will get your lunches.”

“Perfect.” Stark sighed. “Now I suppose I have no choice but to go greet the douchebag...”

Loki could only hope Foster wouldn’t realize who was Stark’s source of information. But he supposed he couldn’t blame the man for wanting to apologise for what was likely a sexist assumption of Foster being wrong in the first place. He knew enough about Midgard to know the treatment female scientists usually faced. Given his own experience with prejudice...Stark owed several apology lunches indeed.

The group soon settled into pairs and threes that talk together. Parker drifted to Van Dyne almost as soon as he found out what was her superhero skillset, clearly fascinated with their very different approach to imitating the animal kingdom. Thor, Vision and Foster were together, discussing something too far from Loki to hear, except Thor’s occasional booming comments. Stark, meanwhile, was indeed trapped by Rand, who was telling him something about non-violence, which was quite ironic from a man whose name came was Iron Fist. Closest to him, James Rhodes was devoting his time to Juarez, with Reyes sort of hanging to the side of them.

“So you’re both from LA?” He asked.

Juarez shook her head. “I’m actually Mexican,” she said. “I mean, I was born there, my whole family lives there, and I only have Mexican citizenship, not US one.”

“Oh? What led you to living here, then? Work?”

“In a manner of speaking. I came here for college – I studied social work at UCLA – and when I saw the situation of some Mexican communities here...I decided I was more needed here than back home.”

“Yeah, could have used some of you growing up,” Reyes muttered, and Juarez lightly touched his hand.

“You from LA?” Rhodes asked.

“Yes. From one of the parts your ‘spoiled rich boy’ friend probably never even saw from his car’s window when driving to Malibu.”

“Like I said, it’s not like he doesn’t know what he is. But yeah, LA can be a shithole.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way myself, but I can’t exactly disagree either,” Juarez commented. “I couldn’t take the city – I detested it the whole time I was in college. I actually live in New Mexico
now. But sometimes work does take me back there, and...let’s say that superpowers come surprisingly useful for social work in some neighbourhoods.”

Reyes grinned a little darkly at that, as if his idea of ‘social work’ was quite different from Juarez’s.

It was at that point that FRIDAY announced: “I think Captain Danvers is coming, boss.”

And, indeed, not long after, a tall, blonde, young-looking woman entered the room. “Hey, everyone,” she said. “I’m Carol.”

Stark rose, his best smile on and extending his hand. “Tony,” he said. “Welcome to the Avengers Compound...and to the Avengers, I guess.”

She grinned. “What, no job interview?”

He grinned back, and with the tiniest glance towards Loki, said: “The job interview will be punching Thor as hard as you can and all the rest of us watching what happens.”

Yes, Loki was very glad he had stayed for this.

There was a round of introductions, and then, true to Stark’s word, they all began to move towards the sparring rooms. Loki waited and followed at some distance, making sure he couldn’t be heard even as he listened to the group talk.

To his delight, Stark hadn’t been joking – the first order of business was truly setting every one of the new members against Thor, to see how powerful they were.

Juarez couldn’t quite match him in strength, but she was definitely faster, and though she had less practice than Loki, she had the advantage of flight, and managed to evade for quite a while before he finally pinned her to the ground, though he was himself rather singed.

Keeping with the fire theme, it turned out Reyes’ powers came from possession, and once he changed shape, he was able to get Thor to sweat significantly before he was finally beaten into the ground.

After that, Parker insisted on having his chance as well, and he managed to confound and inconvenience Thor with his spiderwebs so much the As was nearly beyond himself with frustration. It was amusing to watch, and in fact, Foster was giggling. Loki liked her more and more.

Rand had apparently tried this already and refused to call his Immortal Iron Fist just to amuse the masses, so he simply made it clear that nothing else he did could even touch Thor. What came after that, though, was the most beautiful sight in Loki’s life.

Hope Van Dyne stepped into the ring, and shrunk herself to such a size Thor could not locate her, only to them cause him absolute suffering. In the end, he had to give up and cede the match to her.

Loki wanted to go and embrace her. That, of course, was before he knew the true

Or, well. Loki thought that was the most beautiful thing – but that was before Captain Marvel stepped in and actually gave Thor a beating in a straightforward fight.

It took a lot of effort to remain unseen and unheard, then.
“I was not using lighting, nor my hammer to its full-” he stated once the match was over.

“Neither was I my blasts,” Danvers replied with a grin. “You lost, deal with it.”

Thor looked extremely torn. “You remind me of my friend Sif,” he said then.

Loki’s mood immediately soured. He did not think Danvers was like Sif – she seemed to have a sense of humour.

“Why, they kick your butt often?” She asked.

Thor grimaced. “Not exactly, but she is a fierce warrior. If she was not responsible for defending Asgard in my absence, I would bring her to meet you.”

Loki reminded himself to give Sif some very urgent and crucial tasks once he came back.

Danvers grinned at Thor once more. “We have enough fierce woman warriors here of our own, no need for import.”

“All right, enough trash talk,” Stark interrupted them. “Rhodey, any comments?”

The man stepped in with an analysis of strong and weak points of different new members, and what their training should focus on. “Captain Danvers,” he finished, “I have...nothing but words of admiration.”

She laughed. “Hardly, Colonel. I know there are plenty of issues, especially now that I’ve been out of the game for a while.”

“Then they didn’t show in this fight.”

She shrugged. “Possibly...but put me in against the Wasp and I will be as lost as Thor was.”

“Then we’re gonna try just that!”

The Avengers were all paired up to spar, with Rhodes watching and offering comments. Loki stayed for a moment to catalogue strengths and weaknesses, but it didn’t take him too long to grow bored and teleport back into the communal space, where he considered his next steps. Before he could make up his mind, Stark appeared in the room.

“Shouldn’t you be sparring?”

“I said I had an argent call. I was worried you were going to disappear back to Asgard without even saying goodbye.” He scowled. “It’s irritating you have to hide – there were way too many jokes I wanted to share with you. Maybe you could show up as Shazad...?”

Loki shook his head immediately. “Magneto barely knows anything about me, and he certainly doesn’t know I have shapeshifting abilities. The Avengers do. The moment you told them Shazad was your source of information, some at would suspect me.”

Anthony shrugged. “I’m not so sure – we got rid of the spy assassins, remember – but the solution’s simple. I wouldn’t tell them.”

Loki shook his head again, though he was, as much as tried not to admit it to himself, rather gratified. “No. This is safer. But it is frustrating, even for me, so I do believe I will go back now.”

Anthony sighed, resigned. “In another day for you, then?”
Loki inclined his head. “If you wish.”

“I do. And...you can stay longer, you know.” He grinned. “If you wish.”

Loki smiled a little in response. “I will try, then. It will be twenty days, or near enough, until I come again, given that I have a whole day to get through. But I will come.”

Stark’s grin grew and he leaned in to give him a long, filthy kiss. “This time from me, something for the road.”

It was reassuring to find out that no catastrophe has befallen Asgard in his longer than usual absence. Loki checked all of his spells and wards, and then went to sleep, better to pretend there was nothing extraordinary about this night of Odin’s.

His day was filled with internal Asgard matters, inspecting the state of the army and its weaponry, giving another stern lecture to his gatekeeper, and mediating a few conflicts among the aristocracy. The last was the most taxing, what with his unending desire to tell them they were all idiots and should move to Muspelheim.

He also found a moment to use the throne to look for Bruce Banner. The result was...intriguing.

All in all, he was impatient to get back to Midgard, even knowing there might be other diplomatic duties waiting for him. At least those weren’t so boring and frustratingly exhausting.

He saw to his spells with more confidence this time, knowing they had worked once already, and then he took the step to Midgard with almost a spring to it.

Stark, when he saw him, looked not only pleased but downright relieved.

“Hello,” Loki said, a little surprised.

“Hey,” Stark replied. “So, the Council finally gave me that handler, and he’s supposed to come today. I was afraid you wouldn’t make it in time and I’d have to come up with an excuse.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “When is he meant to come?”

Anthony waved his hand uncertainly. “In ten minutes or something like that.”

Loki inclined his head and sat down on one of the sofas. “Then let us discuss the particulars of what you expect of me.”

The man shrugged. “I expect you to tell the truth. Not about Odin I guess – that really is none of their business – but about the rest. You’ll have the spell by Vision, so it’ll be fine.”

Loki certainly hoped so. “And about our...affair?” He enquired.

Stark seemed on the fence a little. “Yeah,” he said at length. “I shouldn’t be keeping secrets like that.”

“Very well. That makes it easier.”

Stark nodded, and finally ended his pacing to collapse to the sofa next to him.

“So tell me,” Loki began, to distract him, “how did the training go after I left last time? Did Thor
get any more beaten up?"

Stark grinned. “Oh, it went great, and yeah, there might have been...a little beating. Incidentally, you should reveal your identity to Carol – I’m pretty sure she’s trustworthy, you’d have the spell as insurance, and as she’s living here, it would be less awkward.”

Loki did not quite like it, and chose to stall. “You seem to like her a lot,” he observed.

“I do,” Stark admitted easily, “but that’s nothing compared to how much Rhodey likes her.” He winked at Loki. “They’ve had two dates already.”

Loki was surprisingly pleased to hear that. “Does James consider moving back here, then?”

“Nah – it’s not like the army would let him, anyway. And it’s a little early to talk about moving in after two dates. But he might be coming back for the weekends a bit more often now, or even longer,” Stark added a bit pointedly, with a raised eyebrow.

“Boss, Mr. Sikorski is approaching,” FRIDAY interrupted them.

“I will retreat, then,” Loki said, “and appear on the scene again when Vision has done his work in securing the man’s mind. Oh, and fair warning – I will appear as Shazad.”

Stark frowned. “I thought the whole point of this is telling the truth?”

“Yes, but I need to check the spell first, and I would like the man to chiefly associate me with my alter-ego, in case of any slips the spell cannot catch.”

Stark nodded in understanding. “Get ready, then,” he said, and Loki retreated just as Vision approached.

Unseen in his secured corner, Loki observed a still relatively young, fair-skinned man enter the room, smiling a politician’s smile. “Mr. Stark,” he said. “What a pleasure to meet you. My name is Mariusz Sikorski, and I’m to be your...well, handler, I believe is the word, though it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

Stark was half glancing at his tablet, but he looked away to shake the man’s hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said. “Please remove all the bugs on you. I could have FRIDAY simply block their transmission, of course, but this seems more courteous.”

The man grinned sheepishly. “I told the Council it was a bad idea, but would they listen? No.” He began to remove the various listening and audio devices from himself under Stark’s sharp gaze.

“That was truly all of them,” Anthony said when he was finished. “Impressive. I expected you to try and hide at least one or two.”

“The way I see it, Mr. Stark, our relationship is supposed to be built on trust...that didn’t seem like a good way to begin. And you would find them anyway. Now, I assume this is Vision?” He turned, extending his hand again.

“A pleasure, sir,” the creature replied, shaking it. “Are you ready for the procedure?”

Sikorski grimaced a little. “As ready as I’ll ever be, I suppose – how long is it supposed to take?”

“Only a few seconds, I assure you. Please, do sit down.”

He did, and Vision executed the spell – flawlessly, as far as Loki could judge from a distance.
“How do you feel?”

“Like nothing changed.”

Stark nodded. “Babe?” He called, then.

Rather surprised at the address, Loki nevertheless stepped out and into Sikorski’s field of vision. “Good afternoon, councillor,” he said.

“Good afternoon, Ms...”

“You may call me Shazad if you wish,” Loki informed him as he approached the man.

“Shazad, then,” Sikorski replied with another practices smile. “You are the secret source of Mr. Stark’s information, I assume?”

“I am. If you will just allow me a moment to check the spell?”

Sikorski patiently stilled as Loki verified that, indeed, the spell had been executed perfectly and there were no other enchantments present blocking it.

Then, with a grin, he disabled the very weak magical bug that had been placed on Sikorski. No wonder Vision had missed it – it was barely there, and he wondered what, if anything, the recipients could actually get from it. “There was a spell-based recording device present,” he said. “Did you know?”

Sikorski looked honestly shocked. Either he hadn’t, or he was an extremely good actor. “Where did they even...”

“I do not doubt the council has many resources?” Loki said with a shrug, then curled his lip. “However, I have to say that their magical ones are very weak. That is one of the things you will need to work on.”

Sikorski sighed. “Tell me about it...but it’s hard, with Scarlet Witch unwilling to sign the Accords – we don’t know of any terrestrials spellcasters who would be on her level or stronger. Is there any chance you might be willing to help?”

Loki grinned. “Perhaps you should know who I am first, before you make that offer?”

“And who is that?”

Loki’s grin brightened, and he shifted into his usual form.

Sikorski blinked.

“Loki...?” He asked.

“Indeed, councillor,” Loki replied even as he changed back. “Loki of Asgard, at your service.”

“All right, I admit that is unexpected. You were the one to warn Mr. Stark?”

“He saved my life in Siberia first,” Anthony interjected, gesturing them to the sofas and walking to the bar. “Then he warned me, yeah. It was him who arranged for Thor to be sent down with an official message.”

“So all we have to go on is his word,” Sikorski surmised, sitting down.
“Well, I have also been saying the aliens would be back for years, ever since I saw what was on the other side of that portal,” Stark pointed out.

“Still. This could be a trick.”

“It could,” Loki admitted, accepting a glass from Anthony. “I would have needed to trick the king of Asgard and Thor, too, but yes, it could be a trick.”

“Perhaps a distraction?” Sikorski suggested. “Trying to prevent us from looking somewhere else.”

“Possible,” Loki agreed. “But consider your chances – either I am telling the truth and you are in serious danger you need to prepare for, or I am working towards an unknown goal. Acting according to which option brings more risk to you?”

Sikorski laughed mirthlessly. “Hard to say, to be honest. But do not worry, I wasn’t considering putting a stop to the Thanos preparations, though we will be very careful about not lowering our guard in other ways. It is more when you start giving us particular plans of action that I will suggest care.”

Loki was frustrated. “That is a dangerous approach to take, councillor.”

“And the other wouldn’t be?” Sikorski asked archly.

“I am best informed to advise you in this,” Loki emphasized.

“But also the least trustworthy,” the man pointed out. “And now that I know you can arrange matters with Asgard, we cannot even trust information coming from there.”

Loki considered what best to say to avoid irritating Stark with dishonesty but, at the same time, not to reveal too much. “I am...working in service of Asgard, now, though it is in secrecy and not even Thor knows.”

Sikorski was unmoved. “Again, only your word to go on.”

“Perhaps it would be better if you shared your reasons for wishing to do away with Thanos, babe?” Stark interrupted.

Sikorski blinked at the address, but did not comment aloud.

Loki noted that even as he sighed. Yes, what Stark suggested was probably the only way. And so, reluctantly, he settled down and told the vare bones of the story once more.

When he finished, Stark added: “I’ve had my suspicions about something like this, just based on his behaviour during the invasion and the things Thor said about their childhood together. So Loki saying this was effectively just confirmation, for me.”

“That would help more if we could know for certain you are not under his mind control,” Sikorski commented drily.

“I could tell you that I do not have the ability and that it was based on the mind gem,” Loki replied in similar tones, “but that, again, is only my word.”

“And while I was taught the skill to recognize mental manipulation,” Vision added, “I regret I must inform you it was under Loki’s direction.”

That was the first thing that seemed to give Sikorski pause. “So...all your new mental skills are
courtesy of Loki?"

“I am afraid so.”

Sikorski exhaled. “Well,” he said, “at least we know that if you’re playing some game, it’s a very long one.”

Stark grinned. “My thoughts exactly.”

Sikorski blinked once more. “...I beg your pardon?”

“What, you thought it never occurred to me it could be a con?” Anthony scoffed. “Please. I’m keeping the possibility in mind, but so far I’m liking the benefits of this alliance. As it stands, I trust Loki with short-term stuff. It’s the long term things where I’m still on the fence.”

“I suppose that is reasonable, yes,” Sikorski admitted after some consideration. “In fact, I will make it the first official rule in this: any short term decision based on Loki’s information that concern more than just you, you are authorized to make. And such long-term decisions, you must consult with me first. Understood?”

Anthony thought about that. “I’ll do my best, but mostly it won’t be stuff we can discuss over any kind of line, no matter how secure, and...you’re from Poland, aren’t you, councillor? Organizing a flight last minute might be complicated, and it might take too long in some cases...”

“You live on the other side of the world?” Loki asked curiously. “Why were you, then, chosen to be Tony’ handler, instead of someone who lives closer?”

Sikorski grinned, for the first time. “I was the only one willing to let Vision mess with my head. The rest seemed convinced it could be a trick that would lead to their mind control or death. Knowing what I know now, it is more than a little ironic.”

Loki nodded in understanding, amused despite himself. “If a real emergency comes up,” he said then, “I can arrange for teleport transportation. I could also provide secure magical communication next time I arrive.”

Sikorski frowned. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable relying on you so much...but for emergencies, I suppose it will do. If that is all? I need to think about this and then write my report, and then I have a plane to catch.”

“By all means, do not let us keep you.”

After Sikorski left, Vision departed as well, and Anthony, as usual, headed to the bar as Loki turned back into himself. “That went better than expected,” he said.

“I suppose,” Loki muttered. “Though the man is irritatingly sharp. I stayed in the Shazad form the whole time chiefly because shapes like this usually fool even people who know who I am into trusting me more, but no, he was never fooled for a moment. Frustrating.”

Stak grinned at him. “At least I know I am in good hands. But now we’re done with the diplomacy and there are no incoming Avengers to interrupt us this time...so please, let me drag you to bed and let’s not come up for the whole day. Maybe even two. I’ve been looking forward to that for almost a month.”

Loki smirked. “If you let me use my magic on you, you will be actually able to pull that off...”
Anthony’s eyes widened, and then he abandoned his glass and was dragging Loki off to his rooms.

They did, in fact, spend the next few hours doing little but having vigorous sex. Only then were they exhausted enough to lay in bed and actually talk for a while.

“How are things in the other realms?” Anthony asked in a tone that was a little slurred from physical exhaustion. “I haven’t asked for a while, even though I guess it was merely days for you...”

“Yes, but longer for some of them,” Loki reminded. “Things are going well. Alfheim seems relatively calmer for the time being, though I am certain some problem or another will pop up again. And oh, that reminds me...I looked for Dr. Banner.”

Stark rose on his elbow, excited. “And?”

“He is not within the Nine Realms.”

Stark blinked. “What?”

“Yes. Not only he is not on Midgard, he is nowhere else either.”

Anthony stared. “But...how? The quinjet he was flying didn’t pack enough of a punch for escape velocity...”

Loki had rather expected that, so he had an answer ready. “Then he must have accidentally – or on purpose – hit a portal. If that’s the case...he’s most likely on Sakaar.”

“Sakaar?” Stark repeated without any hint of understanding.

“It’s a gateway planet, of sorts,” he explained. “There are many portals. If you want to get Dr. Banner back, you could have Thor have a hint of this, lead him in this direction in some way. He would no doubt go for his shield-brother, he can reach Sakaar, and he can bring Dr. Banner back, I’m sure.”

Anthony looked at him for a moment. “You know, if this is a plot to get rid of Thor, I’m going to be very upset with you,” he said.

Loki rolled his eyes at him. “If I wanted to rid of him, I would kill him in person.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Stark conceded, pacified, and lowered himself again, wrapping around Loki. “Fine, I’ll tell him. Any other news?”

Loki blinked a little at such blithe acceptance, and also trust of what he said. “No, I suppose not. What about you?”

Anthony shrugged, as much as he could in his position. “Brasil came through with their guy. Now Bangladesh and Japan are making noises about someone up their sleeve, too. It’s filling up nicely. Oh, and Carol said she might know a gal or two to help out, too. One of them is apparently called Spider-Woman? Peter will be jealous, mark my words.”

“Which team would she join?” Loki asked with interest.

“Ours, I suppose – she is apparently a great friend of Carol’s, and we were meant to be the basic unit anyway, so it makes sense for us to be the biggest.”

“Your house is filling up again,” Loki noted.
“Yeah.” Stark sighed, not sounding as happy with it as Loki would have expected. “I try not to think about it too much, that I barely know them and how uncomfortable it makes me feel to sleep with them in the house.”

“And yet you sleep with me in your bed,” Loki couldn’t help pointing out.

Stark gave him a look. “I told Sikorski the truth,” he said then. “Short term, I trust you.” He burrowed even closer, and Loki let him, his mind too tangled to find a fitting reply.

Chapter End Notes

Probably Robbie will have bits of All-New Ghost Rider in him, because I don’t watch AoS, but I did read that comics.

As for Firebird being Mexican by citizenship as well as heritage, it’s merely my attempt to limit the overwhelming prevalence of US heroes in this, because the ones who live on the other side of the world will hardly appear too much until the very end…

Every discussion I read insisted Thor would wipe the floor with Carol, but without lighting and full hammer powers? I don’t know...

And Sikorski is inspired by Radoslaw Sikorski, I just changed his first name because writing about real people is a minefield. MCU is not our Earth, after all, so let’s imagine in this universe his parents named him differently. But I like Sikorski (for those of you who know nothing about central European politics, he’s a bit like Polish Trudeau I guess?) and, since there is no Czech politician I actually like that I could use, he was my best bet when I decided I didn’t feel like creating an OC for the UN diplomat I needed here, and that I wanted this part of the world represented, too.

Oh, and I really, really hate the show version of Iron Fist. Can you tell?
Loki makes a resolution. He then immediately breaks it, but at least he put up some token resistance.

Also, someone comes back from a long trip.

They slept little the night after they spoke to Sikorski, and they stayed in bed until the afternoon, when hunger drove them out and Anthony ordered piles of takeout.

“You liked Interstellar last time,” he said then, settling on the sofa with the food. “I don’t exactly have anything else in that league, but I think you should see The Edge of Tomorrow. It’s a similar genre, and it’s fun. Don’t expect scientific accuracy...but there’s an alien attack, so hey, research for Thanos, right?”

Loki agreed to watch as they ate. The film surprised him pleasantly. Anthony was right that it was not as fascinating as the previous one, but still intriguing – especially the ideas about the effects of alien blood.

“Such effects can be created,” Loki explained, “but usually as a side-effect of some major magical cataclysm. Any creatures who had such power innate to them...well, I believe they would have been hunted to extinction for it a long time ago.”

Anthony conceded that it was probably true, with a sort of resigned sigh. “So,” he said then, “are you staying longer this time?”

Loki inclined his head. “At least another night, yes.”

“Awesome. In that case, Carol is out with Rhodey, but they’ll probably be getting back any time soon, so...we either retreat to my room, or you let her meet you. It’s up to you.”

Loki considered, then nodded again. There was little danger to him with the geas involved, and it would be uncomfortable to have to hide. “I will turn into Shazad,” he said, “to avoid any shocks on first spotting me.”

“Good idea. Should I call Vision? I’m sure there’s something more you have to teach him, anyway, and Carol is probably gonna trust the mind whammy more from him that from someone she’s never met before.”

Loki rolled his yes at the vocabulary. “What I do with Vision is more guidance than teaching these days,” he corrected then, “but yes, so.”

Dutifully, the creature came, and they spent some time going over mind-reading more involved that the reading of surface thoughts Loki had taught him before. They were just debating ethical concerns, and what kind of situations warranted the use, when James Rhodes and Carol Danvers
walked in.

Danvers blinked at him, sitting in the Avengers shared space like he was at home there. “Um...hello...who are you?” She asked. Loki could see she wanted to get into a full defence mode, and only the calm of everyone else was holding her back.

Loki’s eyes flicked to her for a moment. “Before I answer that, Captain, I’m afraid I have to ask you to submit to a geas Vision would put on you. It would prevent you from revealing my identity.”

Danvers stared some more, and then looked at Vision, Anthony and James in turn. James’ eyes were wide too. “Um...did you put one on me too...?”

Loki sighed. “I did. I am sorry, at that time there was no other-”

The man waved his hand. “No, no, it’s fine. I owe you more than that, I just-”

“You do?” Danvers interrupted, confused.

“Yeah. I owe him my ability to walk properly again, actually.”

Danvers looked at Loki’s Shazad form, then back at James. “…him?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “It’s complicated. Will you take the geas?”

“You’re all sure it’s safe?”

Anthony nodded, and Vision said: “I assure you, Captain, that I will not harm you.”

“I told you it was Carol. And...all right then. Go for it.”

Vision did, gliding over to her side lightly touching her head. It was not necessary, but Vision had been among humans long enough to understand that giving his spells visible components calmed them. When he was done, Loki perfunctorily checked the spell from his place on the sofa, and then turned into himself.

Danvers’ mouth fell open.

“You...are the guy who attacked New York a few years back, aren’t you? Thor’s brother? I read the files...”

Loki winced. “Both of these statements could be disputed, but essentially, you are correct.”

She scowled at him. “How could these statements be disputed?”

“I am adopted;” Loki declared in a detached tone, “and as for the invasion, it...was not my idea, and in fact, one of the reasons I am here is to prevent the one whose idea it was from destroying Midgard once he comes here.”

“One of the reasons?” Danvers prodded.

Anthony grinned and sidled up to him on the sofa, putting a hand around his waist. “Yeah,” he said. “One of them.”

“Um...am I...” she turned to James. “Am I dreaming?”
The man gave a helpless shrug. “No. This is just Tony. You’ll get used to it.”

“Hey,” Anthony defended, “it takes two to tango.”

“I don’t think anyone is surprised Loki – the God of Mischief – would have a few bad ideas, you know?” James told him drily.

“And you’d be surprised at me because…?”

“Carol doesn’t know you that well yet.”

“True, I suppose. So, Carol, this is me at safe, sane, and consensual.”

Her eye twitched. “You ever do any other variation?”

He looked immediately horrified. “Not on the last one, no! But the first two...well. Not usually in bed so much, though.”

“And this is the exception.” Danvers’ tone itself pointed out how bad of an idea that was. Loki, who was familiar with the phrase from some of his old Midgard flings, sort of had to agree with her. Certainly from where she was standing, letting go of these rules with Loki of all people would not be reasonable.

Anthony seemed to consider the question. “Not really? I mean, beside the fact that I’m sleeping with Loki...I mean, with his superior strength if I let him even just spank me I would probably never walk again, and I just don’t see him allowing it the other way round.”

Loki’s mind was suddenly swirling with all sorts of interesting ideas. He pushed them down firmly.

“Okay, thanks for the mental image I absolutely did not need,” Danvers said with an eyeroll, then turned to Loki. “Um, so...nice to meet you, I guess?” She extended her hand, and Loki stood to take it. “Not something I ever expected to say to you, but if world conquering isn’t really your thing, I guess we have no problem,” she added. “But, er, it might take me a while to adjust.”

Loki inclined his head. “I understand. It is fine.”

She turned to leave the room, but James hesitated. “Will you be staying longer? I don’t really wanna interrupt my date, but I wanted to show you the released chapters from the upcoming Song of Ice and Fire book, I realized you probably never saw them.”

Loki blinked at him. “Yes,” he said then, “I’ll be staying until tomorrow.”

“Good, see you then,” James said and took Danvers’ hand as they walked out.

“Keep refusing to read the books,” Stark said by way of an explanation. “It bugs him to no end that he can’t discuss them with me, but...they’re way too long for my attention span.”

Loki scoffed. “How did you ever make it thought school, I wonder?”

“Not by reading books, I can tell you that much,” Stark retorted, then grinned. “There are just so many other attractive things to do...”

He proceeded to demonstrate. Loki’s mind went back to the suggestion from Anthony’s
conversation with Danvers even as he pulled the man into his lap. But he felt unsure. Their sex had been emotionally charged right from the start, and while it was mostly lighter now, it was still hard to bring games of submission into in any any casual manner. He decided to wait and bid his time. It was not as if he could not enjoy himself without. Enjoy himself so much, in fact.

They retreated back to bed soon after that. Loki took full advantage of not having any time constraints this time. The evening before, he had been impatient, and that morning lazy and sleepy were the words of the day. But now he was awake, and fully able to give Anthony the full attention someone so creative and expressive in bed deserved.

Anthony had already come once, and now he way lying, relaxed and pliant, on his belly as Loki was trailing kisses over his back, heading steadily lower. Soon, Anthony began squirming, and when Loki finally reached his goal with his tongue, his moan was so loud it bordered on a scream. Loki would have smirked in satisfaction, if his mouth had not been otherwise occupied. As it was, he worked on having Anthony come on his tongue alone, and then, with a little magical help to revive, on a different part of him entirely.

Once more, they emerged from the bedroom only late the next day. Loki had his chance to talk to James over breakfast – well, brunch, as Anthony called it, and he was handed a tablet with the promised new chapters. They were each and every one of them works of art.

“When is this book getting published?” He asked when he was done reading, rather impatient for more.

For some reason, James began to laugh out loud. “Never,” he said then. “If you ask me, it’s never. But the Aegon stuff is some shit, eh?”

“Actually, it was the Alayne chapter that was the most fascinating to me,” Loki replied. “She has made so much progress...”

They were soon deep in detailed character discussions, Danvers and Anthony both rolling their eyes at him and talking about something of their own. It was only when Rhodes regretably declared he would have to go that Loki realized he should return to Asgard as well, to be on the safe side.

He was reluctant to go, and he frowned at Odin’s rooms when he arrived. It was getting harder and harder coming back. He knew he should be more careful. He just...really, really did not wish to be.

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Loki was not at all surprised when, the next day, Thor came to Odin requesting leave to take a ship and his friends and go look for Dr. Banner in Sakaar. Magnanimously, he granted it, and tried to hope that somehow, Sif and Volstagg would be left behind there.

Uncle Frey was back with a few of his mages to discuss further details of defence, so that occupied most of Loki’s day, and caused him quite considerable level of stress as well. Playing at Odin in front of Frey wasn’t quite as difficult as in front of Thor, but it was near enough, and the conversations were longer. In some ways, Frey knew Odin better than Thor ever did, and he was less straightforward and easy to fool. By the time the evening came, Loki’s head was hurting.

He watched his uncle – they had never been related by blood, not even when he still believed himself Aesir, and perhaps that made it so easy to think of Frey as kin now - and wondered whether it was as hard for him to rule the rural, family-oriented, conservative Vanahem as it was for Loki
having to keep to Asgard most of the time. Like him, Frey had had little choice – after his father’s
death, there had been no one else except his sister, and she had refused the crown at the time, too
devastated by events to consider herself fit for ruling.

Perhaps he should ask about her – her direct involvement could help the war significantly, but she
tended to mostly keep to herself.

He surreptitiously checked the time with a spell. Some other time, then. He did not doubt that it
would be a discussion for long, and the night was gathering. It was time for the usual evening feast
that got on Loki’s nerves so, and then finally the longed-for escape to Midgard.

He tried to stomp down his impatience when he finally reached his quarters. It would not do to be
slowly in preparation of his spells, and besides, this was his lot at the moment. If he survived
Thanos, he could consider how to free himself from the burden of ruling Asgard. Until then, there
were no other options, no choice involved in this – even if he was willing to give the throne to Thor
and run, Thor was by no means ready for the amount if careful diplomatic work this required – and
becoming impatient with it would only lead him to failure and death. He had needed the outlet of
Stark’s company, yes. But that was what it had to remain – an outlet. His main focus was firmly in
Asgard.

Loki repeated this to himself several times as he checked and rechecked the spells, forcing himself
to slow down, before finally stepping onto the hidden paths.

When he arrived to the Avengers compound, he couldn’t help to still feel like he could breathe a
little more freely. Scowling at himself, he looked around, only to realize the communal space was
empty.

“FRIDAY?” He called, making himself visible.

“Boss is in his workshop,” she replied. “Take the stairs down like you were going to the gym, then
turn right.”

Loki did, curious. He had never been there before, and knew that it was Anthony’s space in a way
not even his rooms were. He found the man elbow-deep ins some contraption or another, but when
he heard Loki enter, he raised his head and grinned enthusiastically.

“Hey, babe,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“And you,” Loki acknowledged, realizing this was the first time Anthony had called him that when
he was in his own form. He tried not to draw any conclusions from it. “What are you working on?”

“The suit improvements I told you about...I finally figured how to imitate some of the vibranium
characteristics Shuri talked about, so...”

“Have I caught you at a bad time, then?” Loki did not relish the idea of returning to Asgard, but as
part of his firm decision to curtail his dangerous distraction, he told himself he would.

Anthony stopped those thoughts in their tracks soon enough, though. “No!” He replied
immediately. “Let me just tie up this loose end here...” He trailed off, and a few seconds later, he
pulled his hands out of the machinery and went to kiss Loki.

They got caught up in it for quite a while.

When they finally pulled apart, chiefly because they were running out of breath, Anthony looked
up at him intently and asked: “Can I take you out?”
Loki froze, all of his thoughts upon leaving Asgard coming back, along with half-formed fears and worries he had scarcely even admitted to himself, but that had been present in his mind all the same. “Anthony,” he said then slowly, “don't make this into something it isn't.”

Stark rolled his eyes, looking away. “Oh, I'm sorry, are we still pretending this is just casual hook-ups?”

“No,” Loki replied, because there had hardly been any chance at pretending that from the start, what with the emotional frailty that had been present, “but it is not a love story either.”

Anthony raised an eyebrow at him. “Who said anything about a love story?”

“Oh, forgive me,” Loki scoffed, “is it you know who is pretending that you weren't intending to ask me for a date?”

“Oh no, I was definitely asking you out,” Stark replied, putting on his usual smug smile, though it looked a little brittle. “But it's still quite a jump from that to a love story.”

“So I am to believe you asked me because you were feeling bored?” Loki demanded archly.

Stark hesitated. “I just...do we need to analyse it?”

“We do not,” Loki assured him. “I can simply say no.”

Stark gave an ugly laugh. “What, you have ‘no dating unless it’s the love of your life’ policy?”

“No. I have a ‘protecting my sanity’, one that I know is sorely needed, and part of it is not embarking on ventures where the relevant parties have very different expectations and understanding of the situation, which I believe would be the case here.” And which, if they went wrong, could in fact rob him of the last vestiges of said sanity by losing him his anchor. But he did not add that part.

“So what are your expectations, then?” Stark asked, as if he was making a concession by the question.

“No,” Loki said firmly. “You initiated this. So you tell me, why do you want to ask me out?”

Stark groaned. “Fine. You’re hot, and clever, and witty, and interesting, and I like spending time with you.”

“Is that all?”

“Is that not enough of a reason for you?”

“No, it would be more than enough. But I need to know if it is all.”

Stark seemed to be fighting with himself. Loki sighed. “As I thought,” he muttered.

“What?” Stark asked, defensive.

“You feel you are falling in love with me,” Loki said flatly.

Stark flushed. “You don’t have to sound so disdainful,” he said through gritted teeth. “I know, just a puny mortal, what an outrage-”

“That's not the point,” Loki interrupted him. “When have I ever treated you like a ‘puny mortal’?”
“Never,” Stark conceded.

“The point is,” Loki continued before the man could say anything else, “that what you feel is not falling in love. It is intimacy born from convenience. I was there when you desperately needed someone, and you were there when I...was in need of an anchor. That is all this is.”

Stark blinked at him. “So, what, you’re saying we’re completely replaceable to each other.”

“Hardly now,” Loki explained. “We got...used to each other. But at that point, we would have both latched onto anyone who fulfilled the basic conditions of what we needed.”

“Yeah, and it just so happens that there was only one person to do that.” Stark rolled his eyes, seeming much more relaxed now for some reason. “Look, I don’t know about you, but spoken from my side, it was a unique combination of character traits that make it possible for me to even talk to you at that point, and it’s those same character traits that keep me interested in you now and make me want to move it further. And I’m trying to be understanding of the time differential, and I know it's only been about a fortnight for you, but... You should do me the same favour and not project your situation onto me. It's been nearly half a year for me, and I know myself enough for this at least. I’m not declaring this a ‘love story’, I’m saying that I’m...interested enough, fine, infatuated enough if you wish, to want to try and move it beyond ‘we sleep together when you come over’.”

“It is irrelevant how unique my traits were, or how long it has been.” Loki began. Anthony rolled his eyes again. “Look, if you’re not interested, just tell me, and we can keep it to fuck buddies.”

Loki was frustrated. He knew he should accept the out offered to him, but at this point he could not, not with this misunderstanding on the table. He knew how Anthony’s self-esteem issues were destroying him. “It's not that I am...wholly indifferent towards you,” he admitted. “But...” He considered how much more to imply, when he usually tried not to face these things even for himself. “Surely you're familiar with the concept of manufactured emotion with no real basis, no depth to them?” He asked at length.

Stark frowned for a moment. “Like Stockholm syndrome?” He asked then. “Sure. It's not what this is.”

“It's precisely what it is,” Loki almost growled. “There's no one else, and so we latch onto each other.”

Stark shrugged. “Again, maybe for you. But Rhodey is here more now, I've been rebuilding bridges with Pepper, Carol is turning out to be a great friend... I have people in my life beside you. It's not out of desperation, it's because I like you, your sense of humour, your manipulative genius, your divinely hot body... At least give me a chance to prove it could be the same to you?” he frowned a little to himself. “We need to get you people. More people, more of a support system, so that you know if this is just convenience or...” He trailed off, and seemed to come back to the realization that Loki was still standing right in front of him. “But in the meanwhile, will you let me take you out to dinner or not?” He asked.

Loki sighed, irritation at Stark’s attempt to plan for his social life warring with distant amusement and frustration. “What is it that you hope to gain?” He asked. “No matter how often I come here, you know I am tied to Asgard. I cannot abandon it, especially not now.” It was not only for Anthony that he was saying it. He himself needed the reminder, in case Stark started to make too much sense. Because Loki could already see he was right in one thing – Loki was projecting onto
him, and he wasn’t as alone as Loki was. For Stark, being alone had been temporary, after Rogers’ betrayal. For Loki, it was a permanent state of being. He was simply too strange to fit well into any company.

Just one more reason not to encourage this madness with Stark, when in could only lead to bitter disappointment on both sides.

“Like I said,” Stark replied deasily, “I just want a chance. I want to get to try. I would hate to think we never did, and I would have to always wonder what would have happened. Wouldn’t you?”

The moment he asked, Loki knew he was lost. Because he knew, of course, what the honest answer was.

He wanted to hold onto this and never let go, and if he did, he would wonder and regret – probably for years, if not decades.

But that was his desperation and loneliness speaking, and his need for an anchor. He had no idea what a more detached, rational look would tell him.

And another question was whether he could afford a more rational approach. He could not lose his anchor.

It was a little better these days, of course – there were five people in Midgard now who knew of his being alive, and to most of them he had some hope of speaking semi-regularly and without much pretence, so the anchorage would spread out a little, but still, Stark was doubtless its most crucial part, and without him it would fall apart.

But he read enough to know how unhealthy exactly it was to form a romantic relationship with his central anchor.

The knowledge of this did not influence the answer he wished to give Stark in the slightest, somehow.

Loki knew, knew with perfect certainty that he should say no, that this was dangerous, that he was getting deeper than he should.

He still said yes.

I have no life of my own except these stolen moments on Midgard, he told himself. Surely I can have this much at least?

“One dinner for now,” he declared firmly, “without any promises for more.”

Anthony’s smile was small to many others Loki had seen, but somehow it still seemed to light up the whole room. “Awesome!” He said.

“And I want your word that you will...not rush,” Loki added, just to reassure himself.

Stark gave him a strange look. “We’ve been sleeping together for months from my point of view, what exactly do you mean by that?”

“Don’t play stupid, Anthony. You know very well it is not sexual closeness that I fear you are projecting more of between us.”

The man snickered. “Yeah, that would be kinda hard – we’d probably have to invent new kinds of
sex to get even closer.”

“Precisely. On the...emotional level, however, we have whole galaxies between us, and I would like your word that you will not pretend otherwise.”

There was a short silence. “All right,” Stark conceded after a moment. “Just...it’ll be hard, with the time discrepancy. If it seems like I’m pushing too hard, just...don’t get offended immediately, okay? Just...tell me, and I’ll try to do better.”

Loki was well aware that was not one of his strong suits. For that matter, Stark probably was, too. He was also a little irritated that Stark still seemed to attach so much importance to the time factor, but knew it would be useless to argue at this point. “I will do my best,” he said at length.

“That’s all I ask,” Anthony replied, and kissed him – first a mere peck on the lips, but then another, deeper one.

“What are you planning for this date?” Loki asked when he broke the kiss before they got too distracted. He did promise, after all, and once he did, he wanted to actually get his one date. No point in breaking his own rules and then reaping no benefits.

“I know the perfect fusion restaurant that I just know you will love. It’s in NY, so it’ll take us a while to get there-”

“Or I could teleport us,” Loki pointed out.

“Or,” Anthony agreed after a very short hesitation, “you could do that. So, anyway, dinner, and then maybe dancing if you feel like it.” He hesitated. “Er, you’ll...probably have to go as Shazad or something, sorry...”

“It’s hardly your fault,” Loki said with a shrug. “And in any case I can use a masking spell that simply prevents people from recognizing me, or a notice us not spell. When do you want to go?”

“FRIDAY, time?”

“It’s three pm, boss.”

“Hmm, still a little early. Make a reservation for seven at Momofoku, will you? In the meanwhile...I guess you could oversee Vision as he experiments...or,” Anthony winked, “we could have a quickie.”

Loki laughed at him. “We have four hours, Anthony. I believe your definition of a quickie might need upgrading.”

“It’s still only about half the time I prefer to take with you,” Stark pointed out.

“Conceded,” Loki replied with a smirk, “and likewise. But I believe exceptions can be made-”

He was interrupted by Anthony kissing him.

It was different than any of their kisses before, more insistent somehow, more unrestrained, though not as emotionally naked as some of the first times they slept together. Loki gave in to it without much resistance, and soon he was lost in the overwhelming sense of Anthony all around him.

“God,” Anthony groaned, tearing his mouth away. “Off, take your shirt off, I need to touch you-”

Loki obliged, as quickly as he was able, and then Anthony’s hands were all over him,
overwhelming him and making him forget all of his good resolutions. There was just something to
Anthony this day that was sweeping him off his feet, and for once, he let himself be swept.

In spite of the initial almost frenzy, they made full use of those four hours, and did not take longer
only because Loki reluctantly insisted they be on time. Reluctantly chiefly owing to the interesting
places Anthony’s fingers had been slipping in when the time to depart was approaching.

But it was worth it. Anthony had been right, Loki really did like the restaurant.

“Does any of it remind you of...um, some other places you know?” The man asked, motioning to
the food.

It took Loki only a moment to realize what he meant. “Hmm,” he considered, even as he cast a
small spell to prevent eavesdropping, thinking about the meals they had tasted already. “The pasta
was a little like some of the things I’ve had in Vanaheim.”

Stark flinched a little. “Careful with words like this,” he muttered.

Loki grinned at him. “I took care of it,” he explained. “Magic.” He returned to contemplating the
food. “The things you said were Japanese, they’re a bit like foods in some parts of Alfhaim. I have
not seen anything even remotely Asgardian or dwarven, but then again, I suspect this restaurant is a
little too sophisticated for it.”

“So, what, you Asgardians just eat roast boars?”

“Mostly, yes,” Loki confirmed with a small smirk. “Alongside other roast things.” Then he grew
more serious. “As for Nidavellir...dwarves have a different diet, they most make different kinds of
fungi. They are usually vegetarian.”


“Why does that surprise you?”

“Dunno, they just don’t seem like the types in our stories. Elves, if someone.”

Loki laughed at that in honest amusement. “They’re about as vegetarian as Asgard. No indeed. In
Vanaheim, some people prefer not to eat meat because of similar ethical concerns as on Midgard –
or at least they argue that meat consumption should be limited – but with dwarves, it’s different.
It’s because of their living conditions – their realm is cold and harsh, rich in mineral resources but
not well suited to comfortable life. They spend most time underground. There, they is plenty of
fungi and similar types of vegetation, and in fact some animals as well – but the sort which, as I
understand it, is not usually consumed on Midgard.”

Anthony frowned. “What, like worms?”

Loki inclined his head. “For example.”

“Some people eat them even here, but you’re right, it’s not common. So, worms and fungi.”
Anthony made a face. “Uh. Doesn’t seem very welcoming.”

Loki smirked at him. “Actually, it can taste very good. They have perfected the art of cooking what
they have.”

“So is their planet like, all covered in ice?” Anthony asked curiously. “Is that what I should be
imagining, and is that why they all live in caves?”
“No – that is Jotunheim,” Loki said, doing his best to keep his voice even. “Nidavellir is simply...inhospitable. There is hardly any vegetation, the surface is swept by strong winds and storms, and the temperature fluctuates greatly between day and night.”

“Strange that intelligent life developed there at all, then,” Anthony muttered.

“There are many caves and underground rivers and lakes. That has always been the main place life has flourished.”

“But there must be some animals,” the man continued musing. “Mammals. What would have dwarves developed out of?”

“There are,” Loki confirmed, “ones that are a little like your mole, for example, only bigger.”

“And the dwarves don’t eat them?” Anthony prodded.

“No. I believe that to their understanding, it would be a little like for you to eat apes?”

“Too close for comfort?”

“Precisely. They seem to regard all of the few species of mammals they have as falling into that category.”

Anthony only nodded. The waiting staff had brought them a new course in the meantime, and he pointed down to it. “Does this remind you of something?”

Loki considered the bite in his mouth carefully. “No, this is nothing like I have tasted before.”

“Damn. It’s French, and I was so sure you were going to say it was elvish, based on what you’ve told me.”

Loki grinned at him. “Well, perhaps the dark elves used to eat like this. I wouldn’t know.”

Anthony kicked him under the table, but it soon developed in a game of footsie.

They returned to the compound in an excellent mood, and headed directly to the bedroom to finish what their exploring feet had started. Afterwards, they dozed off in bed, wrapped around each other, but Loki was roused in early morning by his Asgardian alarms tugging on his consciousness. He was up in a blink, clothing himself with magic.

“Wassup?” Anthony asked sleepily.

“Someone needs Odin,” Loki replied. “I have to go.”

“Wait,” the man muttered. “Come back for Christmas?”

Loki smiled at him, head muddled by sleep enough that his usual filters were not quite fully functioning. “I will do my best.”


In Asgard, he found that the reason for his sudden summons was that Thor came back, with all of his friends – unfortunately – but also with Dr. Banner, which was a little more cheering. If he had not been found on Sakaar, it would have been...complicated. There were a few other portal worlds, but they were further and it would be more complicated getting there. And, of course, Dr. Banner always could have had the bad luck of falling to some completely unexpected planet. If that had
been the case, they would have never found him.

The scientist turned into the green beast as soon as Asgard’s extreme gravity tugged at him, and it was some time until Thor and his friends could calm him, but in the end they apparently managed. He was even brought into the throne room – who knew why – as Thor reported to Odin on his mission.

“My shield-brother was being used by the vile master of that place as a source of entertainment,” he declared. “Even the authority of Asgard had limited sway with the repulsive man. My companions and I had to fight several fights for his amusement in an arena he runs before he let us take him away.”

Loki, as Odin, gave a regal nod. “You did well, my son,” he declared. “With a more important war on the horizon, we cannot distract ourselves with such petty criminals, but once we overcome Thanos, I will make certain to send another, more numerous contingent there to show him we are to be respected. But for now, Warriors Three should return to their positions after some rest. Lady Sif, I have a particular task for you, report to my office in the evening after you have rested as well. And Thor, I assume you will accompany your shield-brother to Midgard?”

“If I have your blessing, All-Father.”


Then, Loki settled on the throne to watch.

Bifrost landed safely, and Loki could see Dr. Banner transforming back into his usual form and looking around himself in some confusion.

"What is this place?” He asked Thor.

"The new Avengers home," Loki’s not-brother explained. “Many things have changed since you've last been here. I would have friend Tony tell you, since he witnessed it himself. I only heard of it from him. I have to warn you though, it is... upsetting."

"Uh... Okay, what...?"

At that point, Anthony stepped out of the compound. "Bruce!" He cried, and almost ran to embrace the man. "I can't believe he actually found you," he muttered.

"Thor?" Dr. Banner asked, clearly still confused.

"... Yeah." Anthony said after a hesitation so small Loki wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t been paying attention. Then he tugged on Dr. Banner’s hand. "Come on in, you have got to meet Carol, and you barely know Vision of course... Oh and wait until you meet Spider-man, you're gonna love that kid."

"Spider... What? Tony, what happened here?"

Anthony sighed. "Later, okay? Let me just bask in the return of my science bro for a while. Oh and Thor, thanks for the delivery I guess,” he threw over his shoulder.

Thor looked after him, a little bemused. "I will come visit with Jane some day."

"You do that," Anthony said absently, seeming to already forget the thunderer’s presence as he chatted at his scientist friend.
He entered the compound with his arm around Dr. Banner and Loki turned his eyes away and left the throne. He would give them privacy now that he knew the man had arrived as he should have, no matter how curious he was.

And he would also try very hard not to think about the fact that the next time he came to the Compound, Dr. Banner would be there, and the green beast with him.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, (God willing) I’m seeing Infinity War tomorrow! I’m so excited/terrified! Terrified bc I just know they're gonna hurt both of my babies...poor Tony.

Oh and I might write that Bruce/Tony talk, because I adore them as science bros, not gonna lie. Written already, now part of 3 of this series.

What I did write, already, is a little fix it for the IM3 after-credits scene I’ve ranted about a few chapters back. Is my headcanon for what happened on days I don’t just ignore it, and for the purpose of this story’s universe it’s canon. So, you know, if you want to understand Bruce and Tony’s dynamic in this story better, go read that little ficlet that’s now part two of the series this just became part one of.

Oh and also I'm thinking of reviving my multifandom tumblr, so if anyone's interested: bararakaterina.tumblr.com.
Loki took great joy in giving Sif a complicated assignment in Vanaheim that evening, one that should take several weeks at least. It was work that needed to be done and she was a good fit for it, but more importantly it would ensure Thor would not try to bring her to Midgard to meet Danvers, and it would also make Asgard free of her. Without her presence, Volstagg was not half as irritating.

Loki also took a more detailed report from Fandral, the most bearable member of Warriors Three, about what happened in Sakaar. It made him frown. Its ruler was not expansionist, so he did not pose a danger to Asgard, but still, it was a little discouraging that a prince of the golden realm was given so little regard there. Loki did not exactly wish to return to Odin’s conquering ways, but...people frequently ended up on Sakaar by accident. What if, next time, the dictator refused to give them up?

Still, Loki supposed he could cross that bridge when he came to it. With some luck, by that time it would no longer be his problem.

During the evening feast, his mind inevitably drifted to Midgard and Anthony. He wondered if things would change now that they had had their date, and if so, in what way. Anthony had had almost three weeks to think about it, and there was no telling what conclusions he had come to.

There was also Dr. Banner’s presence. It actually made Loki almost hesitant as he readied the illusions for his journey out of Asgard. He had not relished his last beating by the green beast, and while he was stronger now and likely could escape in time, he would have still much preferred being able to avoid it.

But Stark was right. Dr. Banner would be a very valuable resource against Thanos. It was worth any discomfort Loki might suffer over this to bring him back.

With that thought firmly in mind, he stepped through to Midgard.

He found Anthony in the shared living space with James Rhodes and all of the Avengers who lived in the compound – including the doctor.

Taking a deep breath, Loki glanced into the man’s mind to assure himself the spell was in place as it should be, and then he made himself visible in the form of Shazad.

“Babe!” Anthony immediately called and stepped to his side to give him a light kiss and put a hand around his waist. “So, Vision already did the mind-whammy thing, if you wanna check?”

“I already did,” Loki assured him.

“Alright, then...maybe we should take this outside?” The man actually sounded a little nervous, which did nothing to improve Loki’s confidence in the soundness of this plan.

Banner blinked. “You’re afraid the other guy will come out?”

“Maybe a little bit? Come on, Bruce, just to be sure. He got a lot of room to play on Sakkar, according to what you say, and...I’d rather take no chances.”
Clearly reluctant and also surprised, Dr. Banner followed Anthony outside. Loki was equally reluctant, but less surprised. He expected this to end in disaster, too. But he knew the option of not telling Dr. Banner his identity was not truly on the table. While Captain Danvers was new to the Avengers and Anthony barely knew her, Banner was a friend. That much had been clear from the welcome he had been given when he returned. Sooner or later, Anthony would wish to tell him the truth, and if it had to come, Loki preferred sooner. At least it would put an end to the problem of Anthony’s misunderstanding of the nature of their...association. So facing the beast it was.

There was a light dusting of snow on the ground outside, and Loki tried not to wonder if the cold would irritate the doctor and increase the likelihood of his transformation.

When Anthony and James both called their armour, Dr. Banner looked even more worried. “Guys?” He said. “What...?”

“Maybe get it over with quickly?” Danvers suggested, looking at Loki.

He took a deep breath. There were no words for how much he didn’t want to do it, but nevertheless, he shifted into his natural form.

Dr. Banner blinked and frowned a little. “That’s...it?” He asked then. “Shazad is Loki?”

“...yeah?” Anthony confirmed uncertainly.

“And you were all worried the other guy would come out because of that?” Banner clarified.

“It seemed like a distinct possibility, doctor,” Loki stated drily.

“...are you all forgetting that I beat him last time?” The doctor asked with a touch of humour in his voice. Loki barely stopped himself from scoffing. He certainly hadn’t. “He doesn’t scare me,” Banner continued. “The last thing we heard was that he died heroically defending Thor, and you said, Tony, that he wasn’t behind the invasion. So...”

Anthony exhaled in relief and stepped out of the armour. Loki, for his part, was still rather uncertain. “You...are not upset, Doctor?” He asked tentatively.

“Upset?” There was a small frown on the man’s face. “I’m confused, a little – you’re supposed to be dead, and also...you’re the guy who saved Tony and helped Jim walk again, right?”

“I am,” Loki confirmed.

“Why?”

Loki gave a languid shrug. “I wanted allies against Thanos on Midgard. He seemed like the best chance of gaining that.”

“Also, I’m irresistible,” Anthony added.

“Naturally,” Loki commented drily.

“Guys, can we take this inside?” Danvers interrupted. “I’m freezing my ass off here.”

“Sure, sure,” Anthony said quickly, heading back to the building.

“You came to him while he was wounded in Siberia, didn’t you?” Dr. Banner continued as they walked in.
“Yes,” Loki confirmed, and because the best defence was always stopping the opponent in their tracks before they even began the attack properly, added: “And if you mean to point out that I chose a moment of his weakness, you are perfectly correct, and Anthony is well aware of it.”

Dr. Banner raised his eyebrows and looked at Anthony. The man only shrugged and grinned. “He’s been surprisingly open about his manipulations,” he said. “Of course, it could just mean there’s a deeper one going on, but...it helps that the only thing he’s asked for so far is us getting ready against Thanos, and he gave back heaps. Including you.”

Banner frowned in incomprehension. “Me?”

“Yeah,” Anthony confirmed and sat down on one of the sofas, gesturing for Loki to settle next to him. “It was him who found out where you were likely to be, and then had me drop hints in front of Thor until he went to get you.”

Dr. Banner turned to Loki, seeming surprised. “Thank you,” he said. “Sakaar was...not a great place to be, even though I don’t remember much.”

“I imagine not. You’re welcome.” Loki looked at him for a moment, resisting Stark’s call. “Did you suspect Anthony’s secret was going to be me?”

The doctor hesitated. “Not...precisely. I mean, like I said, you were supposed to be dead. But it had to be either a genius or someone magical, to be able to help Jim with his walking, you see? It also had to be someone extremely controversial, to have so much secrecy surrounding it. To be honest, I mostly suspected Magneto, until the moment you appeared as Shazad. As far as I know, he’s not a shapeshifter, so then I began to wonder and even consider you...but, well, I had my confirmation soon enough.”

Loki inclined his head. It all made sense, though the doctor’s calm was still unnerving him. Nevertheless, he did sit down, as requested.

“So, this has gone better than anyone expected,” Anthony declared, rubbing his hands. “What do you say we throw a party?”

James gave him a look, plopping down to the opposite sofa. “It’s the 23rd. There’s gonna be a party tomorrow, remember? Christmas party?”

Anthony waved his hand. “Yeah,” he said, “but a bunch of people is invited for that, Loki won’t be able to be himself. I wanna have a regular, spur of the moment party with him now. Please?”

James rolled his eyes. “Yes, all right, let’s have a party.” He grinned. “You should order pizza – that’s worked out great the last time we did an impromptu celebration, Mr. Stank!”

“Hey!” Anthony protested. “That wasn’t even the pizza delivery guy, that was FedEx and Rogers’ stupid letter!”

James only laughed. Loki was glad to see they could joke about the letter now. He, personally, was still angry whenever he thought of it, but then It was less time ago for him.

Anthony had everyone log their orders with FRIDAY and got up to mix drinks. “FRIDAY,” he said then, “give us some tunes – just background music, nothing too loud.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

“So,” Dr. Banner said, sitting down at Loki’s other side. “How come you aren’t dead?”
Loki considered where to begin. “How much has Thor told you?”

“Pretty much everything, I guess – he talked about it a lot when he got drunk, so we got the account of your heroic death several times.”

Loki supposed he should not be surprised, but he was, a little. That Thor would speak of him so often in a good light to people who had only known him as their enemy… It was not prudent, at the very least, but then when had Thor ever been prudent? “The wound was real enough,” he replied to Banner’s query. “I slipped into a healing coma, but I didn’t die. Thor, charmingly, left me there to go save the world, so I made my own way back. Since, when he had freed me from prison, he vowed to return me there once we were done, I elected not to inform him of my survival.”

“Understandable,” the doctor said with a nod, “though maybe a little mean, given that he truly mourn you. But, well. I was just curious whether it was a ploy from the start.”

Loki sighed. “No. Unfortunately, not everything I do is quite so well planned.”

Dr. Banner smiled a little. “That’s reassuring to hear, I suppose.”

Their drinks were delivered, and the rest of the group settled down on the sofas.

“Have you checked out the other books by Martin I told you about?” James asked.

“No,” Loki replied regretfully. “I spend all of my time on Midgard here, so I haven’t exactly had an opportunity…”

“I’ll get them for you and leave them here when I come next,” the man promised. “They’re worth it.”

“Are you honestly threatening to bring paper books into my house?” Anthony asked in mock outrage. “Scandalous. Just tell the names to FRIDAY, and I’ll get Loki a StarkPad to read them.”

Loki gave him a look. “Has it occurred to you,” he said archly, “that I might prefer paper books?”

“You wound me, babe,” Anthony replied, melodramatic, and grabbed his heart. Loki rolled his eyes.

“What are these books like, anyway?” Captain Danvers interrupted their byplay. “I’ve never read anything by him except Game of Thrones either…”

James began to explain, and they spent some time discussing science fiction literature before James excused himself to go to the bathroom.

At that point, Danvers turned to him and Banner. “You seemed to know each other at least a little,” she said. “I guess you met during the New York invasion?” Loki had to suppress a grimace even as he nodded. “I don’t remember the files much,” she continued, “except for reading that it was the Hulk who finally subdued him. What happened?”

Dr. Banner gave a quiet laugh. “It was quite charming. I believe you called me ‘a beast making play he is still a man’, didn’t you?”

Before Loki could react, beyond suppressing another grimace, Anthony interjected: “Well, to be fair, you said that his brain was a bag of cats and that you could smell the crazy on him, before you beat him into my floor.”
"Well, I was right, wasn’t I?” The doctor pointed out, very correctly. “Just as he was right about me, I suppose.”

Anthony merely rolled his eyes.”Come on, Bruce, this is a party, and not the pity kind.”

“I think I’m kinda sorry I asked now, and also I’m understanding better why Tony was so worried about this,” Danvers muttered.

Anthony shook his head with emphasis. “Yeah, no, I wasn’t lying before. That really was mainly because Bruce spent so long as the Hulk, I wasn’t sure what it did to his control, if he didn’t have a hair trigger now or something. If this happened before his disappearance, I’d have had zero worries. As I know him, Bruce’s control is incredible, and it looks like nothing’s changed.”

“But he still beat Loki into the floor when he called him a beast?” Danvers asked archly. Loki really wished they would stop mentioning it. The memories were far from pleasant.

“No, see, that was completely unrelated,” Anthony began, and then he seemed to notice the look on Loki’s face and quickly said, “but maybe let’s talk about something else than the invasion, all right? Um, how about a movie?”

“Right, you said you were watching scifi with Loki, right?” Danvers asked immediately, not missing a beat.

“Yeah, so…?”

“Has he seen Star Wars yet?”

Anthony rolled his eyes. “Star Wars is not a real sci-fi-”

“I don’t care, how can you show him space films and not show him Star Wars-”

“He hasn’t seen Star Trek yet, even, and if we were getting into classics that would take priority-”

“How dare you-”

“Now now, kids, calm down,” Dr. Banner said, clearly amused. “I agree with Tony that Star Trek clearly takes precedence, BUT it’s not really so suitable for a party watching is it?”

Anthony reluctantly grumbled his agreement. “But, I mean, what episode?”


Anthony frowned. “The acting is so bad in that one though – he should start with Ep Five-”

“If he does the plot twist at the end will make no sense-” Danvers opposed.

In the end they agreed to “start with episode four and rewind the particularly bad bits”, whatever that meant, though Danvers seemed like her teeth hurt just with the idea. Loki sat there the whole time, a little bewildered. He had heard of Star Wars in his trips to Midgard, but the passion with which the mighty Avengers argued about it seemed entirely unwarranted by the little he knew of it. He was actually a little curious now.

He was even more bewildered, however, when the film actually began. The acting truly was atrocious. “Is this to show me not all films are as good as the two we have watched before now?” He asked Anthony-
“Hey now, that’s harsh,” James protested, defensive, and Danvers immediately declared: “Now I see you really are a villain. Dissing Star Wars!”

“Come on,” Anthony implored, “Darth Vader is cool, isn’t he?”

“It is somewhat less amusing when you have fought against people like him,” Loki pointed out. The character reminded him of Malekith in some ways.

“No, it’s not,” Anthony insisted. “I had you take me by the throat and almost choke me – and Thor too, come to think of it, must be an Asgardian tradition – and I still love watching Vader do it.”

“Way too much information, Tony,” Danvers muttered, and Anthony choked on his drink.

“Wow,” he said. “You saw innuendo somewhere I didn’t. You truly are one woman in a million, Danvers.”

It was only with this statement that Loki realized what she had meant, and once more his mind flooded with images he did his best to push to the side. He had to wonder though, a little, whether Anthony was trying to tell him something with these snide mentions. It might be a good idea to discuss it openly once they were alone.

Consequently, when the first extremely mediocre film was finally over, Loki was rather impatient and disappointed when he was pressured into ‘simply having to’ see the one that apparently followed in the series.

It was better, though, as had been promised, and Loki was actually enjoying it...right until the very end.

Then, when the father of the protagonist was revealed to be the mass-murdering villain of the series, Loki flinched, and suddenly his thoughts were spiralling out of control as he sat on the sofa and stared blindly ahead.

He was back in that weapons vault, and he was having that conversation with Odin again, he was touching the Casket and he knew, he just knew, but he was refusing to admit it...search your feelings, you know it to be true...oh how intimately he knew that situation, that knowing deep down but refusing to face it. And the feeling of completely absolute refusal of such reality that came after.

He also knew what happened next. His memories were pressing on him from all sides, sending the Destroyer, fighting with Thor, letting go of the Bifrost, the fall, the void, and then Thanos…

It took him a very long time to come to himself.

When he did, he was sitting in a mostly empty room in front of a television that was off. Anthony was the only person present, on the sofa next to him, within reach but not touching.

“Are you back with me?” He asked softly.

“Yes,” Loki answered, reluctant but aware there was no point pretending what just happened didn’t happen.

“Are you okay going to my room?”

Loki merely nodded, and they walked there in silence.
Once the door shut behind him, Anthony immediately started talking.

“T’m so sorry, babe, I didn’t realize- I know...well, Thor told us you were adopted, during the
Chitauri invasion, but I didn’t know it was a triggering or traumatic memory, otherwise I wouldn’t
have...just...I’m sorry, all right?”

Loki shrugged. “You have nothing to apologize for,” he said in a dead voice. “It was hardly your
fault.”

Stark shook his head vehemently. “Of course it was, this was supposed to be a happy Christmas
party, one you could actually enjoy as opposed to the one tomorrow that will have Thor and you in
disguise...and instead I-”

“Anthony,” Loki interrupted sharply. “I never told you, you couldn’t have known, and it was not
your fault. Leave it be.”

The man exhaled. “All right...okay. But, can you at least- tell me what- I don’t wanna pry, but I
really want to avoid any repetitions, okay, so if you could tell me what about it-”

Loki wanted to laugh. What about it? Everything. Every little thing that was there in that scene was
like a mockery of his own life and the shameful secrets it contained. Suddenly he remembered that
frost giant calling Thor a princess. Well, he supposed his not-brother would truly be awkward in
the dress this Princess Leia character wore, but otherwise he would fir the role perfectly well. All
of them would.

Stark was still looking at him, uncertain but expecting an answer. Loki wouldn’t believe he would
ever tell this to anyone willingly, and yet...suddenly he felt tired. He had claimed to himself that he
tried to be as honest with Stark as was possible, but this was the biggest, most repulsive lie of them
all, was it not? He had allowed Stark to lie with him knowing what he was. Before, he had at least
not made his partners into monster-victims knowingly, but to be aware that he was a beast and yet
still allow a man who had had enough betrayal in his life to be unmanned by him... His selfishness
truly knew no bounds.

“I suppose you deserve to know,” he said aloud. “At least it will snap you out of your ridiculous
idea when it comes to your infatuation,” he added bitterly, and before Anthony could say anything,
confident he would be able to escape before the man had time to attack, he closed his eyes and took
on his Jotun form.

There was no sound, not even that of Anthony walking or running away or calling for his weapons,
so after a time Loki opened his eyes to see what was happening and to prepare himself adequately.

Anthony was simply standing in the same place he had been in before, looking at him, his
expression confused now. “Um...this is really cool and all, and hot, but what does it have to do with
anything?”

Loki gritted his teeth at the mocking. He had started this, so he might just as well finish it. Anthony
was rational enough to continue preparing for Thanos after Loki was gone. “This is my true form,”
he said.

Anthony frowned. “True form? What makes it truer than the others? I mean, they all looked pretty
real...”

“This is the form I was born in,” Loki growled. Surely that man could not be this slow.

Anthony’s frown deepened. “...and that makes it truer because? I mean, it’s not like people always
stay looking the way they were born—"

“This is the form I would revert to if no magic was at play, no outside influences,” Loki almost shouted, interrupting him. Now he was certain the man was intentionally mocking him by pretending not to understand.

Anthony shrugged. “If I didn’t shave and cut my hair, I’d look like a hobo. Doesn’t mean it’s my true state or some crap.” He paused. “Look...I think I get what you’re trying to say. Since you showed me this when we were talking about adoption, I’m assuming Thor doesn’t look like this without magic?”

Loki almost laughed at the idea, though he felt no mirth. “No indeed.”

“So you were adopted from a different species,” Stark continued.

“Yes,” Loki confirmed, gritting his teeth once more.

“And,” Stark went on slowly, “given your reaction to the Star Wars scene...your biological dad is some asshole?”

“All of my species are ‘assholes’, you moron! I’m a jotun, a frost giant!” Loki finally exploded.

“Whoa now,” Anthony said, putting up his hands. “All of your species? That...doesn’t really jive with me, you know.”

“Because you know nothing about them!” Loki spat at him.

Stark shrugged. “Well, I mean, at the very least there’s you, right?”

This time, Loki did laugh, aware how insane it sounded by not caring. “Yes, me – I who led an invasion to your planet, attempted to kill my brother several times, and did my best to destroy the entirety of Jotunheim!”

“Wait...” Now Anthony was staring at him, finally thrown at the reminder of his past crimes. “Jotunheim...you...your attempted genocide was on the people you were born into?”

“Yes,” Loki said through gritted teeth.

Stark grimaced. “All right...I think I can see how learning you were born as one of them after that would mess you up.”

“I knew before,” Loki corrected, still in his bitter voice.

Anthony’s mouth actually fell open, and he stared a moment longer. “Okay, you know what, I’m shelving that for now,” he said then. “There’s just...way too much to unpack. But...this. You being Jotun by birth, which apparently means having blue skin and red eyes, among other things. So...all right. The Jotuns are...are they something like traditional enemies of Asgard, or what?”

Loki scoffed. “They’re traditional enemies of everyone, including your precious Midgard. They tried to conquer it a millenium of yours ago, and your planet would have been frozen over with human life eradicated had Odin not intervened. They were a threat to all the realms.”

Anthony nodded in understanding. “All right, so...a bit like the Mongols in the Middle Ages, I guess, only with an environment controlling weapon?”

Loki frowned, distracted as he searched through his knowledge of Midhard’s history. “I suppose,”
he said then, “only much more powerful.”

Stark shrugged. “Well, compared to you, they were probably pretty much like the Mongols compared to the kingdoms we had at the time. So, how many realms did they conquer?”

Loki shook his head. “None.”

Anthony blinked. “None?”

“No. Odin stopped their attempt on Midgard and took the weapon that enabled their travel between realms from them, so that ended their campaign,” Loki explained.

Anthony was quiet for a moment, seeming to consider how to phrase what he wished to convey. “You said something about Asgardian imperialism some time ago, when we discussed Rand,” he said at length. “About...Vanaheim, was it? That you guys conquered it?”

Loki nodded, unsure where this was headed. “Yes, millennia of your time ago – decades of ours.”

“Any other realms?” Anthony asked in a casual tone.

“Alfheim,” Loki said immediately, then frowned a little and added: “And Svartalfheim in a way too, I suppose, only it was left a wasteland after the war, so no one lives there anymore.”

Anthony blinked repeatedly this time. “So...Asgard conquered two realms, wiped out another, and crippled the power of yet another one. Earth, I suppose, was considered inconsequential. What about the other three?”

“Nidavellir is a firm ally – they supply Asgard with weapons. We have good relations. Muspelheim is not...it’s a realm of fire and creatures of fire, few of them and far between. It is not truly inhabitable by anyone else. And Niflheim is a world of darkness.”

Anthony nodded as if confirming something. “So...let me get this straight,” he said then. “Out of the seven habitable worlds, Asgard effectively rules or conquered five, and the other two were only left alone because they were either of no strategic interest or a crucial weapons supplier? And you believe Jotunheim in the planet of public enemies and evil conquerors? Loki, babe, ...”

Loki could only stare at him. It wasn’t that any of this information was new. He knew all of it. But it was just the way Stark put it, it... “But they were trying to take over Midgard,” he said a little numbly, “and they were trying to freeze it.”

Stark took a deep breath. “All right, let’s say I believe it – and I don’t, just for the record, not necessarily, because information coming from someone’s enemies can never be trusted – but I guess inventing their invasion entirely would be hard, so let’s say I believe the invasion, and have some doubts about ‘want to frost the land’ bit. Though speaking of Mongols, if they had trouble with our climate I suppose they would have wanted to – I mean if the Mongols could have changed the Indian climate to make it easier to invade I bet they would have – but, anyway. Even if all of it was true, the invasion and the freezing, that would still make them better than Asgard, since Midgard was only one planet. How many had Asgard conquered by then?”

“All of the ones I named, except Jotunheim,” Loki replied distantly, the image of history as he knew it shifting before his eyes.

“Ah,” Stark said like something else fell into place. “So it’s like a desperate attempt to equal out the powers, right? To get themselves a colonized realm as well, to avoid getting completely overwhelmed? Sure, it’s a useless realm, but at least it’s something? We’ve had attempts like this in
history too, in 19th and 20th century. So Jotunheim desperately tries to even out the playing field, and Asgard shuts them down fast instead. Sounds like standard superpower politics, only on a larger scale. What else you got?”

“Asgard...didn’t treat the people of Vanaheim and Alfheim badly?” But even as he was saying it, Loki faltered. Yes, they were more protected than oppressed now, but he read the histories. He knew what the conquest had looked like. He knew why Freya was keeping to herself these days.

“Yeah, I can see you know that’s bullshit already,” Stark said with a nod. “Plus Jotunheim never actually conquered anyone, so you don’t know how they’d act. Anything else?”

“I...” Loki was desperately trying to grasp at straws. “When I gave them passage, the forst giants I mean, they were more then willing to come and kill Odin...”

Anthony raised his eyebrows at him. “Wouldn’t you be?” He asked. “Because I would, in their place.”

“Yes. Yes, I would,” Loki admitted in defeat.

He was feeling off balance, like he had not since finding out his true heritage. He had known Asgard was an imperial power, he knew the history most of that realm tried to forget, he knew all the atrocities that happened, but somehow he had never thought to...contrast it with Jotunheim in this way. To question the most basic assumption.

And to think, he had always believed himself above the idiots of Asgard, so much more knowledgeable and capable of seeing through tricks and illusions! Ha! He had not known about the greatest trick played on him, and he had, apparently, not known about this illusion built around the realm he had been born in. Pitiful.

“I...will need some time for this,” he said, and to his horror he realized his voice was shaking a little.

“Sure thing,” Anthony immediately nodded. “Do you want to go to that room of yours tonight? Not that I want you gone, not in the least, but I thought maybe you’d prefer some alone time to think. Personally, I just want to hug you, but...”

Loki stared at him. “You’d still lay with me, even knowing...?” He didn’t finish the sentence, simply gestured at his still blue skin.

Anthony rolled his eyes. “I thought we’ve just established there was no big deal anywhere in this? In fact, I could have more issues with you still ruling Asgard and continuing it on its imperial trajectory, but fortunately for you I am from the US and I used to sell weapons to the goverment, so it would be the biggest ever case of pot calling the kettle black. So...come to bed?”

“Yes,” Loki said slowly, bewildered. “I will.”

As if half asleep, he undressed and climbed under the covers with Anthony by his side, almost unconsciously taking his Aesir illusion back on. Anthony grabbed his hand for a moment.

“Good night,” he muttered. “And...thanks for telling me.”

Loki only nodded. After a short hesitation, Anthony let go of his hand to wrap his arm around him instead.

They did not have sex that night, but Anthony held him tightly as Loki stared off into the distance
and contemplated how much just one human could change, with just a few words and the right point of view.

Chapter End Notes

Stay woke, Loki!

A shorter chapter once again, because after this scene it just didn’t seem fitting to add any more to it.

I just wrote in SW because Carol loves them, I absolutely didn’t realize what the Ep V reveal would mean to Loki until I got to that point. It’s not one of the films usually used to this (compared to, you know, Avatar, Frozen, Lilo and Stitch...damn there’s a lot that fits Loki’s story way too well).

Also, Infinity War!!! That film was so awesome, but at the same time, so heartbreaking. In some ways I think what happened was even worse than what I expected would happen, that’s all I’m gonna say.

Oh, and my tumblr if anyone’s interested.

EDIT: I wrote the bit with Tony's talk to Bruce, it's part three of the series now.
Trouble in paradise. Well, more trouble, that is. But all is well that ends well!

When Loki woke in the morning, memories of the previous night flooded him, and with them, humiliation.

Immediately, he slipped out of bed, using a bit of illusion and trickery to prevent Stark noticing, and then dressed himself with another spell and teleported away.

His first idea was of going back to Asgard, but the mere thought of the golden realm was turning his stomach at the moment, so he ended up in a deserted part of Midgard he knew of from one of his previous visits a long time ago, pacing.

He couldn’t even bear to think of the previous night. Weak, disgusting, monstrous, pitiful, pathetic. Couldn’t handle watching a film, something Midgardian children spent their free time with, and he broke down like the weakling he was. And then, then his foolishness and naivete about Asgard being revealed by Stark, who had never even been there and knew nothing about it, and then he let himself be comforted, like a small child, held in his arms as if Stark was his mother…

Spark’s of wild magic were running across Loki’s skin in agitation.

A large part of him wanted to never go back to Stark and spare himself the humiliation.

But there was another part, too, which cringed and protested at the idea.

There were the rational reasons why that would be the wrong move, of course – the plans for Thanos, his anchorage – but he also knew that was not the reason why he hated the thought so much.

Attachment born out of convenience.

Do you want to be humiliated, then? He asked the part of himself that wished to go back. Do you want to see him laughing at you, mocking you for your weakness, for your monstrosity?

He might not, that sentimental part protested.

Oh? He already did so yesterday.

Did he though?

Loki thought, going back over his memories. He had been certain of it yesterday – Star’s reaction when he first saw his Jotun form, his pretended unwillingness to understand the situation – but if it had been mocking, the man had to be the most excellent actor. There was no sign of revulsion or horror in his face at all, and he did lie with Loki in his bed without cringing.
Was he a good enough actor for that? Loki didn’t trust himself to judge that objectively and dispassionately.

Why would he choose to go with him to bed for the night though? It could have been to try and kill him in his sleep, but that has clearly not happened, so...what would have been the purpose?

*Very well, so perhaps he is not repulsed by the Jotun form for some strange reason, Loki told himself, but what about your desperate weakness, your clinging?*

The sentimental part of him responded by bringing up memories of Stark at the beginning of their...acquaintance, desperate and clinging, too, at the end of his rope. *He would not mock you.*

Loki knew that was no guarantee, but still, it was...a factor.

But it wasn’t just that he hated, deeply and viscerally, showing weakness. It had some practical effects as well, which were undesirable from purely pragmatic point of view. Effectively, he had just shown Stark his soft spots. And perhaps the man was pretending just so that he could best plan how to make use of them to destroy Loki.

This was when, unexpectedly, the sentimental part of Loki showed some teeth. *I’ve known his weak spots for weeks,* it said. *Am I really so defenceless that I’m afraid to face him on equal footing now?*

Loki wanted to scream. He had known, he had *known* he was not being careful enough, that he was letting himself get too close, and this, this was the result.

But no, he told himself firmly. Taking his fear of weakness and humiliation out of the equation, the most rational course of action was going back, because of Thanos and because of his anchorage. Going back, and making it clear to Stark that the weak spots he had shown were not explorable.

Brutally silencing the weak voice that whispered *but perhaps he would understand,* Loki set his teeth in determination and called for his magic.

He was tired, exhausted in fact, and it cost him additional effort not to show it as he readied for facing Stark. He teleported back to the bedroom, but the man was not there, so he sat down on the bed, wondering what to do – he didn’t have the strength to face the shared spaces. Before he could form any decision, though, Stark burst into the room.

“Loki,” he said, and there was a depth of some emotion in the one word Loki couldn’t properly decipher, “you’re alright, you’re here, I was worried...well. You’re back, that’s what matters.”

Loki could only nod.

“So...I was planning for you to come to the party tonight, but you don’t have to-”

*See? Already he regards you as weak,* Loki hissed at himself. “Have no care, Stark, I will come,” he said in a cool voice, straightening.

Stark blinked at him. “Um...okay, whatever you want. Just...is everything...I mean, can I do something, or...?”

Loki scoffed. “What do you imagine you could do?”

Stark sighed, sounding frustrated. “Look, you just called me Stark, and you haven’t done that since I asked you not to. I don’t like it, and I’d like to fix it.”
And I would like to make it clear that I’m not your charity case on which to demonstrate your great heroism,” Loki replied bitingly, rising from the bed and drawing himself to his full height.

Stark gritted his teeth, and his eyes sparkled with anger. “Oh really? You fucking rule Asgard, Loki, how the fuck would I figure you were my charity case?” It almost exploded out of him, as if he had been holding it inside for a long time. “From the fucking beginning I’ve been accepting help from you without having anything to give back, but suddenly when the tables turn a little, you think I see you as a charity case? What does that say about how you see me, then, tell me?”

Loki didn’t expect that, and it threw him. “It’s...different,” he said, less forcefully.

“Different how?” Stark insisted.

“You’re...human.”

Stark gave a bitter laugh. “Oh, is this how it’s going to be then? I’m just the weak, pitiful human you look down on?”

Loki exhaled. “I told you this...idea of yours wouldn’t work.”

“No. Stop right there,” Stark said, his voice like a whip. “This is not a case of some fate dooming it or whatever bullshit. This is on you. So...do you see me as a puny mortal or not?”

Loki sighed. “In some ways, you are a puny mortal, and it would be foolish of me to ignore it.”

“In some ways, sure – I’m weaker, get hurt more easily and heal more slowly. But this isn’t what we’re talking about,” Stark insisted.

Loki closed his eyes. He was too tired for this. “Must we-?”

“Yeah, we must, because I want to get my answer. So?”

There was a long silence. “No,” Loki said then, grudgingly but honestly, “I do not regard you as weak, not in the sense you mean.”

Stark gave a sharp nod. “What is this bullshit about it being different with me, then?” He asked.

Loki gave a shrug. “It just is.”

“Why? If not because I’m mortal?”

It truly wasn’t – Loki knew he wouldn’t regard an As in Stark’s position as weak either, no matter what the rest of Asgard would say. “Because you aren’t me,” he answered at length.

To his surprise, something triumphant appeared in Stark’s eyes. “Yeah, I thought so,” he said. “So let’s cut this out right now. If I’m allowed to fall apart on you, you’re allowed the same courtesy, without being thought weak by anyone, all right?”

“You’ve never shattered to pieces over a film scene,” Loki growled before he could stop himself. He began to mentally curse and look for a way to backtrack immediately, but before he could say anything, Stark interrupted him.

“That’s only because I know my triggers and avoid them like the plague,” he said with a shrug. “You won’t see me watching anything with prolonged torture or even capture. The Bridge on the River Kwai is just a no-no for me. Lately, I’m also not as keen on alien invasions as I used to be, unless it’s either mindless fun or different enough it avoids any triggers, like the Edge of
Tomorrow. Betrayals in films just make me get blind drunk afterwards, fortunately, because they’re so prolific I couldn’t watch anything if they were downright triggering. But anyway, that’s why I apologized yesterday. I’m very careful about this for myself, and I was careless when it came to you.”

“If you don’t want to be treated as weak, don’t treat me that way,” Loki replied, some sharpness returning to his tone. “You had no reason to suspect, and the last thing I want is you being worried about me shattering over anything and everything.” It was only after he said it that Loki realized he was speaking as if this arrangement between them would continue in some form, as if things weren’t profoundly changed.

“Fair enough,” Stark said easily, like he had no doubt about it either. Was this it, then? Loki thought back to his plan when he teleported here. He had meant to stay, after all...but he had meant to make it clear his weak points weren’t explorable. He wasn’t sure he had achieved the second part. But Stark was right, he had shown even more of his own weaknesses, so...perhaps it truly could be this easy?

“And...please don’t run away on me next time?” The man added. “It really freaked me out.”

Loki gave him a considering look. He truly had seemed distressed when he entered the room, for some reason. Surely Loki could at least set an alarm and, if he still meant to return, return when Stark woke, if similar situations came up in the future. “I’ll...try,” he said.

“All right, I guess that’s best I can ask.” There was a short silence. “I don’t want to piss you off again, but are you sure you’re up to seeing Thor today? Also Pepper will be here, you know, my ex, so...”

Loki frowned at the second part. “Should that be a cause for concern?”

“No, no, just...” Stark shrugged. “It’s considered polite to warn one’s partner in situations like that.”

“Ah. In case of jealousy.”

“Not that I expect you to be jealous,” Anthony quickly reassured. “I just didn’t want to spring her on you out of nowhere.”

Loki wondered. He knew himself well enough to know he had jealous tendencies, but he truly felt none here. Perhaps he was not as deep in this as he had feared, then. The thought was relaxing. “It is fine,” he said.

“Good. And Thor?”

“I can handle him,” Loki said, though he did not relish it. “Perhaps I could work with Vision on some of his abilities now,” he added then. He hesitated. “Spellwork...soothes me,” he admitted.

“All right, I’ll call him here,” Anthony replied, immediately realizing Loki had no interest in venturing outside his rooms. “But just for the record, the others...well, I don’t know Carol well enough to say, but she was in the army and saw active duty, so I think she has her own share of demons. And with Bruce and Rhodey, I actually do know for sure and trust me, it was nothing they don’t know from personal experience, and though their triggers might be different, they’re the last people in the world to think less of you for that. Bruce would actually...relate to quite a number of your issues, not that I expect you to bond over it. Just...it might help to be aware.”

Loki simply nodded, unable to do any more. It was taking a lot out oh him just to accept this kind
of personal reassurance, and the reminded of what the others have witnessed, placidly. Stark seemed to understand and left the room, giving him some time to recompose himself before Vision came.

The creature was professional and they got directly to working. Looking for something suitably distracting, Loki gave him a look out of the corner of his eye and said: “What do you say to finally looking at mind control today?”

They had been dancing around the topic for a long time. Loki trusted Vision enough not to try it on him by now, and besides, Vision could find the way to these abilities himself at this point, so there was no point it trying to keep them from him. And it was involved enough work to occupy Loki fully.

Vision hesitated for a moment, but then inclined his head. “I am...not averse,” he said.

With zeal, Loki began to explain.

They had been working for a few hours, interrupting silence only for instruction, when Vision suddenly said: “I truly wish you could meet Wanda. I believe you would have much to talk about.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Given her relationship to Anthony, I highly doubt it.”

“That would likely be a point against you in her eyes, yes,” Vision conceded. “And in yours against her, I suppose. But even only your power...”

“From my understanding, the nature of hers is very different from mine,” Loki reminded him. He was curious himself about how magic could work differently, to tell the truth, but it just did not seem like powers gained from exposure to the sceptre could be the same. They should be more similar to Vision’s.

“I do not quite know,” the creature replied. “It is not my expertise, and she is not a theoretician, she has hardly any formal education, so she mostly concentrates on its practical uses. But from my limited understanding, there are similarities enough.”

Loki shrugged. “Well, it is a moot point anyway, given that she is in hiding.”

“...yes,” Vision agreed, after a slight pause that was very intriguing, but which Loki had no capacities to explore right then, not when he was testing his shields against Vision’s mind control and trying not to think about last night at the same time.

They both tired out in another hour or so, and Vision retreated to his rooms as Loki, with a deep breath and some steeling of his nerves, went in search of Anthony. He did not like venturing out of these rooms, but he was well aware that being alone would be even more dangerous at this point.

He found the man in his workshop with Dr. Banner. He hesitated in the doorway for a moment, but at length, entered.

“Babe,” Anthony greeted him with a smile. “I was just showing Bruce my new suit improvements. It’s pretty cool, eh?”

“Impressive,” Banner agreed. “And useful, especially the bit where you can have it everywhere with you.”

That caught Loki’s interest. “You can?”
“Yeah. Some more work with Shuri and their use of vibranium and nanoparticles made me see that even without vibranium, I could use nanoparticles in very interesting ways...the result is a portable armour.”

Loki frowned, “What happens to the mass? Surely if you had it with you at all times, it would be too heavy,” he pointed out, and saw Banner give him a surprised look.

Anthony shrugged. “Part of it is a lighter construction without loss of protection – the particles can do that – but yeah, part of it will have to be sewn into my clothes to divide it a little, the basic support structure let’s say. It’ll take some doing, but it can be done, easy.”

Loki knew it could. Still… “If you had a pocket dimension, it would be much easier.”

Anthony laughed. “Yeah, if wishes were horses...”

Loki shook his head. “It is not quite like that. I know I have offered to help your armour with magic before. At that point you disliked the idea, but you’ve lost some of the distrust of my magic since then. Would you be amenable?”

Stark blinked at him. “If I put it in the pocket dimension...Would I be able to retrieve it?”

“I can make it accessible for you, yes,” Loki confirmed.

“Then...yeah. Yeah, let’s go for it. This will make it so much less limited!” Stark was growing excited.

“Where do you want it?”

“I was planning to put it on my chest, so...yeah, I think that’d be best. I’m used to it there and all that.”

Loki nodded. “Lie down, then, this will take a moment.”

Anthony situated himself on a sofa in the corner, and Loki approached, Banner looking curiously over his shoulder.

Usually, creating pocket dimensions was considered relatively complicated magic, but this was Loki’s particular expertise. For someone used to travelling the dark paths between worlds, pocket dimensions were child’s play.

Still, constructing a permanent one that was sound enough to keep in all the fights Anthony got into was inevitably time consuming, so Loki settled down on the edge of the sofa and began to work.

“Can I talk to you or do you need to concentrate?” Anthony asked.

“You can talk to me,” Loki replied absently. “Most of this is grunt work. When the more difficult parts come, I’ll let you know.”

Anthony nodded. “So,” he said then, “can we agree we won’t tell Sikorski about this? Because he’d pop a blood vessel or two, I’m pretty sure this is his worst nightmare when it comes to you.”

Loki smirked a little. “I certainly will not volunteer any information. I thought it was your insistence we be honest with him.”

Anthony looked unconcerned. “Yeah,” he shrugged, or as much as eh could while lying down, “but decisions that only concern me are still mine alone, remember?”
“Your definition of things that only concern you is somewhat flexible,” Loki observed. If he truly had been sabotaging the man’s suit, it would have an enormous effect on everyone who fought by his side, and more indirectly perhaps even on the whole world, depending on the threat Stark fought.

“I know, I know,” Anthony said. “But looking at it this way, everything I do has the potential to influence a lot of people, so I’d end up never drinking or eating unhealthy again because it’s better for the world if Iron Man stays alive longer, right? I’d go insane. I have to draw the line somewhere, and what kinds of adjustments I make to my suits is one of them. I’ll make another armour without your magic on it in case this is some kind of trap or whatever, not that I really think it is, just to appease my conscience, but....”

“That will hardly help,” Loki pointed out mercilessly. He wanted Stark to confront this face on. “Ultimately, you will still have to choose which you use for Thanos.”

Stark did that little pseudo-shrug again. “Yeah, but hopefully we still have some time and I’ll be able to make that judgement better by then.”

Banner gave them both a look that was a little troubled, then sighed. “All this talk of betrayals is great, but could we get to what is actually happening here? Because, did I hear something about pocket dimensions?”

“Sorry, Bruce, I forgot that without being used to Maximoff and her magic, you still expect things to make sense scientifically,” Anthony chuckled.

“But it does,” Loki insisted. “I am almost certain that I saw the essential notions for understanding this already present in your science. You are aware of the compactified dimensions, are you not?”

Banner blinked, nodding, while Anthony pumped a fist in the air. “I knew it!” He cried. “I knew you were using them!”

“All right,” Banner said, suddenly impatient, “so do you know how many are there?”

“How many…?”

“Compactified dimensions, to make use of! We have several theories and while one is more prevalent, there is no proof for either...”

Loki smirked at him. “I am not certain I should influence your scientific development by giving you this answer.”

Anthony rolled his eyes and looked at Banner: “We have got to have him watch Star Trek, seriously,” he said.

Loki froze a little as this statement, and Anthony reached up and pressed his hand. “Sorry,” he mouthed.

Loki noticed another look Banner gave them, and though there was no pity or scorn in it, it still made him uncomfortable to the highest degree. “I need to concentrate now,” he said, not entirely truthfully but the other two thankfully accepted it without any comment. The rest of the process of creating the pocket dimension was spent in silence.

“It is done,” Loki said finally some minutes later and stepped away from the sofa.

“All right, so how do I use this thing?” Anthony asked impatiently, waving his hands in front of his
chest as if he expected to find something there.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Pick a hand gesture or a word,” he invited. “I will tie the opening to it.”

“Hmm...” Anthony considered. “Does the word have to be said by me? Because if I’m incapacitated, I’d like for FRIDAY to be be able to do it for me.”

“That will not be too much harder to allow for,” Loki assured him.

“A-okay, then...what about...” He grinned. “Prongs?”

Loki rolled his eyes at him. “You can just go ahead and use ‘I open at the close’.”

“Nah, that’s way too long,” Anthony replied, grinning wider. Banner just shook his head at them, as Loki, with a long suffering sigh, began to work the word in the spellwork.

“I’m not surprised at Tony making a reference,” Banner muttered, “but has he managed to introduce you to Harry Potter yet? I wouldn’t think that’d be such a priority for him...”

“No, I have read it before,” Loki explained.

Banner looked astonished. “You have?”

“Yes. I have visited Midgard from time to time in the past, and books, especially those with magic in them, were usually what I brought home with me. Asgard’s prose can be very uninspiring.”

“And poetry is better?” The man asked in curiosity.

“Actually, yes. The songs, I mean. They sometimes contain interesting and compelling stories, though most are of course entirely without value. The prose, though, is usually just...well, propaganda, really, when I think about...everything we’ve discussed,” he added, his eyes drifting to Anthony for a moment.

“Propaganda?” Banner questioned. “Of what? Does Asgard have an ideology?”

“Everywhere has an ideology, doctor,” Loki said archly.

“Fair enough, but I always thought the Asgardian one was the pretty straightforward story of royal honour and goodness. You usually don’t need that much complicated propaganda for that. Am I wrong?”

“About kings not needing propaganda? Yes,” Loki said with a smirk, thinking of Frey or his attempts at unifying Alfheim to some degree. “About Asgard’s ideology? Not entirely, but it is a little more complicated than that.”

“In what way?” Anthony asked, now clearly growing interested too.

Loki hesitated. “Odin needs magic to rule the way he does,” he said at length. “But male magic users are normally frowned upon very heavily on Asgard. As a result, most of the energy in the propaganda is actually invested in making people forget he uses magic. And then, of course, the rest is spent on propagating the idea of him as a peaceful ruler and making people forget he conquered several realms, while at the same time maintaining his image as a fierce warrior. It is masterfully done, truly.”

Anthony shook his head. “How does that even work?”
Banner smiled, a little bitterly. "Tony, America has the biggest military budget ever and yet people mostly believe we’re all about protecting truth, justice and the American way. Why do you need to ask?"

"Good point."

There was silence as they contemplated this, then Loki added the last few touches, checked that everything was in order, and nodded at Anthony. "It is finished," he said.

"Cool," Anthony replied, jumping up from the sofa to try the new possibilities out. "So," he said, bending over a worktable to reach some of his tools. "Thor and tonight. I kept thinking you’d go as Shazad, but then just before you came here I realized you said something about this some time ago...like if Thor knew shapeshifting was involved he would begin to suspect you...so, are you still worried about that?"

"Yes," Loki confirmed, "and in fact, I would like to ask you not to tell him that Shazad is shapeshifted. In fact, perhaps another geas would not go amiss."

"Come on, where’s the trust?" Anthony grumbled.

"It is your distraction I fear more than your betrayal," Loki answered. In this particular matter, at least, it was true. "Most of you are entirely capable of telling him by accident."

"...yeah, fair enough," the man admitted grudgingly. "You’ll have to ask Carol and Rhodey, though. With Vision, I guess you’ll have to trust him."

"If there is someone with whom I am not worried about carelessness, it is him," Loki replied. He was well aware that if the creature decided to betray him he would lose his safety on Midgard, but with someone who had so few emotional states, there was less fear of it. Until Loki did something that would make betraying him the reasonable course of action, he should be safe.

"Yeah, I wouldn’t be either," Anthony agreed. "All right with me. Bruce, you cool with it?"

Banner shrugged. "One more spell or less, does it matter?"

Loki stared at him for a moment, then did the spell immediately, in case the doctor changed his mind later.

"Okay, this thing seems to be working," Anthony stated from his worktable, putting things in and out of his pocket dimension. "It’s awesome, too. I’m gonna have so much fun with this!" He took a deep breath, about to say something, but seemed to notice the time and sighed. "But I guess it’s time to go talk to Rhodey and Carol. People will start showing up for the party soon enough."

With another sigh, Anthony packed up his work, sneaked a screwdriver into his pocket dimension with a grin for some reason, and they headed up to the common area. James and Danvers were already there, sprawled on one of the sofas.

He accepted the geas easily enough, but she looked a little uncomfortable when asked. "I mean, okay, but, um- would you mind if Vision did it instead? I’m sorry, it’s just-"

"But of course," Loki interrupted her. He was surprised Banner hadn’t insisted on the same, in fact, and in the end the curiosity was too much for him and, once the work on Danvers and James was over, he had to ask.

Banner gave his small, bitter smile. "If you wanted, you could have done it without me being
aware,” he replied. “I saw no point in protesting.”

Loki frowned. He could have, yes, but it did not mean he would have. Why did he bother with asking, anyway, if none of these people even took it seriously?

Before he could say something, though, Banner continued: “If you meant to only do what you said you would, I didn’t mind it was going to be you. If you meant to do something else, you could do it without my consent just as easily. I was confident enough you weren’t about to try and wake the other guy, which is my usual fear with mind tampering, so...”

Loki nodded, but he was still surprised. The doctor kept astonishing him. Perhaps he should have spent more time studying him instead of the green beast during his invasion.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of Pepper Potts. He hadn’t seen Anthony with her in what equaled months of Midgardian time, so he watched in curiosity, and saw that much of the strain was gone as Anthony went to embrace her.

“Pep,” he said. “I think you mostly know everyone? Only this is Shazad, of course, my girlfriend.”

Loki managed not to flinch at the title, and shook Ms. Potts’ hand with a bland smile he judged appropriate for meeting a long-term ex-girlfriend.

She returned it with a much more honest one, or at least so it seemed to Loki. “Nice to meet you,” she said. “I’ve had Tony throwing hints about your existence for weeks now, but he only gave me a name a few days ago.”

“I’m afraid that is my fault,” Loki said with a bashful smile. “I’m not much for notoriety.”

Potts chuckled. “Well, good luck with dating Tony then. It’ll be a challenge.”

“We’ve managed so far,” Loki said, making his tone just a shade colder. It was amusing to play ta jealousy when he felt none, he realized.

“Very true.” Potts looked around. “Bruce! I haven’t seen you properly since you came back. Come on, I need to hear about your journeys.” With that, she dragged the man away, just in time for Thor’s and Jane Foster’s arrival.

“So you’re Shazad,” Foster said in greeting, and Loki had to wonder if Anthony talked to everyone about him. “I’ve heard really impressive things about you – Tony said you actually understood Interstellar?”

Loki chuckled. “I did,” he said, “at least until the love conquers all message came in at the end.”

Foster laughed in turn. “Something to work on, then?” She said with a wink towards Tony and made space for Thor to ‘introduce’ himself.

“Lady Shazad,” he said in his usual pompous manner. “It is a pleasure to meet you. Are you a scholar, then, like my Lady Jane?”

Loki reflected with bitterness how there was no scorn for it in Thor’s voice when he thought Loki was a woman. “Yes,” he replied, and unwilling to go into details because it would lead Thor too close to Loki’s real identity, added: “And what do you do?”

Thor laughed his booming laugh. “I am a warrior, and I protect Midgard, much like your Tony.”
Loki raised his eyebrows. “Oh? I thought he was a scientist, too.”

Anthony tightened his hand around Loki’s waist a little. “I am both,” he said firmly. “Now Jane, there’s some bits I’ve been meaning to ask about your theory of how the Einstein-Rosen bridge works in relation to what it does to any area where it lands…”

Loki stayed silent and waited. Sure enough, after only a few minutes of this conversation, Thor wandered away, and then he could finally join in the conversation with his own observations on travel between worlds.

The more he said, the more impressed Foster was clearly growing with him. Loki in turn was more and more irritated that he could not speak to her as his actual self and reveal all of the context for the things he was saying. If she had been just Tony’s friend, he would have done so in a heartbeat. How Thor managed to charm this woman, he had no idea, but it did not surprise him at all that even by his relationship, he was spoiling Loki’s enjoyment of company.

Peter Parker arrived next. He was clearly not very interested in Loki at first, beyond a respectful greeting he seemed to merit as Anthony’s partner, but since he joined the scientific conversation, he was soon looking at him with more and more interest too. Loki had to admit he was rather bright for a child, and would probably be a mind to be reckoned with once he was an adult.

The groups changed and shifted with a few more people coming, like Hope Van Dyne and Darcy Lewis, an assistant to Foster who seemed to get on excellently with Parker. The a woman came in who was greeted enthusiastically by Danvers and then introduced as: “So this is my best friend Jessica Drew...also known as Spider Woman.”

There was a moment on silence, then an enraged “what?” from Parker. Loki couldn’t help but chuckle at that with the others.

“Yeah, sorry kid,” Drew said with a grin. “I was here first.”

“So...you have spider powers too?” He still sounded a little irritated, but also intrigued now.

“Yes, though a little different from yours. Same origin though, radioactive spiders. They’re a pain.”

Parker laughed at that, and soon enough they were standing in the corner discussing the details of their powers.

“So,” Anthony said, turning to Danvers, “this is the potential addition to the team you’ve been talking about?”

“One of them, yeah. I thought this would be a good opportunity to do a meet and greet and see if we were willing to work with each other.”

“And the other addition?”

Danvers grimaced. “Yeah, that’s gonna be more complicated. She’s...only a little older than Peter.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Anthony said immediately.

“I know, I know, but...she wants to help, and when Thanos comes it’ll be a threat to us all.”

“I don’t care. It was a mistake dragging Peter in.”
“You can’t take away her choice in this-”

“Surely there would be no harm in group training with her?” Loki interjected. “Just in case she is required to join the fight for some reason, she will at least be well integrated. You know it will lower the risk for her.”

Anthony frowned at him. “It’s dangerous-”

“Like Peter, she already uses he powers to fight,” Danvers spoke again. “This could help her with that, and of course we won’t call her in unless it’s literally an end of the world kind of scenario.”

Anthony sighed. “All right, all right. I’ll think about it, that’s the most I can give you now.”

Danvers nodded, and went to speak with her friend. “Thanks, Tony,” James muttered. “Carol...well, she knows Kamala would be crushed if she couldn’t help in any way, and that in turn would crush Carol.”

Anthony only sighed again, but fortunately, Foster and Banner soon distracted him with more science talk, and no other source of conflict appeared for the rest of the party.

They retired later, after everyone left, and Loki hesitated by the side of Anthony’s bed. Last night he had been too thrown off balance to think clearly, but now he had doubts about whether he should stay in the same bed. Before he could voice them, however, Anthony stepped behind him and embraced him, kissing his neck.

Loki got caught up in the embrace a little, and it was only when he realized Anthony was undressing him that he froze. He could not- he could not still mean to- he understood Anthony did not have the same fear and disdain of the Jotun he did, he understood the arguments of Asgard being even worse, but this- Anthony was forgetting, or repressing, what was truly under Loki’s skin, and Loki would not allow it. He had lied enough in this.

Abruptly, he changed into his Frost Giant form.

Anthony didn’t even slowed down, only humming in his throat.

Horrified and astonished, Loki stepped away from him and turned around. “No,” he said. “Just no.”

Anthony seemed confused. “Loki? What’s-?”

“Not in that body!”

“But...it was you who changed-”

“Yes, to remind you who exactly it was you wanted to take to bed! Think with something that’s not your dick for once, Stark!”

Anthony frowned at him. “First, please don’t call me Stark in bed. Second, I don’t give a flying fuck what skin you’re wearing. If you don’t like it, fine, change back. If you don’t want to have sex, fine, say so. But don’t pull this crap, because I don’t care about you being born a frost giant, all right? I don’t give a damn.”

“I wasn’t just born a frost giant, I still am one!” Loki shouted.

“If you want,” Anthony said with a shrug, playing calm.

“I do not want, Stark, I very much do not want, but that doesn’t change reality,” Loki replied, his
Anthony looked at him for a moment. “Look,” he said, “you were raised Aesir and you are used to your Aesir form. If you want to see yourself as Aesir, what’s stopping you?”

Loki scoffed. “Wasn’t it you who said ‘if wishes were horses’ today?”

Anthony shook his head vehemently. “This isn’t about wishes. Your whole personality was forged in Asgard. You are Asgardian if you want to be, though you might not have been born there.”

Loki mulled about that for a moment, then sighed. “It’s not like that solves anything, even if I agreed with you. I have not been too fond of Asgard lately either, even before your enlightening speech yesterday. That option is not much better.”

Anthony grimaced at that. “All right, I understand how that can be a tough choice. But you don’t have to make it right now. Just take on the form you feel most comfortable in, because you feel good in it, not because your identification with Asgard or whatever. And come to bed.”

Loki slowly changed back, though he was still a little hesitant as he climbed under the covers. It was not so much that he was agreeing with Anthony as that there was nothing else to do. He knew for certain he did not wish to spend any longer in the Jotun form than he needed to. No matter if his Aesir one was a lie, it was still preferable to the truth, and for long stretches of time he could even forget.

Anthony climbed in after him. “Now...may I touch you?” He asked.

“If you are certain you want to,” Loki replied.

He barely finished the sentence before Anthony was all over him.

“Of course I want to,” he said. “I always want to.”

The sex they had after that was the slowest they ever had. Anthony was taking time with every inch of his body, kissing and caressing it in his slow progress down to his feet and then up again to where Loki’s impatience was becoming more and more obvious.

The man downright worshipped him, there was no other word for it. And Loki...let him.

When he returned to Asgard in the morning, it was at his most unwilling and reluctant yet.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Tony. It will take much longer than one pep talk from you for Loki to be all right with this...

I put a note about this to the previous chapter, but for those of you who haven’t seen it, the "welcome Back to Earth Bruce" convo is now written in part 3 of this series. Probably at some point tomorrow, I will also add the conversation Tony has with him while Loki is with Vision in this chapter. It’ll go as chapter 2 of "Science Bros Redux". EDIT: Already posted, though it was a long way from "tomorrow".
Chapter Summary

Vision makes a request of Loki, Loki makes a request of Tony and Tony makes a request of Loki. Then Tony makes a request of the Accords Council. Lots of requesting all around.

Chapter Notes

Mild Infinity War spoilers I guess. Nothing that can’t be deduced from the trailer, really, and I hope that by now the majority of you has already seen it, but if you haven’t and in case you’re keeping yourself completely unspoiled you might wish to skip from the moment Vision appears to the first cut. Do a Ctrl+F for “Shuri”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki felt uncomfortable in Odin’s skin the entire following day – or even more uncomfortable than usual.

Everything in Asgard now reminded him of its past and of the unfavourable comparison to Jotunheim Anthony had made. Luckily he had no sensitive business planned for the day, so he cancelled what he could and kept mostly to Odin’s rooms, where he dug out the old history books he had read ages ago. But now, he looked at them with doubt. Could he actually trust what was written in them? If he could, he would travel to Alfheim to search there, but it would be very suspicious for Odin to search for something like that, and he dared not try and travel in a different disguise, not to the realm that had the most creative mages. The chance of discovery was too high.

So instead he searched through what could be found in Asgard, looking for details, small hints that he might have missed before. There was very little, and he didn’t know if he could trust his intuition about the significant parts or whether his conversation with Anthony had made him paranoid.

He had come back too soon, that much was clear. He had been overwhelmed on Midgard too, and wanted to escape to think, but Asgard was hardly a safe harbour to do that at this point, and he should have stayed longer to better prepare himself.

His mind drifted to just before he had left. It was Christmas Day, and so Anthony insisted on exchanging gifts. For his part, he had given Loki beautiful leather-bound editions of all the Midgard prose he had ever mentioned as liking – as well as a StarkPad with thousands of books on it. “You tell me which is better,” he had said with a grin.

Anthony had originally believed the pocket dimension was his gift, and was surprised – pleasantly so – when Loki pulled out a working Asgardian equivalent of a Midgardian computer for him to study and take apart. The man had disappeared to the workshop almost immediately.

Well, hopefully the three weeks or so he had to study it would have been enough to satisfy his curiosity at least to some degree. Though perhaps him being distracted would be better? Loki was
both impatient to go to Midgard – to escape the questions that Asgard raised in him now – and
dreading it a little. Anthony had had three weeks to think about what he now knew of Loki. His
initial reaction might have well changed, and had Loki not been so uncomfortable where he was, he
would have perhaps considered postponing the journey out of fear of what he would find on the
other side.

As it was, though, he stepped to Midgard as soon as he could be reasonably certain no one would
come calling for Odin.

The common space was empty, but as soon as Loki removed his invisibility, FRIDAY said: “Boss
is in the workshop, but I have to warn you, Doc Foster is with him.”

Loki only nodded and considered whether to shapeshift or retreat until she left when FRIDAY
added: “Jessica Drew is here and has been put under the geas by Vision, so you can go and
introduce yourself. And Vision asked me to let you know he wanted to talk to you when you come.
Should I call him here?”

Well, that was an elegant solution. “No,” Loki replied. “Ask him whether I can come see him in his
rooms.”

There was a short pause. “He says you’re welcome to.”

“Thank you,” Loki answered, and first let himself be directed to Drew’s room.

Apparently Danvers had prepared her friend somewhat, because when she saw Loki, she only
blinked. “Wow,” she said. “Carol told me it would he alarming, but I still didn’t expect this.
So...you’re a good guy now?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Loki replied with a smirk.

She huffed. “That’s what I thought.”

Loki merely nodded at her and headed in the direction he knew Vision lived.

Vision was waiting in the doorway. His rooms were different from any other he had ever visited,
and made it very clear they did not belong to a human, or anything similar. For one, there was no
bed, and it was clear the armchairs that were present did not see much use.

Vision now gestured to one of them. “Please,” he said, “do sit down.”

Loki did so. “What do you need?”

The creature looked almost embarrassed. “I do, indeed, need something – and I am sorry, I am
already drawing on your resources much by using your magical expertise-”

Loki waved that aside. “It will be to my benefit as well if you use it against Thanos,” he said. “No
need for apologies. But I assume this is something different.”

“Yes.” Vision actually sounded nervous know, which, as far as Loki knew, was a first, too. “I was
wondering if...perhaps...you could speak to Tony about...about Wanda.”

Loki hadn’t expected that. “What about her?” He asked.

“Wanda is...” Vision seemed to hesitate about phrasing for a moment. “She is willing to sign the
Accords and come back, if she gets amnesty and if she is allowed to live here in the Coumpound.”
“And you want me to sell this to Anthony,” Loki realized immediately.

Vision inclined his head. “Yes. I know I would not be able to.”

Loki raised his eyebrow. “And you think I will?”

“He...likes you better, and—”

That amused Loki. “You think he’ll do what I ask for because we’re sleeping together?”

“No,” Vision said simply, calm now that he had voiced his request. “If something, it would be because you are in a relationship together, but chiefly it is because he trusts your judgement and known you are not personally interested in this.”

“You think he doesn’t trust yours?”

Again, that hesitation over phrasing. “Tony and I have a...complicated relationship, given the traces of Jarvis that are in me.”

Loki considered the problem. “Why did Wanda change her mind?” He asked.

Vision took even longer to formulate his answer this time. “There were...multiple reasons,” he said at length. “One of them is that her life as it is now is not...she spends time chiefly with Captain Rogers and Sam Wilson, who are good friends and while she likes them well enough, there is little space for her there, and she frequently feels like a third wheel. When Natasha is with them, it is easier, I understand, since they have more in common, but Natasha is not...warm, exactly. It is a lonely kind of life for her who was used to constant company of someone as near to her as her twin brother.”

Loki nodded in understanding. “And the other reasons?”

Vision hesitated longer this time. “She and I have...we have been in contact since she became a fugitive.”

“Yes, I gathered as much,” Loki commented drily.

“We are...attempting a relationship, I suppose.”

That surprised Loki. He had not thought Vision had these kinds of desires. “I take it Anthony does not know?”

“No, and I would ask you do not tell him unless you believe it would help to convince him to bring Wanda in.”

Loki nodded. Vision had kept his secrets after all – at least he assumed so. A good time to ask, he supposed. “I take it Ms Maximoff doesn’t know about me?”

Another hesitation, which did not bode well. “Not precisely,” Vision said then. “She does not know your identity – but she does know that there is a magic user we are allied with now and who helps me with my powers. It is one of the additional reasons she began to consider joining us. As I have told you before, while she is capable of much with her powers, she does not understand them well. She wishes she could.”

“So as part of the agreement, I would be expected to teach her?” Loki clarified.

“Only if you wished to,” Vision hurried to reassure him.
“So. Loneliness, her attachment to you, desire to learn more about magic,” Loki summarized. “These are all reasons worth considering. But what of her dislike of Anthony? Does that not influence her?”

“It...did, originally, when it was only Tony and I living here. She felt she would be too exposed to him. But now there are more people, so she believes she could handle it, and he could as well.”

“And her disagreement with the Accords?” Loki probed.

“We have...discussed it, at length. She understand more now, I believe, why it is necessary, and while she still does not like it, she tends to believe it is the best of many bad solutions.”

Loki gave him a searching look, trying to gauge the truth of his words. “Very well,” he said then. “Though you should know I am not entirely happy with you telling her about the presence of a magic user. If she tells Rogers and Romanoff...all sorts of people could find out.”

“I would have put her under a geas,” Vision replied, “but with her powers, it would have been pointless. But I did get her solemn word she would tell no one. I understand you do not trust her, but I do.”

Loki only inclined his head. “I will try,” he said. “But I cannot guarantee anything, and you should know I will merely present this to Anthony to the best of my ability and belief for what is the best solution. I will not attempt to manipulate his the decision you desire in any way.”

Vision looked mildly horrified. “I would never ask you to.”

Loki wondered if that was true. When people came to him to persuade someone, that was what they usually had in mind, though they would vehemently protest otherwise. But Vision was not exactly ‘people’, was he? So it was entirely possible he was being honest. Loki was not sure he was capable of dishonesty, though clearly he was more than capable of leaving crucial things out, if Anthony did not know about his relationship with Maximoff. It was all worth considering.

“Is that all?” He asked.

“It is,” Vision confirmed, “unless you have time for overseeing my practice now.”

Loki turned his gaze to one of the cameras in the room. “FRIDAY,” he asked, “is Dr. Foster gone now?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m afraid they’re having a science videocall with Wakanda. It might be a while.”

Loki grinned. He had planned to stay with Vision if she was still present, but this was something different entirely. “Then I believe,” he said, “it is time Shazad joined them.”

He had to admit, Princess Shuri surprised him.

Even after Stark sung her praises, the knowledge of her youth was still making Loki rather sceptical of her abilities.

But then he actually talked to her, and suddenly he saw himself.

It was very strange in a way, because even from the short conversation he was present for he knew
they were completely different in character, and that she would have more in common with Thor in her nature, bright, warm-hearted, open and smiling.

And yet she was the younger child in a royal family, and the one that focused on academics while her elder sibling was praised for his fighting abilities. Of course, Wakanda was not Asgard, so he was praised for much more as well and she was not made to undergo strenuous martial training anyway, but the parallels were still there to grasp, and so Loki did not speak much when he was present, only listened and observed, even as he did his best to ignore the long looks Anthony was giving him and any worry about what they could mean.

Once they were done and Jane Foster left, Loki turned back into himself and remarked: “They are...very far with their science.”

“Does it approach what you would call magic?” Banner wondered. “Thor always says there is not much difference between the two in Asgard.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Thor, as always, does not know what he’s speaking of. The difference is clear enough, it is simply not where humans would expect it. So no, what they do in Wakanda is not close to our magic – it happens on too large a scale, or too small one.”

Banner seemed confused, and so Stark explained, his gaze still sliding to Loki every other moment in a way that did not seem connected to the subject matter. When he finished the speech, the doctor was suitably impressed.

“So what Wakanda does is completely different?” He asked then.

“It is different from magic,” Loki clarified. “But it is, in fact, very similar to our science. They are not far from Asgard in that regard, if they are behind at all – it is a little difficult to compare the advances in healing, for example, when human bodies are so much more fragile than Aesir ones. But yes, I believe they are at least very nearly at the same level.”

“Ha! Take that, space Vikings,” Stark exclaimed triumphantly, pumping his fist in the air. Then he grinned. “So...that means it’s up to me to invent the quantum scale manipulation, right?”

Loki gave him a dubious look. “You wish to learn magic?”

Stark’s lip curled. “It just sounds so unscientific when you put it like that...but there mus be a way to do it with machines, right?”

Loki only sighed. “If you expect me to start explaining the principles of magic right now-”

Stark seemed to consider the proposition. “Yeah, maybe not now. But later. For now let’s go. Bye Bruce.” And without further explanation, Stark started to drag him out of the workshop.

Loki’s worry grew, though at least he told himself that this behaviour was far too informal to spell any kind of true disaster.

They headed directly to the man’s bedroom, which could still mean many things, and Loki only felt relief when he was kissed insistently the moment the door shut behind them. “I wanna take you out again,” Stark muttered against his lips. “But...later.”

Loki was fine with later.

Stark was impatient and forceful, and like once before, Loki ended up against the wall. This time, though, there was less aggression, and the only source of frustration was his three weeks’ absence.
He did his best to make up for it.

Afterwards, when they were getting dressed again and Stark was in a good mood, Loki repeated Vision’s proposal.

He fully expected it to be a hard sell. He wasn’t disappointed.

As he continued talking, Anthony was frowning more and more. “You know I can’t stand her,” he said at length.

Loki sighed. “Yes, I do understand your personal bad experience,” he said. “And please understand that I am not trying to pressure you into anything. I am merely presenting the situation as it stands, the way Vision asked me to. Try to look at it from some distance.” Loki did his best not to feel like a complete hypocrite, since that was notoriously something he had trouble with. Still, it did not change how the situation stood. “What she did is nowhere near Rogers, and to my mind not even near Barton or Romanoff.”

Anthony considered that. “I don’t know – is it worse to break yourself out of domestic confinement, or break someone else out? But I agree about Rogers and Romanoff, at least.”

Loki nodded. “Vision is right in one thing,” he continued. “Rogers was her role model. I know you hate the youth excuse, but she was young, much younger than you. Too young to grow out of her hero worship. I did such things out of my hero worship for Odin that...well. The point is, I understand her situation to a degree, and so I also understand that while it does not excuse her entirely, it...explains her actions quite a lot. And while on a personal level there is a difference, on a general one you cannot find me acceptable in spite of my mistakes and reject her entirely.”

“But this is personal,” Anthony pointed out. “I’m being asked to live with her.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, “that is why I thought of suggesting a compromise. I know she set living here as her condition, but I do not believe she would protest much if she was settled elsewhere – perhaps in New York under Thor’s supervision – and Vision was allowed to move there with her.”

Anthony sighed. “So you’d ask me to kick Vision out.”

“He wishes to be with her,” Loki reminded him. He had left out some details of the story here, and only told Anthony that she had contacted Vision and let him know she wished to come in, and that Vision cared enough for her to make this important to him. “Do you have a better solution?”

“No,” Anthony admitted. “I need to think about this. And first of all, I need to ask the others – mainly Bruce. Without his agreement, she isn’t setting foot anywhere near here.” He frowned. “Um- I don’t wanna leave you alone, but it’s just gonna hang over my head...”

Loki nodded in understanding. “Go and speak to him,” he said. “I will be in the communal space. I do have quite a number of books to read, after all,” he added, waving his Stark Pad, and Anthony grinned at him before he left again.

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Loki sat and read for a while, and then discussed what he was reading – a fascinating mix of science, magic and literature that reminded him strongly of Interstellar – with James before the man was called away by Anthony, presumably to be consulted as well, and Loki could return to his book.

Anthony came back a few hours later.
“All right,” he said. “I talked to everyone who has a say in this. Now I need to give it some time to consider and just let it roll around in my head, so...how about that date?”

Loki, still too surprised that after everything, Anthony would still be interested, could only agree. He did not wish to risk his good fortune. “I suppose one more date will do no harm,” he said.

“Awesome. I thought the Met, but it’s a bit too late in the day for that now, so...what about the other Met? You like classical music, right? Or do I just think that because you stole that guy’s eyeball in Stuttgart at a concert?”

Loki snorted. “That was mostly accidental, yes, but nevertheless I do like it. Particularly opera.”

Anthony grinned. “I knew it. So much drama and so many divas, how could you not? Your performance during the invasion was distinctly opera-inspired, come to think of it. FRIDAY, what’s on tonight?”

“Roméo et Juliette, Boss.”

“Great, that sounds dramatic enough. Shall we, then? Can’t wait to see you in a suit once more.”

In response, Loki waved his hand and he was wearing a bespoke tuxedo. Anthony looked him over with distinct appreciation, then frowned. “You know you can’t go like that,” he said in frustration.

Loki did, indeed, know. He had merely wished to provide the mental image Anthony had demanded. With another spell, he became Shazad dressed in an evening gown.

Anthony nodded, and this time his glance was more cursory. Loki wondered about that. “It’ll take me just a little while longer,” the man said, “but I promise to be ready in no time.”

Loki inclined his head, and occupied himself with watching Anthony strip, which was always a pleasant thing to do.

“I know you already got dressed, but...you sure you don’t want to join me in the shower?” Anthony asked once he was naked.

“FRIDAY, how long until the performance starts?” Loki asked by way of a response.

“An hour,” came the prompt answer.

Loki simply waved his hand again, and he was naked as well, back to looking like himself. “If I teleport us, we should make it just fine – unless we dawdle too long,” he cautioned.

Anthony smirked. “No worries about that – I plan to introduce you to the wonder that are shower blowjobs. Trust me, you’ll come in no time at all.”

Loki rolled his eyes at the man, but not half an hour later, he was forced to admit the truth of his words. Shower oral sex was wondrous, and it was very fast.

Afterwards, Loki dried them with one spell and changed and dressed himself in another, preferring to watch Anthony pick and put on his clothes on his own. It only took a few minutes for the man to be standing ready in front of him. “Ready?”

Instead of an answer, Loki teleported them to a shadowy alcove near the Opera house.

Anthony blinked. “Come here often, do you?” He asked then, amused.
“I’ve been quite a few times,” Loki admitted. “I try to make it to interesting premieres when I can – which used to be perhaps once in an Earth year or two.”

Anthony shrugged. “Probably as often as they have interesting premieres here, so...”

Loki gave him an amused look. “You are not fond of this place?”

“Well, classical is not really my style, if you know what I mean.”

Loki frowned. “Then why did you plan a date you will not enjoy?”

Anthony shook his head. “I don’t hate it, it’s just not something I’d listen to at home. From time to time, it’s fun, and I’m pretty sure you’d hate any of the concerts I like, so...”

Loki still did not quite understand, but they were entering the building, so he stopped protesting.

Stark met a few business associates in the foyer, so Loki got to play the empty-headed girlfriend until they were safely in their box. Once there, and once he ensured their conversation would stay private, Anthony turned to him with his eyebrows arched. “It’s fun to watch you play a bimbo,” he said, “and with those guys it was fine, but everyone who knows me a little would immediately know something was off. I only ever took women like that to bed, I wouldn’t go to the opera with them. Plus, I haven’t done this whole one-night stand thing for years.”

Loki was astonished. “You haven’t?”

“No. Once I got the arc reactor...well, it was just too personal to show every random person I could pick up, you know? Plus I dated Pepper for much of that time.”

“Of that, I was aware, but I believed that you picked the habit up again after the break up,” Loki explained.

“Nah. Honestly I was so fucked up after Ultron I think I couldn’t even get it up half of the time. Definitely in no state to let strangers into my bed, what with the constant nightmares and stuff.”

Loki gave him a surprised look. “I have never noticed you having nightmares. Was it mere luck?”

“No, they’re much rarer now. And I’ve never had one with you in my bed.” Anthony grinned at him. “You are clearly a good influence.”

Loki was spared replying by the arrival of the conductor.

The performance was decent enough. Especially the singers performing the two titular parts did an exceptional job, with a degree of convincing acting that Loki found unusual in this Midgardian genre. In fact, he himself couldn’t imagine pulling it off. For one, he could not sing like that, of course, but even beside that, seeming convincing when producing such over-dramatic lines so frequently repeated would be too much of a task for him.

During intermissions, they drank overpriced champagne and people-spotted – or rather Anthony did, and pointed out the remarkable characters to him. When the performance was over, the man gave him a sarcastic smile. “We should have done that too.”

Loki blinked in confusion. “Done what?”

“This whole Romeo and Juliet schtick. We were enemies, weren’t we? Such a perfect ready made story, and we blew it.”
Loki gave him an incredulous look. “Once more, I believe you are projecting too much significance onto our relationship.”

Anthony waved his hand. “Eh, they were teenagers who met like twice. Whatever you think about us, compared to them, we are a love story.”

Loki had to concede he had a point.

They headed to the same shadowy alcove and Loki teleported them home, where they had time for one more, slow and languid, bout of sex before they fell asleep.

“I’ll agree,” Anthony said to Loki first thing in the morning – well, first thing after morning sex, as he was exiting the bathroom and towelling his hair. “I’ll even let Maximoff live here on a probationary basis – on one condition.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I expected you to take longer to decide.”

“Like I said, I’d just obsess and stress over it. Better not. I gave it a night, I thought about it in the shower, which is always the best place to think, and...yeah. Like it or not, she’s an important asset.”

Loki gave him a small frown. “That isn’t the argument I used.”

“No, but it’s the real reason behind it, isn’t it? If she wasn’t important for the war with Thanos, you wouldn’t give a damn.”

Loki’s frown deepened. “I still do not ‘give a damn’, as you say – not about Maximoff. All of them are assets, and you do not see me asking whether you’d consider taking them back. And I would have related this to you even had she had hardly any powers.”

It was Anthony’s turn to frown. “Why?”

“Because Vision asked it of me,” Loki answered simply.

“What, and you listened to him out of the goodness of your heart?” Anthony asked sarcastically.

Loki gave him a bitter smile. “Of course,” he said. “Cannot expect such a thing from monsters.”

Stark blinked, seeming thrown out of his own ironic mood by surprise. “What? No! This has nothing to do with you being Jotun by birth, Loki, and fucking everything to do with you being you!”

“Oh, but that has everything to do with me being Jotun,” Loki explained calmly. It was nothin but the truth, after all. “I’m intrinsically untrustworthy – and why do you think that is?”

Stark ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. “I didn’t- Shit. That’s not what I meant, Loki, okay? It’s just that...look, this whole thing, why you’re here, it has added benefits, sure, bu the main reason is that it’s useful against Thanos. You wouldn’t fucking sleep with me if it weren’t for that reasoning, so forgive me if I’m a little sceptical of your altruism.”

It was Loki’s turn to be surprised. “You believe that, and yet you still ask me out for dates?”

“Because I think there might be potential for more, but you yourself told me you thought this was basically just convenience. What am I supposed to think?”
Loki exhaled, and sat down on the bed. “It was the initial reason, yes,” he said. “And it is also true that if being here wasn’t related to Thanos at all, I wouldn’t allow myself such distraction. But you must have noticed that most of the time I spend here is not related to preparations for Thanos in any way.”

“So...what? I’m getting some seriously mixed signals here.”

Loki was sorely tempted to roll his eyes. “I told you I enjoyed time spent in your company already.”

“Yeah, sure. I enjoy a lot of things. I wouldn’t travel across the realms for most of them, I think.”

Loki could have pointed out that he regularly travelled across the realms for theatre or new books, but it wouldn’t have been particularly productive at that point. “But for some, you would,” he said instead.

Anthony let out a long breath. “Yeah,” he said, sitting down next to Loki.

They stayed there for a moment in silence.

“You said there was a condition,” Loki said at length. “What is it?”

Anthony shook his head. “Now I feel like an asshole. You’re right, if Vision really wants this, it should be enough.”

“No, Anthony,” Loki insisted. “It was enough for me, because I have no unpleasant associations with Maximoff. You do. It is perfectly fine to ask for something in return for being willing to put up with it. Tell me.”

A small smirk appeared on Anthony’s face. “Well, remember that you asked for it,” he said, and then gave Loki a steady look. “My condition is that you tell Thor you’re alive.”

Loki stared.

“Not that you’re playing Odin, obviously,” Anthony continued quickly. “But just...that you’re not dead. Because we might need you in the fight against Thanos – I assume unless Asgard is invaded, Odin wouldn’t go into the field?”

“No,” Loki confirmed, still in shock.

“Then we will need you as yourself,” Anthony pointed out, “and we can’t afford Thor going through the emotional upheaval of finding out you’re alive mid battle.”

Loki’s mind finally came back to itself, and he gave Anthony a sharp look. “That is not the only reason you wish me to tell him.”

“No,” Anthony admitted, “but it is the one I think you will consider.”

“What are the others, then?” Loki had some idea, but he wished to hear them.

“Well, for one I feel a little sorry for the guy. I get that he has faults aplenty, but it’s also clear he’s still torn up about your death. And for another...I thought about what you said, that I was one of the very few people who knew you were still alive. Obviously some of the Avengers know now, but still. I think Thor knowing would...help. I know you’re not best buddies nowadays, but he was raised as your brother, and that must still be quite an identity cornerstone.”
Anthony was right, unfortunately. And if he told Thor the truth, there would be the additional benefit of being able to talk openly with Foster. Still, there were numerous drawbacks. Too numerous to count. “You said to tell him I am alive,” Loki pointed out. “That is quite different from speaking with him again, let alone telling him I am Shazad. Which is it you want?”

Anthony sighed. “I’d prefer the second, but I’ll settle for the first.”

And would keep hoping the second would come in time, Loki did not doubt. “And you’d appreciate it even more if we put our differences aside, is that is?”

Stark gave him an irritated look. “Do I hear you telling me to get over Rogers? No. So don’t put words in my mouth. I still don’t know what exactly happened between you two, but until proven otherwise, I’ll believe there was some problem on Thor’s side too that led to your...hm...falling out. I’m hardly in a position to tell you to forget about it. But if you are in danger of forgetting who you are, then who better to help than someone who has known you your whole life?”

“Oh yes, Thor known every little thing about me.”

Stark looked about ready to tear his hair out. “Again, that’s not what I said. But since you were a child, your identity formed in relation to him to a degree, did it not?”

“...yes,” Loki agreed reluctantly.

“Then him knowing and you speaking with him, even if it’s only to argue and threaten, should help.”

It would. Loki knew that perfectly well. He didn’t reply.

No, telling Thor Shazad was Loki was out of the question. But letting him know he was alive...beyond the one conversation as Odin, which was inevitable, there would be no need to talk to him. Stark was right, it could be strategically important once Thanos came. And from the books he read about anchorage, he suspected than even the mere fact that Thor knew of his continued existence would help, though in a very small way. And now that he was considering it, he felt the pull, the need to let him know. He suspected he would feel the need to reveal himself, too – he had felt that a few times already, too, chiefly to Fandral – but that, he knew he could resist. This, perhaps he didn’t have to.

“It is Vision that wishes for Maximoff’s return, not me,” he muttered at length. “Why am I supposed to pay the price?”

Anthony grinned at him. “Because you have something I want, and he doesn’t.”

“Oh?” Loki asked archly. “Is that the only thing I have that you want?”

“If you think I’ll agree to trade this for awesome sex, you’re wrong. I know too well I can get that anyway.”

“In fact, I expected you to bargain for those dates you are so insistent on.”

Anthony grew serious. “I would never bargain for that,” he said. “I want you to go with me because you want to, not because I tricked and forced you.” He frowned. “I hope you don’t feel that way.”

Loki gave him an exasperated look. “How many times must I tell you I won’t be forced into anything, not any more? As I said, I enjoy spending time with you. Come, let us tell Vision the
good news.”

“You agree, then?”

“I do. As much as I detest it, your argument is true. But I will do it on my terms, in my way and within my own time-frame.”

Anthony frowned at the last bit. “That sounds like you could wait until I am long dead.”

Loki grimaced. He disliked being limited by deadlines in any way, but he understood Anthony’s point. “Within an Asgardian month, then,” he amended.

“Fine,” Anthony agreed, though clearly he wished it would have been sooner. Well, Loki did plan to do it sooner. He just wanted to give himself enough of a leeway.

“Shall we, then?” He asked, and they headed to Vision’s room.

He was grateful – even moved – and Anthony had to stop the outpour of thanks.

“Just let her know,” he muttered.

“I will, but...she’ll need the assurance from the Council before she comes.”

“Oh, right.” Anthony scrunched up his nose. “Well, Thanos should make that easier at least – they’ll be happy with any addition to the team. Plus she’s the most powerful of the rogues, so they’ll be thrilled to see her come in. I don’t think this’ll be too hard.”

Vision inclined his head. “Please, let me know when it is done.”

Anthony nodded. “Time to call Sikorski then,” he muttered.

He had been right – it took almost no time at all to convince the man, though the Council, being more numerous, would naturally take longer.

“Good job, Mr. Stark,” the politician told him at the end of that conversation. “Bringing the rogues in is the best outcome we can hope for.”

Anthony gave him a smile that looked more like a grimace and ended the video call. The, he headed straight for the bar.

Loki sighed. Well, he could hardly have hoped there would be no price to pay for Anthony. Now, it was his job to make sure the price did not end up being too high. Fortunately, he was quite good at distraction.

He tried not to think about all the things he himself needed distracting from. After all, taking care of someone else's state of mind was quite effective in that, too. So without further ado, Loki stepped towards Anthony and embraced him from behind.

Chapter End Notes

Your weekly dose of Frostiron now comes with free opera reviews included! Unfortunately for performances that are no longer in theatres, but hey, not my fault the
timeline says this takes place in 2017. (Oh God, I just realized this chapter takes place right around the Trump inauguration and that I missed the election… Well fortunately MCU is not our universe, and we know the Secretary of State is a different guy, so the president can be too. Phew.)

There'll be another Bruce chapter in Science Bros Redux for this, discussing Wanda. Already posted. It might cool your rage at Wanda's sudden potential appearance in this story. Or make it grow, hell, what do I know.
I swear there won't be one chapter there for each one here, it just worked out that way a few times in a row now.

For those of you who haven't seen it, Bruce and Tony’s discussion of Loki and other romantic entanglements is already posted.

And also, this story has gone over 1000 kudos since the last time I posted, so...thank you all so much! <3
Over the following days, Loki had plentiful opportunities to regret asking Anthony to accept Maximoff back.

The man alternated between relaxation and agitation the whole time. He could be fine one moment and pacing and drinking to excess the next. Loki finally had an occasion to witness the man’s nightmares, too, or rather the panicked breathing and widened eyes after he woke Anthony up from his thrashing. He had been much happier without.

On day four, Loki finally caved.

"I apologise," he said. "I shouldn't have asked this of you. I underestimated the effect it would have on you."

Anthony, who had been pacing his room again, stopped and waved his hand. "At first I was kinda pissed - I thought that like everyone else, you were finally asking me to 'be reasonable' - but effectively, it wasn't you asking. It was Vision, and... She's his friend. Like I told Bruce, if I ask everyone at the compound to accept your presence here because we're together, how could I refuse him when he asks for the same kind of favor?"

"Yet no one here is as affected by me as you are by her," Loki pointed out. He was quite certain he would have noticed, even if they had tried to mask their discomfort.

"Yeah," Anthony agreed. "Except for Bruce, they don't have personal experience with your invasion, and his is apparently more of a problem for you than for him."

"Precisely." Loki gave a sharp nod. "You do have personal experience, that is why I shouldn't have asked you."

Anthony shook his head. "It's done, Loki. Vision deserves it, for sticking by me."

Loki thought no one should expect a reward for standing by their friends, and he was sure Vision did not. But he said nothing about that, aware it would be fruitless. "Perhaps," he muttered instead, "but you are still restless and plagued by this."

Anthony shrugged. "Yeah. But my trauma is not her responsibility."

"Is it not?" Loki questioned. "Has she not created it by her own actions? Tell me, has she ever apologized?"

"No," Anthony admitted. "I mean, she said she was sorry for allying with Ultron in general, but she never apologized to me. Or Bruce, as far as I know. But then again, it’s not like I ever apologized
to her for making the weapon that blew up her parents.”

Loki frowned at the comparison. “There is quite some amount of difference between manufacturing the weapon and pulling the trigger,” he pointed out.

“Is there?” Anthony asked archly. “And what if it was my intentional ignorance that directly led to the weapons getting to them?”

“Still not the same,” Loki insisted.

Anthony merely shook his head. “I inherited an empire of blood,” he said, “and the only thing I could say was ‘oh, shiny’! Don’t try to find excuses for that.”

Loki flinched at those words, suddenly recognizing himself all too easily in them. “I am afraid I will always try to,” he said in a heavy voice. “For I did the same.”

Anthony immediately looked guilty. “I didn’t mean it for you, Loki.”

Loki smiled bitterly. “I am aware, but...if the shoe fits, as the saying goes. I inherited an empire of blood, too, and I only noticed all the red when you pointed it out to me.”

Anthony shrugged uncomfortably. “Well, it took being blown up by my own weapon for me to notice, so I think you’re still ahead.”

“Your recognition, at least, is further in the past.”

“Yeah, but I was still older than you are – in years lived, I mean – when I realized, and had control of the empire for longer.”

Loki exhaled. It was true, after all. “So tell me...what is the next step?” He demanded, suddenly feeling tired. He had been avoiding this question for days now, allowing himself to be distracted by Anthony’s worries so that he did not have to face his own. But this conversation had made him do so, willing or not.

Anthony sighed. “It was easier for me,” he said. “I did what I could to stop the flow of blood, and then to wash it away. But you can’t really afford to.”

“Not now, no,” Loki agreed. “Not with Thanos coming.”

Anthony frowned at he contemplated the problem. “Perhaps you could...build the basis? So that once the war is over, you can give the other realms independence more easily?”

Loki considered the suggestion. “I suppose,” he said. “I have already been consulting with them more than Odin would have – though it was chiefly because I wanted more magic expertise included and that was the only plausible way to do it – so I could build upon that, I expect. But that is only stopping the flow of blood. I do not know how to wash it away.” He did not even know how to wash away the blood he himself had spilled, let alone the oceans left by Odin.

“Hm...” Anthony gave another frown indicative of thinking. “Do you have the idea of reparations in Asgard?”

Loki tried to parse out the All-Speak translation. “You mean something like weregilt?”

“Something like that, I suppose.”

“Then we do, yes.” He furrowed his brow. “But it seems almost offensive, to pretend I can put a
price on years of subjugation.”

Anthony nodded in understanding. “You would have to ask them, definitely, for ways to pay for it, and you would have to try to compromise. You have to be ready for people asking a price Asgard won’t be able to pay. It’s understandable, and you might feel tempted to cripple your own realm to make up for the past, but...don’t.” Anthony stepped over to him now, and took him by the hands. “It won’t help anyone in the long term, this kind of penance.”

“You tried as well, did you not?” Loki asked, looking into his eyes.

“I did,” Anthony confirmed with a small nod. “It took Pepper a long time to explain to me that that was not the way to go, but in the end I had to accept it and move on. The guilt is not so easy to buy out of.”

There was a short silence as they both contemplated it. “Speaking of Pepper,” Anthony said then, in a much lighter tone, stepping a little away. “I’d like her under the geas, and knowing the truth about you.”

Loki had been expecting the request for quite some time, and so he only inclined his head. It would be done.

In fact, given it had some hope of distracting Anthony, perhaps it should be done now.

“Call her, then,” he said. “I am willing.”

Anthony smiled at him in thanks. “FRIDAY, you heard the man – god, demigod, whatever. Call Pep.”

“You’re on, Boss.”

They waited but a moment, and then the voice of the woman sounded from the speakers. “Tony? What is it?”

“Hey, Pep. So, there’s something I kinda need to talk to you about in person. So...any chance you’re somewhere nearby?”

“Yes, I was just about to fly out of DC, so I suppose I can come over...but what is it?” She sounded a little worried and a little suspicious.

Anthony grimaced. “Sorry, I really can’t talk about it on the phone, not even a FRIDAY-secured line. Just...come here. Everyone will be happy to see you.”

“All right, Tony. I’ll be there in two hours, okay?”

“See ya.”

The call was ended, and now Anthony was pacing for a different reason, one that had his shoulders inhabited with less frustrated tension.

“I hope she won’t freak out too much,” he muttered.

“Do you expect her to?” Loki asked curiously.

“Well, she...worries about me. She’ll likely freak out and think that you mind controlled me to start with. But it shouldn’t take her too long to calm down, especially when the others tell her it’s fine.”
“Will they?” Loki asked archly.

Anthony rolled his eyes at him. “Duh. I mean, who knows about Jessica, but the rest? Definitely.”

Loki had hardly had any time at all to speak to Drew beyond greeting in the communal space in the four days since she found out about his identity, so that was understandable enough. Perhaps he should work on that, in the interest of gaining allies. But Anthony took priority.

Speaking of which, Loki decided that the Potts distraction had worked well enough for Anthony to be in a mood to be distracted by other things. With that goal in mind, he approached him and embraced him from behind. “So,” he muttered directly into his ear, “how are we about to spend the two hours until Lady Pepper comes?”

They spent them very pleasantly indeed, and with enough time to spare to look entirely proper when she did come, Loki in the form of Shazad.

“Oh, hello,” Potts said to him, seeming surprised, then turned to Anthony: “So, what is it? Do you want us to come somewhere else, or…?”

“Nah, it concerns Shazad. FRIDAY, could you call Vision here, please?”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

Potts seemed surprised. “It concerns Vision, too?”

“No exactly, but we need him here. Or...well, not that, either, but I think you’d be more comfortable with him.”

Now Potts was outright frowning. “Why?”

“Well, there is this...geas everyone who lives here is under. It protects Shazad’s real identity from anyone hinting about it accidentally. I’d like you to know, but that means you need to have that geas on you as well. Vision can do it.”

“I assume the other option was Shazad?” Potts asked with interest.

“Yeah.”

The woman shrugged. “I don’t mind, she can do it.”

Loki shifted a little uncomfortably on his feet. “Given that you do not know who I am, Ms. Potts, I would prefer if you left it to Vision to save you any future discomfort.”

Now the worry was returning to her face. “All right...” She said slowly.

Vision came in that moment, only to perform the spell and leave again. He was uncomfortable around Anthony these days, sensing his worry. Once he was gone, the man nodded at Loki, who took on his Aesir form.

Pots gave out something of a muted squeak.

Then she looked at Anthony with very accusing eyes.

“I...can explain?” He said, and under her judging gaze, he did, the entirety of their history, with no interruptions from either Loki or the woman he was speaking to. He himself paused many times, thinking about how to phrase things, but Loki did not step in to help him. He was curious about the
choices Anthony would make.

He was pleased to find out their view of things was not very different, and the differences that were present were chiefly caused by it being over half a year since their affair started for Anthony. He spoke a little about how he contemplated their relationship when Loki was gone, and that, of course, was something Loki himself had had little time for.

“So, wait,” Potts said when the explanation was over. “When you refused my offer of getting back together, it was actually for Loki?”

Anthony grimaced. “I….don’t think so? The reasons I told you were the main ones, honestly, but...he might have played a part, subconsciously. I don’t know. We certainly weren’t dating at that point.”

“Yes, I got that.” Potts’ eyes shifted to Loki, and for a long moment she only looked at him. “There are many things I could say,” she noted at length, “but they all seem rather pointless. Just...Tony’s been through enough. Try not to add to it?”

“I will do my best,” Loki replied, quite honestly, and she gave a sharp nod.

“All right,” she said then, turning back to Tony, “LA’s calling. I have to go, but we’ll talk more later. Take care. Goodbye, Loki.”

And with an embrace to Anthony and a small wave to him, she was gone.

“I’m not a fragile flower, okay?” Anthony said the moment she left. “I don’t want you to...I don’t know, start to try and protect me and whatever, and keeping things from me, because of what Pep said.”

Loki shook his head, a little amused. “That is not what she meant,” he replied. “I understood her intent, even if you did not.”

Anthony waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah. Shovel talks. I get it.”

Loki inclined his head with some amusement. “At least this one was very politely worded,” he said, stepping closer. “And since there was no actual request not to hurt you...what are your thoughts on being a little sharper in bed?”

Loki had been considering it for some time, and now it seemed like a fittign time, where it would provide them both with a much needed release of a deeper kind than conventional sex did.

“Literally sharper?” Anthony asked archly. “I’m not much into knife play, but otherwise...sure, we can get creative.”

Loki gave him an unimpressed look. “If you have limits, I need to know them, Anthony. ‘Not much into knife play’ will simply not cut it.”

The man sighed. “I know, but...can we do that part some other day? Maybe do something mild enough for now?”

“Hmm.” Loki considered. “What are your thoughts on edging?”

The stifled moan Anthony gave was an answer enough in itself, and so Loki set to work.

The sounds he managed to get out of Anthony by the end were positively divine.
Maximoff was scheduled to arrive the following day.

Anthony waited, nervous and pacing, for the arrival of one of those who chose the opposite side from his in a conflict that shaped all of their lives.

All of his hard work from previous night undone, Loki did his best to distract the man by other means, and so did Banner, but their powers were not enough and at length Loki simply elected to go and watch Vision practising. The creature needed distraction as well, and was less infuriating to be around than Anthony, who shut himself in his workshop.

Maximoff’s car pulled in to the Avengers Compound parking lot in the evening.

Vision stepped out of the house to welcome her, with the rest waiting inside. She stepped in and looked around the room, masking her nervousness relatively well, though Loki, in the form of Shazad, could still see it.

Her eyes landed on Anthony. “Stark,” she said, and Loki was pleased to hear there was more caution than animosity in the tone.

“Maximoff,” Anthony returned.

She looked at him for a moment, then continued to other man who tensed at her arrival. “Dr. Banner.”

He didn’t respond beyond a minuscule nod of his head.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Danvers interrupted. “This is like the Cold War. All right, since no one seems keen on introducing me, my name’s Carol Danvers, code name Captain Marvel. This awesome woman standing next to me is my best friend Jessica Drew, code name Spider Woman. You seem to know the rest.”

“Hello, Wanda,” James greeted, though he did not sound much warmer than Stark. Loki could see Vision fretting – as much as he could fret – in the background.

“And I am Shazad,” he said smoothly. “I’m the resident magical expert. I assume you’ve already signed the Accords?”

“I have,” she confirmed. “They were waiting for me at the airport, before I was allowed to go through immigration.” Again, her bitterness was well-masked, but still clearly perceptible to Loki.

He merely nodded. “There are some further magical safeguards member of this household are bound by,” he said. “However, that will have to wait until we can examine the nature of your power, since the simple one used on the others would have little effect. I assume you would prefer Vision to conduct the examination under my guidance?”

She shrugged. “He trusts you. That’s enough for me.”

Loki had to admire the poker face of everyone in the room. No one gave anything away. “I am sure that with such an admirable maxim, you will fit right in again, since to my knowledge he trusts everyone who lives here,” he couldn’t help the little jab. “But now, perhaps you would like to get settled? I am sure all the rest can wait till the morning.”

She gave him a small smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “That sounds great,” he admitted, nodded at
the others, and turned to leave, accompanied by Vision.

Loki watched them go as he moved to Anthony side to put a hand around his waist in silent support. Maximoff’s eyes snagged on it as she was exiting the room, and suddenly, her eyes turned much less friendly. Well. This was going to be interesting.

There were muttered ‘good night’s all around the room as people drifted to their bedrooms, and Loki led Anthony away, too, in silence. He knew perfectly well he would not be in the mood for the more pleasant kind of distraction tonight, so after some consideration, he returned to a topic he had absolutely no desire to speak of, but knew he needed to, before he returned to Asgard. The time when he would need to do that was approaching, and he had to be more ready this time.

“The way Maximoff looked at you, it reminded me of the way people used to look at me in Agard, before I wore Odin’s form,” he said.

“What, with hate?” Anthony asked bitterly.

“Caution, more like. But yes, a little bit of hate, too.”

“Well, at least that’s over, right?”

“It is. Now it is myself who looks at Odin’s face in the mirror with resentment – or even more resentment than before.”

Anthony did not say anything, but he abandoned the glass he had poured himself to embrace Loki.

Loki thought about different ways of leading to his question, but as always when speaking of this, he was just too tired for subtleties. “How do I go back there?” He asked.

Anthony gave a deep sigh. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I can’t imagine coming back from Afghanistan and being unable to tear it all down. But...you’re better at this than me.”

“At what?”

“Patience. Bidding your time. You can do it.”

“I’ll have to, but...the prospect is daunting.”

“Hey. One day at a time.” Then Anthony grinned. “Literally, right? You can come here after every single day and spend a week here. That’s doable, isn’t it? A one to seven ratio?”

Loki smiled a little. He had already been considering it, but… “I fear that if I do that, I will lose my touch with Asgard. I will become too removed.”

“I’m sure we can find a way around that,” Anthony replied, becoing enthusiastic with the idea of a new project. “I don’t know, you could dictate all the details of the day you just had to FRIDAY when you come, and listen to them before you go back? Would that work? Maybe accompany it with some spell-based visual memories?”

“That...could help, yes,” Loki conceded.

“Great! Let’s start. You’re going back soon, like you said, so you need to remember as much as possible. FRIDAY, are you ready?”

With a resigned sigh, Loki settled down for a few hours of thinking of Asgard.
The very next morning, after breakfast in bed and explaining the political context of some of the things he had mentioned the previous evening to Anthony, Loki turned into Shazad and asked FRIDAY to request Maximoff’s and Vision’s presence in the communal space. She arrived, with an expression that seemed mildly irritated, with him as serene as always behind her.

“Yes?” She said.

Loki fought the need to raise his eyebrow at the tone. Her noticing his relationship to Anthony truly seemed to have changed her approach. He was tempted to remind her of her words from the day before, that Vision’s trust was enough to her, but in the end, resisted. “As I’ve mentioned yesterday, and I’m sure Vision’s told you, there’s a geas everyone in this compound is under. It’s a condition of living here, yet given your powers, we aren’t certain how to put you under one.”

She shrugged. “You can’t.”

“It’s possible, and if that is the case, you’ll likely have to move elsewhere,” Loki replied calmly. “However, as that seems like a last resort to me, I’d prefer it if you allowed me to examine your powers and see if there is not a way after all.”

He scowl deepened, and she gave Vision a long look. “Please, Wanda,” he muttered. “I promise you Shazad will not harm you in any way.”

Maximoff looked at him in silence for a moment longer, then, reluctantly, nodded.

Loki began his work, his eyes unfocusing as he studied the energy he could sense around her and in her.

“I remember hearing that your powers were a result of exposure to the Ming Gem,” he said, watching the swirling red. “How did that happen?”

Maximoff hesitated.

“Wanda was part of experiments done with the Sceptre,” Vision explained instead.

Loki jerked, losing his concentration. “The sceptre?” He asked, alarmed, facing back on them. “You only mentioned the mind gem before.”

“It was what had the effect on her, was it not?” Vision asked, a little confused. Of course. He did not know. Loki had only told Anthony something of what the casing was.

“Perhaps,” Loki muttered, but all he could think of was finding the sceptre in the Void, the irresistible pull, the way it twisted his mind and caused him such unending pain…

“What kind of experiments?” He asked aloud, to distract himself.

“Exposure,” Maximoff said curtly.

“How direct?”

“We...I was in its presence, in the same room, for extended periods of time. Without any kind of barrier between us.”

“Were there any...adverse effects?” Loki wondered.
“The process was not...pleasant,” Maximoff answered with a hard edge to her voice.

“Did you notice any kind of heightened emotional instability during it, or loss of memory?” He continued probing.

“No,” she replied, sharp and fast this time. Loki pressed his lips together. He would have to discuss it with Anthony. For now, he focused back on his work.

He could sense the power of the Mind Gem, a little different here than when he sensed Vision, but similar enough still that he was capable of filtering it out relatively easily. And when he did, there was something left behind. Something unidentifiable to him, but something that had the distinct aspect of – an overblown balloon, perhaps, or an animal made to grow beyond its natural size by magic. He had come across things like that before.

He blinked back into his surrounding once more and turned to Maximoff. “The Sceptre merely amplified something that had already been present,” he told her. “I can sense the original trace of it in you. Do you remember exhibiting any powers from before the exposure?”

“If I had them, don’t you think I’d have prevented Stark’s bombs from blowing us up?” She barked, and this time Loki could not prevent his eyebrows rising, though he did not comment on it, except for “I’ll take that as a no, then”.

He focused on her energy once more. The source of it was...unfamiliar. It was unlike any other magical ability he had ever examined, be it in a Vanir mage or an elven one, or one of the many with mixed blood he had met in his life. That was hardly surprising – humans, as far as he knew, did not have any inherent forms of magical ability. Not in any way he would understand them, at least. Discovering some in her would have meant she had an elf or a Vanir in her ancestry somewhere.

But still, there had to be something. It was not always easy to see the shape the overblown balloon would have before any air was pumped into it, but it should be possible to do it. Loki did his best.

When he finally spotted what he was looking for, he realized why it took so long. He had been looking for that part of spirit he knew to be responsible for magic, but there was nothing like that. Instead, it was as if Maximoff’s entire body was the course of the original power, without any kind of focus point. It was...strange. Unfathomable. Loki had no idea how that worked.

He examined it a moment longer, but it became no more familiar, and so he refocused his attention on his physical surrounding once more. “I lack the necessary context for this, I fear,” he said. “The traces I see are unlike magical ability I know from other realms. But there appears to be a...potential within you, the very genetic makeup of you I believe, that allowed the sceptre to be successful.”

“In the genetic makeup?” Loki heard behind him and he turned, surprised, to notice Dr. Banner. Anthony, he knew, had elected to ‘sit this one out’ as he had said, and so he ahd not expected his scientist friend to appear. “Could it be an X-gene mutation?”

Loki pursed his lips. “I’ve never seen the nature of Magneto’s powers, but I suppose it’s possible.”

“Is there anyone who could tell us more?” Banner wondered.
“I think Captain Danvers has had dealings with X-men,” FRIDAY joined the conversation unexpectedly. “I could call her?”

“Do, please,” Loki agreed immediately.

Maximoff scowled at him. “It would be an interesting change if somebody asked me,” she muttered.

Loki gave her an arch look. “I was under the impression you agreed to my examining of your powers?”

“You, yes. Not everyone else you might decide to call to your assistance.”

“It is fortunate, then, that the good Captain will have nothing to do with you at all.”

Danvers arrived just then, in a good mood as she always seemed to be, and dispelled the growing tension a little. “I’m here,” she announced. “So, what do you need?”

“Do you know anything about the nature of the X-men abilities?” Loki asked simply, without bothering with any kind of build-up. He had a feeling that the sooner this session would be over, the better it would be for all of them.

“Huh,” Danvers muttered. “Not really theoretically? I’ve worked with them a lot, but I’m no scientist and there was never exactly time to ask about it, anyway.”

Loki was considering if he still could use that second-handed knowledge somehow when Vision suggested: “Would you consent to me reading those memories, Captain? Perhaps I could extract something useful out of them.”

“Or even better,” Loki added, instantly liking the idea, “you can learn to project thoughts and memories and then simply show me.”

Vision inclined his head, and set to work.

He had Danvers’ memories in no time at all, but learning a new skill, as always, took him a while, so Danvers and Banner left them to it, even as Maximoff, to Loki’s irritation, refused to leave Vision’s side. He tried to amuse himself with the StarkPad he had from Anthony and pay her no mind.

“I believe I have it now,” Vision said at length. “I need to practice, though so Wanda, if you would…?”

She nodded at him, smiling, and he touched her face gently, watching a memory that made him smile in turn. Then he stepped away from her and turned to Loki, who received an image of Wanda watching Vision as he cooked. It was a memory that was intimate in its simplicity, and he felt uncomfortable getting it.

“Good,” he said when it was over. “It seems to work well. FRIDAY, would you call the Captain back here, please?”

That whole exchange only took a few minutes, and after Danvers retreated again, Loki readied himself to seeing her memories.

They were not pleasant, of fights for bare lives and desperate situations, but he saw many of the X-Men there, even some with psychic abilities or abilities that seemed like magic at the first glance.
It didn’t take him long to see the similarities. He could not exactly examine them the way he had Maximoff, of course, but there was enough to see that these powers were vast and diverse and with no particular point of focus to them. He could easily imagine Maximoff’s powers fitting in among them. He would need to see some of these X-men in person to really know, but it seemed like a plausible theory.

“Yes,” he said aloud. “It is likely the same principle. You appear to have some genetic mutant ability, Ms Maximoff, that the sceptre merely strengthened.”

She was scowling at him, as if displeased by this news. “So can you make this geas, then?” She asked.

“I will have to consider and look into some magical texts to see if there is a way,” he replied. He had little experience with this kind of Midgardian power.

Something between a smirk and a remnant of that scowl appeared on her face, and she walked away with a comment that sounded suspiciously like “that’s what I thought”.

Loki sighed, and headed to Anthony’s rooms.

“So? How did it go?” The man demanded, waiting for him, tense all over.

“About as well as could be expected,” Loki replied tiredly. “She seems to have low-key mutant ability that the sceptre strengthened.”

“Oh!” That caught Anthony’s interest. “Maybe I could discuss this with Xavier and Magneto next time I talk to them?”

Loki blinked in surprise. “They are in contact?”

Anthony waved his hand. “Er, no, separately, I mean. But I could ask both? If they know cases like that, I mean...”

“How, yes. Particularly, you should ask about mental manipulation of those whose mutation gift them with psychic powers.” He frowned a little. “If, that is, you can phrase it in a way that does not sound like you are threatening them.”

Anthony chuckled at that, and Loki continued: “Xavier’s expertise could help, and Magneto could possibly know of some more unsavoury methods.” At Anthony frown, he shrugged. “We do not have to use them, but it might be good to be ready...especially given what I learned.”

“What?” Worry flashed over Anthony’s face.

“You did not tell me Maximoff’s powers came not from the stone itself, but from the sceptre.”

Anthony opened his mouth, then shut it again and a look of horror appeared in his eyes as he remembered the difference. The difference between Vision and Ultron. “So...she was mind controlled, too?” He asked.

Loki shook his head. “From what she told me...Not exactly. Not as much as Barton or Selvig, certainly, and not even as much as me. What tendrils of control there were were broken the moment she gained her powers, anyway. It was more akin to what you experienced aboard the helicarrier. The sceptre drew on emotion, the worst emotion in everyone. It was its first step of its attack, the way to open up the mind, make it vulnerable, and that could then be followed by direct control.”
“So she was under the influence.”

Loki sighed. “As with her powers, it was what had already been already inside her, only amplified. Besides, remember the helicarrier. You were all affected by the Sceptre while in the same room, but it passed as soon as you got away from it. Yes, she was exposed to it longer, so the effects would have lingered, but not more than a few days. I suspect it was more...the Sceptre shook something loose, something she did not care to restrain again once she could have, because she liked the freedom it gave her. Perhaps she believed that with locking it away, she would lock her powers? But there is liberty in giving free reign to the worst in you. I should know. So perhaps that was enough.”

Stark opened his mouth to reply, but it was just then that Loki felt the pull of his spells from Asgard. Someone was coming to wake Odin.

“I have to go,” he said quickly. “Speak to them and try to find a way...and be careful around Maximoff,” he shot as a final warning before accepting a light kiss from Anthony and stepping onto the dark paths.

He returned just in time to slip in the place of Odin’s illusion as he was shaken away by one of the servants. “My king. My king!”

“Yes, what is it?” Loki muttered, pretending to be muddled by sleep still.

“There’s a woman who arrived here in a ship – she claims to be the last surviving Valkyrie, and says she has an urgent message for you!”

All of Loki’s attention immediately snapped to the problem. The Valkyrie had been gone since before his time. Claiming to be one was so outrageous it was more likely to be the truth than a lie. Especially as she was demanding to see Odin, who likely remembered them all by sight. And the idea of that – of an actual, living Valkyrie in Asgard again – well, it was incredible.

Of course, she could be wearing an illusion or be shapeshifted. Illusions were easy enough to spot if you knew what you were looking for, but shapeshifting was harder. And Loki was at the distinct disadvantage of not being able to ask her about particulars from the past, for he did not know them beyond what was in the history books. Any shapeshifter could have read those just as easily.

As he dressed, Loki considered the problem, trying desperately to think of something his mother or Odin told him that would serve as this sort of test. His mind drew a blank.

Well then. He would just have to resort to more invasive methods.

For now, he met her with the welcome that befitted such a legendary figure, though he kept it out of the throne room. He hoped to keep this under wraps as long as possible. He knew that as soon as true morning came, instead of the barely dawn it was now, the entire palace would know. The news was too big. But at least for now, they would have some quiet.

“Odin,” she said in greeting, her nod barely there and no respect at all in her voice.

Loki wanted to laugh. Oh, how he wanted to laugh, and he was hit with a reckless impulse to show his face so that they could share in their thoughts. The delicious irony, of the last of the Valkyrie possibly not having any respect for the king of the golden realm! He wanted to ask, too, to hear every little detail.

She sneered at him. “I saw your golden son on Sakaar,” she said. “Along with the noble warriors you sent as his entourage. Let me tell you, Asgard has really gone to shit in my absence.”

“You were on Sakaar?” Loki asked in Odin’s most business-like tone, his curiosity too sharp to bother with thinking about what would the All-Father say to such disrespect.

“Yes.” She scowled even deeper. “Your son took away my friend.”

Loki gave a mental blink. She knew Banner? “So you came to get him back?” He asked mockingly.

She scoffed. “No. I came because I travel and I hear things. After he left, I heard he is not your only child being restless lately.”

Loki was truly thankful for his flawless poker face in that moment as he muttered: “Oh? Do you have news that my other son survived, then?” He supposed it would take care of the ‘telling Thor’ business.

She gave him a strange look. “Your other son? No, I care not for your sons,” she replied. “But your daughter is stirring in her imprisonment.”

Chapter End Notes

Belated Ramadan mubarak/Shavuot sameach/blessed Pentecost to all concerned!

So, who expected Valkyrie to show up?

We’re getting to the more...plotty part of this, I suppose. Like I said, this is a single-point departure AU, so Valkyrie became involved as a direct result of Thor and the Warriors+Sif presence on Sakaar. More will become clear in time, though I’m considering a one-shot from her POV to shine some light on her motivation, since I’m not sure I’ll have the space to work in into the story properly.

And for those of you worrying about Wanda’s presence in this story, in case this chapter didn’t make it clear and to calm your nerves: she’s not about to become the newest hero. At the same time, your reviews did have some influence over me, since I have a spectrum of interpretations of Wanda, and your comments made me write her more towards the ‘unpleasant’ end of it. I still prefer it when those comments are worded kindly, though. ;)
Your other son? No, I care not for your sons," the Valkyrie replied. “But your daughter is stirring in her imprisonment.”

This time, Loki could not keep his amazement entirely off his face, though he certainly did not show as much as the deep astonishment he felt inside.

Once more, he felt an overwhelming desire to laugh.

A few years ago, before the revelation of his parentage, he would have mocked the pseudo-Valkyrie and had her ran out of the palace, for suggesting something so absurd. But now…

Was the idea that Odin had had a daughter any more absurd than the fact that Loki was actually a Jotun? What was so strange about the possibility of another child, born on the wrong side of the blanket, kept secret perhaps out of desire to keep the shame of it from touching the golden, perfect royal house of Asgard? Especially compared to the king himself raising a Jotun as his own son? The most astonishing part was perhaps that Odin would imprison a child of his own blood, but then, Loki did not know who the mother had been. Perhaps there had been something distasteful there. Perhaps there had been a monstrosity that led Odin to treat this unknown daughter in a way he never would have his golden son.

So it was, in fact, perfectly possible. Why not? There could just as easily be several daughters tucked away somewhere, and a few more sons.

Loki felt the urge to laugh again.

No, he told himself firmly. No time for that. No time for shock or amusement. The Valkyrie, if she truly was one, came here for a reason, and he had to find that reason. So he locked all of his feelings about this up to be dealt with later, and instead walked towards her, trying not to stalk in a too Loki manner even though he very much wanted to. “My daughter,” he said contemplatively, getting closer. “Now that is something I haven’t heard in a while…”

He was behind her now, and quick as lighting, he put a hand to her face and, touching her mind, read her memories.

She was genuine – a true surviving Valkyrie – and apparently, so was her warning.

He saw a large battle, a woman dying in the Valkyrie’s – Brunhilde’s, for that was her name, apparently – arms, he saw another woman, enormously powerful, fighting on the other side, with powers that were familiar to Loki on a deep level. He saw her calling Odin father as she was imprisoned. And he saw the danger Valkyrie spoke of, too, men in a clandestine meeting talking about the call from Hela, and how her agents were already all around Asgard, lying in wait to kill
And, most damningly, he heard one particular part of that conversation: “Odin sleeps now. It will be easy, so easy, to get rid of him once and for all, and with that, the prison will be broken.”

They knew. Somehow, they knew, and it was not Loki masquerading as Odin that they wanted to kill.

When he let Brunhilde go, she fell to her knees, and the look she gave him was one of pure hatred.

“I have to make sure such warnings have a true basis,” he told her in his best unconcerned tone. “Now go – the servants will give you quarters. I have to deal with this.”

“I won’t stay in this goddamned realm a moment longer than I have to,” she spat at him. “I gave you the warning. Let’s see if you do better this time than you did the last. I’m done here.”

Loki considered trying to stop her. But he would not catch her off guard again, and he would not win in a fight with a Valkyrie, he knew that much. Not without revealing his identity at least. Besides, he did not need her at the moment. She clearly knew many secrets about Odin’s past, yes, but asking questions would show his ignorance. Better she left. Away from Asgard, she could not find his secrets, or tell them to anyone who mattered. Loki would do some searching on his own, try to find out the truth about the past. He had little hope of success, but it was still a better chance than attempting to force the last remaining Valkrie to stay against her will and then put his fate in her hands.

And he was, at the moment, too thrown off balance by these revelations to attempt any silver-tongued persuasion. Not that Odin’s guise was particularly suited to them, or that he thought she would accept it from the All-father.

“Go, then,” he said. “Your loyalty to Asgard is clearly gone with your days of glory.”

She did not dignify that with a response, quite rightly, turning on her heel.

“She is a fraud,” Loki told the guards once the door opened. “Take her back to her ship.”

That would stop the news of a Valkyrie spreading like wildfire, at least, but that was the smallest of Loki’s worries at the moment.

No, there were only two which clamoured for his attention. The danger to Odin was, absurdly enough, the easier of them. The danger to Odin was, absurdly enough, the easier of them. He knew what he had to do.

What he had no idea about was this notion of a sister.

He had believed that after his talks with Anthony, he would feel at least a little more comfortable in Asgard, but now that seemed like a vain hope, with discovering another lie.

He shut himself in Odin’s rooms again – he hoped two days of the same behaviour in a row would not be too suspicious, but it was not as if he had much of a choice – to contemplate the problem. Hela. Odin’s daughter. When had she been born?

She must be older than Thor, he realized. The war that he saw in those memories was too big to possibly keep secret if Loki had been older than, perhaps, five at most. The Valkyrie had been gone for as long as he could remember. And Hela had clearly been an adult already back then. So significantly older than Thor.
That meant...it meant Thor was not Odin’s firstborn. It meant Hela could have a claim on the throne, depending on Odin’s will concerning the inheritance. And, Loki realized with growing horror, Odin had not had the time to make a decision. He had fallen into Odinsleep, and so now it would default to...whom?

There had never been an eldest daughter since the royal dynasty of Asgard was established. There was no precedent. Loki did not know if the gender played a part, if Hela was even legitimate at all, and it was another thing he could not simply ask about.

The idea was so absurd that he had to laugh a little once more. The golden son not being the first. Having to give way to the dark daughter, the warrior queen and sorceress he saw in Brunhilde’s memories. It would have been poetic and beautiful if Loki had not seen the danger of his sister, and if there had been no Thanos on the horizon.

He needed to find out the truth of what had happened in the past and what would happen now, but how?

He already knew there was very little the available history books in Asgard would tell him about the darker past – he had searched a mere Asgardian day ago, after all – but nevertheless, he tried again, going over every tome worth its name. He looked into legal documents, too, to understand the succession.

But at the end of the day, he still did not know.

His mind kept cycling to the departed Brunhilde. He could not speak to her as Odin. But perhaps, perhaps he could speak to her as someone else. He normally did not dare doing such things, but this situation he needed to understand. Everything could potentially hang in the balance. The fate of the Nine Realms, and more.

This needed careful planning. Meanwhile, it was late evening already, and he had Odin’s safety to see to. And he could use the additional time his stay on Midgard would grant him once more, to think in peace.

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When Loki appeared in the communal space of the Avengers compound, he found Maximoff facing off with Banner. They were in the middle of an argument, and he was clearly seething with anger.

“You’ve been unable to apologize this whole time,” he was saying through gritted teeth. “I don’t know if you just don’t care or-”

“Bruce, you need to calm down,” she told him in a falsely soft, patronizing tone. Loki could sense the fear behind it easily enough.

“Stop telling me to calm down,” he spat. “Do you even know how many people died in Johannesburg? Have you bothered to find out?”

She avoided his eyes. “It’s done already, there’s no point in going over it again-” She tried.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Dr. Banner was shouting now, enraged. That was when Loki saw Maximoff raising her hands and letting loose tendrils of red energy.

He was still invisible, and it was the work of a moment to dismiss them with one spell and put Maximoff to sleep with another. Then, turning his eyes to Banner and his laboured breathing, he...
said: “FRIDAY, call Anthony here please.”

“Already done,” came the voice from the speakers, for the first time since Loki could remember sounding angry instead of relaxed. “I called him the moment I noticed Ms Maximoff was using her powers.”

“Thank you, then.”

Just at that moment, Anthony burst in, his suit coalescing around him and a thunderous expression on his face. He stopped when he noticed Maximoff sleeping on the ground, and seemed confused. That was when Loki realized he should probably make himself visible.

Anthony exhaled in obvious relief when he spotted him. “That’s what I call a timely arrival. What happened here?”

“Maximoff tried to use her powers on me,” Banner replied, every word infused with rage.

“She WHAT?” Anthony asked, incredulous, and his eyes flashed with anger to match the doctor’s.

“It was a sleep spell,” Loki clarified. “She provoked Dr. Banner into anger, and then judged it too dangerous to herself and attempted to put him to sleep.”

Anthony stayed silent for a moment, gritting his teeth, and Loki was fairly certain he was trying to prevent himself from physically attacking Maximoff. “All right,” he said then, “that’s it. She’s done here. Wake her and I’ll kick her out.” He sighed. “And I guess, FRIDAY, call Vision. He should be present for this, though I’d much rather he wasn’t. Let the others know what happened, but we don’t need them for this.”

The all sat down on the sofas around Maximoff’s prone figure, the two men breathing deep as they tried to get their anger under control. Loki himself was furious enough, too, and he suspected he would have been even more so had he spent three weeks in her company.

He wondered if he should apologize to Anthony again for asking him to allow Maximoff into his home. He had truly miscalculated in this matter.

He looked at the woman on the ground. Well, he supposed this at least solved the problem of finding a way to put her under the geas, since he had had no time to look into that.

Vision came, and immediately grew alarmed when he saw his partner on the floor. “What happened?” He asked, hurrying to her side.

Loki, judging himself the most impartial of those present, took the word. “I arrived to find Dr. Banner and Ms. Maximoff arguing. She was making him upset by refusing to apologize for what she did to him in the past, and when she felt she was in danger of encountering the Hulk, she tried to use her powers on him to put him to sleep. I stopped her, and put her to sleep instead.”

“I very nearly transformed when I saw her magic directed at me,” Banner added. “If Loki had been just a second later with his spell, I would have. And it wouldn’t have been the good kind of transformation.”

Vision looked completely horrified. “I am so sorry, Bruce,” he said. “I...do not understand why...”

Bruce gave him a bitter smile. “Frankly, to me, it wasn’t entirely unexpected. I’m just really, really grateful Loki was here.” The man turned to him to give him a small smile.
"I’m kicking her out, Vision," Anthony said seriously. "I wanted you to be here for it, but it’s non-negotiable."

"I understand," the creature said immediately. "Of course. I am...sorry that I asked for her presence and she betrayed your trust in such a way. Nothing in her behaviour when we were together suggested..."

Anthony waved his hand. "It wasn’t your fault. I said I’d give it a try, I did, and it didn’t work out. It’s all there is to it.” The tension in his voice belied his words, but no one commented on it.

Loki sent a tendril of his magic towards the pitiful excuse for a sorceress at his feet, and woke her up even as he turned into Shazad.

Maximoff sat up, confused, and looked around herself. "What happened?" She asked.

“You tried to use your powers on Bruce, that’s what happened,” Anthony said in a voice colder than the winds of Siberia.

“He was about to Hulk out!” She defended, snapping out of her confusion and into an aggressive tone fast even as she rose from the ground.

Banner scoffed. "I wasn’t about to hulk out until I saw your magic headed towards me."

“Regardless,” Anthony added. “You were here on probation, and this definitely breaks the terms. You’re out. You can join the New York branch, if Thor agrees to have you – FRIDAY, call him please. If he doesn’t, you can try with LA and Hope. In any case, you’re done here.”

Maximoff turned to Vision, as if expecting him to intercede on her behalf.

“I am sorry, Wanda,” he said. “I understand you were afraid, but what you did...it broke trust, and trust is something kept in high value here.”

Anthony seemed to hesitate for a moment. “If you wish, you can go with her,” he said then. “I’m sure both Thor and Hope would welcome you.”

Vision, however, shook his head. “No,” he said. “New York is not that far. We can stay in touch.”

The look of utter betrayal on Maximoff’s face would have been pitiful if Loki hadn’t been so angry.

“Fine,” she snapped, turning sharply to give her back to them, and stalked out of the room.

Anthony looked after her for a moment, and then left, too, without a word. With a small sigh, Loki followed after him. This was going to be a difficult evening, and that was before even accounting for what Loki had to tell him.

He caught up with the man just as he was entering his rooms. Anthony held the door open for him.

“Well, that was a disaster,” he muttered once they were alone, pouring himself a drink.

“Once more, I apologize,” Loki said, sitting down and accepting a glass, too.

“And once more I tell you you have no reason to,” Anthony returned, settling next to him and leaning into his side, the glass in one hand. “I’m mostly relieved, honestly – or I’d be if I wasn’t so pissed. But it was very uncomfortable three weeks, and having a legitimate excuse to throw her out like that is a blessing, really. I just wish Bruce didn’t have to be the one to almost pay the price. I can’t thank you enough for stopping her.”
Loki hesitated a little, but he felt he had to clarify this point. “You do realise she would not have actually hurt him, do you not? As I said, it was a sleeping spell.”

Anthony frowned at him. “Of course she would have hurt him. After what she did to him during Ultron, being subjected to her powers again, for whatever reason...it would have been one hell of a trigger.”

Now Loki was frowning too. He knew she had been on the opposite side, originally, but he had no details. “What did she do to him?” He asked.

So Anthony told him. Loki was incredulous.

“So she did to him what I did to Agent Barton, Dr. Selvig and some others during the invasion—”

“Yeah,” Anthony interrupted, “only she did it of her own free will, she made him kill civilians, not trained agents, and she tapped – intentionally, no doubt – into his pre-existing trauma of the Hulk hurting people.”

Loki had to stay silent for a moment as he took it in, because yes, he realized, it was all true. Additionally, the slaves of the sceptre retained some small amount of agency. Banner, it appeared, retained none. “And after all this, she was then accepted into the Avengers?” He asked in a voice heavy with disbelief.

Anthony shrugged. “Don’t look at me, wasn’t my decision. I wish I could blame pragmatism – you know, better get that power on our side before someone else like HYDRA manages to bag her again – but like I told Bruce, I think Rogers and Barton were feeling sorry for her. She lost her brother during Ultron.”

Loki scoffed. “You mean during the same catastrophe she herself helped unleash? Forgive me if I’m not overflowing with sympathy. I know something about that, after all, and I would have hardly expected anyone to look more kindly on me afterwards.” He shook his head. “I should have asked for details before I acceded to Vision’s request. Frankly, it never occurred to me there could be something like this behind it, because it never occurred to me he would still ask, after a history like this.” He sighed. “I also do not understand why Dr. Banner said yes.”

Anthony let his shoulders rise and fall once more. “Like me, he was giving her a chance. We saw how that worked out, but now that’s over and done with at least.” He sighed, and Loki considered and this, perhaps, was the true difference between him and these so-called heroes. He knew he would never forgive something like that, and never give another chance. He contemplated that, and what it said about him, and about Anthony, and about this relationship the man insisted they try to have.

“Hopefully after she moves out, we’ll be able to have a moment of peace,” the man in question interrupted his thoughts.

Loki grimaced. “Well, about that...”

Anthony gave him an exasperated look. “What?”

So Loki told him the tale of the unexpected Valkyrie arrival in Asgard, and about the warning she had passed on to him, willingly and unwillingly. “I had to get Odin out of there, the sooner the better.”

Anthony’s look turned to incredulous. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”
“Yes,” Loki confirmed with a nod. “He’s here. I need you to keep an eye on him for me, Anthony, under the best security you’re capable of.”

A small crease appeared on the man’s forehead. “Well, of course I will, but...aren’t your spells a better protection?”

“I will ward him as well, certainly – the strongest wards I can cast – but I am hoping that perhaps your safety measures could be unfamiliar for these unknown opponents of Odin, and so give them some additional trouble,” Loki explained. “I can’t take any risks.”

“All right,” Anthony said, and there was no scepticism or indecision left in his voice, only determination. Loki felt like kissing him in that moment, but before he could, the man continued: “FRIDAY, you heard him, start working on a secure room.” He then turned to look at Loki, pulling one leg up on the sofa. “Meanwhile...are you sure that news about the sister is legit? I mean, I once had some assholes try and convince me with fake records I wasn’t Howard’s biological son.” He grimaced. “Er, sorry, bad example, but it’s what happened. It was a smoking pile of bullshit even though I’d have actually probably been happy if it was true. Are you sure this isn’t a similar kind of scam? Just trying to throw you off?”

Loki waved away the potential similarities in their stories – it wasn’t the fact of the adoption as such that had thrown him so much, after all, it was the knowledge where he was adopted from. Even if Anthony’s scammers had been right, there was still no danger of something like that.

Instead of focusing on that, Loki answered Anthony’s question. “At the very least the Valkyrie who delivered the news believed it,” he said. “Faking memories like that, with that sort of emotional depth...it is extremely difficult. She would have to be a shapeshifter under a grandmaster level spell. It is possible, of course, and I will investigate and try to find out the truth, but in the meantime and until I find the plotters, Odin has to stay away from Asgard.”

Anthony only nodded. “What’s your gameplan for discovering what’s up?” He asked, leaning back against Loki’s side.

Loki sighed. “Frankly? I have no idea. I would have questioned the Valkyrie more, but I have little means at my disposal to keep her in Asgard. She left already, and I don’t know of any other source of information I could safely go to. If she knew, other older Asgardians have to know as well, but there has to be some sort of ban on speaking about it if I never heard. Asking about it would be considered extremely suspicious, even if I took on another form.” Then he remembered one detail that almost got buried by the rest. “I told you she came from Sakaar, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she said she knew Banner. Called him her friend, in fact.”

Anthony sat up a little to look at him, and raised his eyebrows. “But Bruce said he spent almost all of his time there as the Hulk. Do you think...?”

“Possibly.”

“We have to ask him,” Anthony stated decisively. “Come on. I wanted to check on him anyway. FRIDAY, is he in his rooms?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Good. By the way, what’s the word from Thor on accepting Maximoff?” He added as he got up and headed towards the door.
“He said he’d need to confer with Dr. Foster and the other members of his team,” FRIDAY informed them.

“Good for him,” Anthony muttered with appreciation, and for once, Loki had to agree.

The reached Dr. Banner’s rooms. The man was already waiting for them, apparently having been notified by FRIDAY. “Come in,” he said.

“Thank you, Dr. Banner,” Loki muttered, looking around the rooms he had never seen before with interest. They were much simpler than Anthony’s.

“There’s no need for that,” the man said. “You just saved me from a very unpleasant Hulk-out and got us rid of Maximoff. I think you earned calling me by my first name.”

Loki gave him a surprised look. Both men seemed to regard the service he rendered them more highly than he himself did. “Thank you, then, Bruce,” he amended.

The doctor only nodded. “What do you need?” He asked.

“First, to check you’re all right,” Anthony interjected.

“I’m fine, Tony,” Banner muttered with a fond roll of his eyes. “And I’m sure you wouldn’t have dragged Loki over just for that.”

“No,” he admitted. “There’s something else.”

“I am aware you do not remember Sakaar well,” Loki took over, “but I had a visitor on Asgard recently that claimed to know you from there. Claimed you were her friend. A young woman of dark complexion, an exceptionally good fighter...do you remember anyone like that?”

Banner frowned. “I don’t. But I’ve been able to talk to the other guy a bit more since Sakaar, I can try asking...what do you say, Hulk? Sounds familiar?”

And then, to Loki’s astonishment and slight horror, Banner sort of half-transformed and answered: “Angry girl?”

Loki hmmmed. “She seemed angry enough,” he agreed.

“Hulk miss Angry girl,” the creature stated decisively.

“She seemed to miss you as well.” Loki created a quick projection of Brunhilde in front of them. “Is this her?”

“Angry girl!” The Hulk cried enthusiastically, and Loki quickly dispelled the illusion before the creature tried to embrace her. Banner pushed him back with a grimace. “He’s confused about where she went,” he explained. “Careful with illusions around him.”

Loki nodded in understanding.

“So, what now?” Anthony asked.

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted. “I need to contact her somehow, but...do you remember anything about her, Bruce?”

The man shook his head. “Hulk doesn’t really think about people like that. She was there, she was angry, she drank, she was his friend. That’s all I can get out of him.”
Loki sighed. “I need to get there. I need to talk to her. But even if I somehow convinced her to come here or to Asgard and could do all of the talking on the way or here, the journey there and back would still take at least a few weeks of Earth time – even if the portals were very well aligned – and I can’t afford to be missing from Asgard for that long right now.”

Anthony frowned, and they both stood for a moment, lost in their thoughts and trying to find a way out of the situation that didn’t leave them vulnerable on one side as they tried to cover the other.

“All right, can someone fill me in with what is going on?” Banner interrupted their silent musings.

After a small hesitation, Loki nodded. “It’s a little complicated,” he warned.

“Well, sit down then,” the doctor replied, motioning to his small sofa. Loki did, and as Banner settled down on a chair opposite to him and Anthony next to him, he began to explain, with only minor adjustments to the truth as he told the story.

When he finished, there was a short silence. “Can’t Odin do something?” Bruce asked then. “You got him to send Thor, surely you could get him to arrange this as well.”

Loki shook his head without missing a beat. “From the short interaction I had with her, I gathered she detests Odin. He’s useless for this. What I need is more time, but how...”

“Or you need someone to go for you,” Banner pointed out.

Loki shook his head again. “Most Asgardians would have just about the same effect – perhaps if I knew who she was friends with when she still lived there, but I don’t...”

“I wasn’t talking about Asgardians,” Banner corrected him. “I was talking about me.”

Loki stared at him. “Bruce...” He said then, incredulous. “Why would you suggest...?”

Banner sighed. “Look, if I got you right, if this Hela plot is real and succeeds, it could endanger the whole of Asgard, right?”

Loki grimaced. “Potentially, yes. I don’t know much about her, but what I glimpsed in the Valkyrie’s mind is that she is extremely powerful, and she does have a claim on Asgard’s throne, even if it turns out to not be the best claim. Matters are unclear at the moment.”

“Right,” Banner continued. “And if Asgard falls, we’re dead when Thanos comes.”

“...effectively, yes.”

“So it should be obvious enough why I’m suggesting this,” the doctor concluded.

“Bruce,” Anthony muttered, “I don’t like this.”

The man shrugged. “Neither do I, much. It’s not like I enjoyed Sakaar. And the biggest problem: to talk to the Valkyrie, I need to be the other guy, at least to start with. That’s what she knows. But to convince her, I need to be myself. But lately, I’ve had a bit of trouble with transforming on command – ever since Sakaar, actually – and that might ruin the whole plan. Specifically, if I let the Hulk come out fully, I might never get myself back.”

That surprised Loki. “You haven’t sent him into a fight since you returned?”

The doctor shook his head. “There hasn’t been any need, thank God. In the time I’ve been here, there has only been two or three minor scuffles for the Avengers to deal with, nothing on a scale
that would require the other guy. I’d have normally transformed for training, but...well.”

Loki nodded in understanding and considered the problem. “I could probably help with that,” he muttered at length.

“You could?” Banner asked, surprised.

“Yes. Especially with Vision’s assistance. I haven’t examined your powers in detail, but it should be possible to create an amulet for you that would help with your transformation one way or the other. The only thing I couldn’t ensure is the Hulk actually wanting to transform back into you.”

“All right,” Banner said slowly, “that sounds like it might work, or at least help a bit. Now what was it you said about a good portal alignment?”

“Yes, that.” Loki frowned for a moment. He would be some help in tracking them, but he couldn’t do all of it, and he could hardly ask anyone in Asgard without raising questions... “We will need Jane Foster,” he decided.

Anthony raised his eyebrows. “Well, good luck explaining this without telling her who you are.”

Loki pressed his lips together as he thought. “We could say Bruce realized he had to go back for some reason,” he muttered. “The bigger problem will be preventing Thor from going with him again. I am quite certain that would actually ruin everything.”

“You always assume Thor will ruin everything,” Anthony pointed out, not entirely unjustly.

“This time, I have an actual reason,” Loki retorted. “I heard her speak of him.”

“I don’t like the idea of Bruce going alone,” Anthony insisted.

“He doesn’t have to, necessarily,” Loki pointed out, glancing at the doctor to include him in the conversation and lessen the unpleasant feeling of other discussing you in your presence. “Just...no Asgardians.”

“Carol,” Anthony said, snapping his fingers. “She has space experience. Would you go with her, Bruce?”

The man shrugged. “Sure. As long as she’s willing.”

“Awesome. We have a space trip to organize.” Anthony grinned in sheer delight.

They left Banner in his rooms after a short discussion of what the journey would entail and how long it would likely take. Loki also gave him some details about the portals, and what they would need to look for. Banner promised to try and read up on the scientific side of it so that he could be useful help to Foster once she was told of the matter.

Anthony was full of enthusiasm for this new project, and Loki ha dot curb it a little when he reminded him of the matter of Odin.

“Oh, right,” the man muttered. “FRIDAY, how are we doing on that secure room?”

“It’s as ready as I can make it, Boss.”

“Awesome. Let’s stick the old man there and start on the remaining security measures, then, shall
Loki only nodded. There were other activities he would have preferred to engage in, seeing Anthony in such a bright mood, but first things first.

The room was relatively small, but bit enough to fit the invisible Odin and leave enough space around him for Loki to lay his wards. Anthony, meanwhile, was dragging in various instruments from his workshop and tinkering with them. Loki would have dearly loved to ask for details, but once again, the work took priority.

It was when he was almost done that FRIDAY interrupted them. “Sorry to bother you, Boss,” she said, “but Thor called. He decided to accept Ms Maximoff into his team on a probationary basis. He offered to come and pick her up.”

Anthony frowned at the air in front of him. “All right,” he said. “Tell him to come at any time it suits him, but to bring Jane with him.”

“Sure-”

“Just one moment,” Loki interrupted.

“What is it?” Anthony asked, turning to him.

What it was was a problem, as usual. Loki knew from experience that things hardly ever went simply for him. “Thor will take her off our hands, but she is in a hostile mood towards us at present,” he pointed out. “I do not believe she would outright attack, but...she does not know who I am, but knows enough about me that if she speaks to Thor, he could reasonably get very suspicious. I would be much calmer if I had her under a geas, but for obvious reasons, I had no time to look into that problem. So as much as I understand it bothers you, delaying her departure might not be a bad idea.”

Anthony nodded pensively. “I spoke to both Xavier and Magneto,” he said then. “They were both willing to help, after a fashion.”

That caught Loki’s attention. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“Xavier seemed inclined to think that if she was really a mutant, she should be staying with them.” Anthony grimaced. “It’d be a solution, I guess, but I’m not thrilled by the idea, to be honest, and not just because she could babble our secrets.”

Loki shook his head. “That would not be a problem – what she knows is only dangerous if spoken of in front of Thor, no one else.”

“Yeah, the problem is elsewhere. Xavier is way too good of a guy, and we saw how he handled Magneto all those years ago. I don’t think he learned his lesson, and I don’t think he’s the type to deal with her well. I can’t stand her, but on some level, I understand her, if only because she is what I want to avoid becoming. Xavier wouldn’t.”

Loki knew precisely what Anthony meant. He, too, found certain uncomfortable parallels in Maximoff. “And Magneto?” He prodded.

Anthony frowned a little in thought. “He sounded interested, but was pragmatic enough to know she was a member of our team and that in spite of my reservations about her, I could see any attempts on his side as talent poaching. So he agreed to help if he could ask for assistance on our side in turn.”

“It is,” Anthony agreed. “In fact, given that we can’t stall Maximoff moving out without it being suspicious and unhealthy for Bruce, I think we should call him now.”

They did.

“Mr. Stark,” the man said, in his usual serious tone. “Are you calling to collect on the favour we discussed?”

“I am,” Anthony confirmed. “In fact, it suddenly became rather more urgent. I am sorry to ask this in such a hurry, but...could you possible make time tonight?”

“I could,” Magneto agreed, “provided the promise of a return favour within the stipulations from last time still holds.”

“It does. No harm, otherwise we’re good.”

“Then where shall we meet tonight, Mr. Stark?”

That, of course, was the problem. Agreeing on a place to meet that neither of them would consider a trap was nearly impossible. For obvious reasons, Magneto would not step into the Compound, and Anthony was equally distrustful of any locale Magneto suggested.

In the end, it was Loki who interjected, Shazad’s voice coloured with exasperation. “Let us draw a line between the two places you are suggesting,” he said, “and meet directly in the middle. That way, no one should have the advantage, correct?”

“FRIDAY, show the map, please?” Anthony asked his AI.

She did, in such a manner it was visible to Magneto as well. The mid-point seemed to be in the middle of a field.

“That is...acceptable,” Magneto admitted reluctantly.

“See you in two hours, then?” Anthony suggested.

“Yes, Mr. Stark. See you there,” Magneto agreed, turning away.

Anthony let out a long breath and went to get another drink as FRIDAY ended the call. “Now we just have to convince Maximoff to come with us,” he muttered as he poured.

Loki shrugged. “If she doesn’t, I will simply put her to sleep once more.”

Anthony grimaced. “As I said, I don’t particularly want to become her.”

In this, Loki was unconcerned. “Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind,” he replied. Anthony’s only answer was knocking back the drink.

They found Vision in Maximoff’s rooms, speaking to her urgently and trying to calm her anger. “What do you want?” She barked at them when she saw them enter without knocking.

“One last thing before you leave,” Anthony replied, his voice cool and flat. “We told you your powers were likely X-gene-mutation based. You wanted to understand them better. We got you a meeting with some mutants – the sort that will not try and get you to live with them in the their little school slash containment unit – to find out more. Will you come?”
Loki could see Maximoff’s sharp desire to refuse, warring with the knowledge that this might be her last chance to find something out. He knew she desperately detested accepting any favour from Anthony, and that that impulse might well win over. “If you don’t,” he said with a slight shrug, “it’ll at least save us the huge favour we’ll no doubt be asked for in return for this meeting. I shudder to think what it’s gonna be.”

It was not a subtle manipulation, but then, Maximoff was not a subtle creature. Her eyes gleamed. “I’ll go,” she said curtly, “if Vision goes as well.”

It was agreed on immediately, and a Quinjet with a stealth mode loaded them up and brought them to a large field in Iowa, a little before the time for the meeting.

Loki did a security sweep with his magic and noticed four people already present, waiting. “They are here,” he muttered.

“All right, that probably means they have teleportation,” Stark replied quietly. “Not many things fly faster than the Quinjet. I suppose they came early to make sure we didn’t call the government on them. Makes sense, I guess.”

They existed the plane, and began to walk towards the waiting group. Their silhouettes were slowly revealing themselves, and Loki saw one woman and three men. A few steps closer, and then began to distinguish faces, and then their expressions. Loki just noticed the look of utter astonishment on Magneto’s when he set his eyes on Maximoff before he, himself, was completely distracted by the figure standing by Magneto’s side.

She was small, and the eyes were yellow instead of red, but there was still no doubt.

There was a frost giant standing right in front of him.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhangers two chapters in a row...sorry about that. Sometimes it’s just the way it works out.

I imagine most of you feel just as relieved by Maximoff being about to leave the compound as Tony does…There are no words for how pissed I am that we see more magic from Wanda “was exposed to the Mind Gem for a while” Maximoff than from Loki “can travel between freakin planets” Liesmith in the films. So, fuck that. Loki will always be able to overpower her with his hands tied behind his back in my stories.

I’m sorry there was no real time for the boys to be together in this one. I’ll be sure to make some next chapter!

Also, this is what I think about that “Tony Stark’s parentage” comics plot point they tried to sell us. Even the Harry Potter fan theories where Harry wasn’t James’ son made more sense, because at least there you could explain away the fact that he looked exactly like his dad and had exactly the same kind of talents with “magic”!

What almost happened to Bruce might require another Science Bros Redux update. Oh, and in case you missed it, the one about Bruce and Wanda and why he gave her a chance has been up for a while.
Loyalties

Chapter Summary

The meeting is...tense. The night after is not much better.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter is SUPER long. Expect the next one to be shorter, probably, though why am I still trying to plan things I have no idea.

TW: some discussion of the shoa/holocaust, some uncomfortable parallels and some parts of it not particularly sensitively handled. If you want to skip, go from where Wanda begins to talk to Magneto about her past to the next occurrence of “Amahl”.

Also later on there is a mention of suicide, after Loki and Tony get back home. If you want to skip that, go from where they begin to talk about Loki’s past to the next mention of “fuck it” (or to the very end of the chapter if you want to be 100% safe without any hints, but you’d miss rather crucial development that way.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki had had no idea there were any frost giants on Earth, and now he was stuck on that thought, unable to move past it. There was a frost giant. Standing right in front of him. He had no idea how to deal with a situation like that, in this context.

“Who are you?” A voice asked, and that threw Loki, because that was exactly what he had been meaning to ask, but the voice is not his.

After some examination, it turned out it belonged to Magneto, and he was looking at Maximoff.

“Wanda Maximoff,” she replied proudly.

“Maximoff...” He looked at her intently for a moment. “Was your mother’s name Vedrana?”

Loki, his mind still busy with other things, vaguely sensed Maximoff next to him immediately going tense. “What do you know of my mother?” She asked.

Magneto didn’t reply, he just stepped closer, and Maximoff shifted into a battle stance.

“You look just like her,” he muttered.

And suddenly, it all clicked in Loki’s mind. He blamed its slowness on the shock of seeing the frost giant.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s an unexpected answer to this particular puzzle.”

“Isn’t it?” Anthony agreed.
“What?” Maximoff asked, fairly seething by now.

When Magneto didn’t look like he was about to clarify, and Maximoff was getting more and more impatient, Vision interjected. “It seems that he is your father, Wanda,” he said.

Maximoff whipped around. “My father,” she hissed, “died when Stark’s missile blew him up when I was a child.”

As much as he didn’t like her, Loki could empathize acutely with Maximoff in this moment. It was never pleasant to know that you have been lied to so fundamentally. And while Magneto was not quite the same kind of monster Laufey was, he was still a wanted criminal. It was a long way from the innocent victim Maximoff was used to claiming for her father.

Loki’s eyes shifted back to the frost giant, a vivid reminder of his own uncovered heritage of violence. What was he supposed to do with her, he wondered?

“Yes,” Magneto replied to Maximoff, and that surprised Loki enough to pull his attention back to him. “He has been more of a father to you than I ever was. Nevertheless, I loved you mother, and I wouldn’t have left if I didn’t have to.”

Maximoff just stared at him, turning back. “So, what,” she said then, “I’m supposed to believe you got my mother pregnant and then left her, and she somehow convinced my father we were his?”

“I doubt he did not know you were not biologically his children,” Magneto returned. “That does not make you any less his, however.”

“So what’s your claim, then?” She asked, mockingly.

“None,” he admitted. “But perhaps there could be one? It seems you inherited powers from me. I would be...glad to help you understand them.”

Maximoff hesitated, anger warring with disbelief and desire to know and belong in her face. Loki was thrown back into his memories once more. He had been only angry, he knew, angry and horrified. But then, perhaps it would have been different had Odin been dead since his childhood. And Maximoff likely didn’t grow up with stories of Magneto’s crimes, not unless her mother felt very vindictive.

That was another difference, of course. Maximoff was allowed to keep her mother. Not all of her identity was uprooted in one fell swoop. That, too, had to change much.

Anthony next to him interjected in the conversation, sounding uncomfortable and drawing Loki’s attention. “I get your reasons, I really do,” he muttered, “but I’m not sure how great I’d feel about actually feeding Avengers-trained people, who know our inner workings, to your semi-terrorist organization.”

Magneto gave him a sardonic look. “Will you fight me over this, then?”

“No,” Anthony said simply. That was enough to reassure Loki, and he only half-listened to the rest, his mind drifting to his own concerns once more and his eyes going to the frost giant. “Definitely not me, in my metal suit,” Anthony was continuing somewhere on the edge of his consciousness. “And I’d much rather avoid any of us having to. But I feel compelled to point out there’d be...complications. As in, I’d probably have to tell the Accords Council – they’d wonder where she went – and, well. All sort of unpleasantness would ensure, for everyone involved.”

Maximoff scoffed at him. “I’m not about to try too hard to spare you inconvenience, Stark,” she
said.

The forst giant, Loki noticed, had markings very different from his own.

“Do you want to return to living on the run again?” Anthony asked in return.

“Wanda,” Vision spoke softly. “Think about this carefully.”

There was a bit of silence. Loki tried to remember Laufey’s markings, and whether they were different or similar. But it had been so long ago, and the only thing he had noticed about his father back then was his monstrosity.

“I don’t know,” Maximoff said. “I don’t even know if I believe him. I just...want to know more about this.”

“I will not rush you,” Magneto replied calmly.

Loki wondered about the eyes. Was it possible there was some type of frost giant unknown to him who had yellow eyes instead of red? He had never read anything like that, but he had to admit that the Asgardian books on frost giant were anything but exhaustive.

“So it was her you wanted our help with?” Magneto asked.

“Yes,” Anthony admitted. “She knows some things that are not for public knowledge. Everyone else who knows them has been put under a geas to prevent them speaking about it, even accidentally. Given her powers, we do not know how to make such a geas. Yet we do not like the idea of her going without.”

“That’s not what you said this was,” Maximoff protested, sounding angry.

Would a different eye colour be indicative of something? And if so, of what? Was she more dangerous, or less? Or did it have no effect?

“I said it was a chance to find out more about your heritage,” Anthony was saying, “and that is what it was, for you. Even more so than I suspected. For me, it’s a chance to get you that geas.”

“And you believe I will help you curtail my own daughter’s freedom?” Magneto asked mockingly.

Anthony sighed. “I’m not asking for those secrets to be locked from your knowledge – I don’t care about you knowing. It’s some others I’d rather keep out of knowledge, and apart from the danger of accidents...well, I’ll be honest. Me and your daughter aren’t on the best of terms, and if I was in her position, I might use all the secrets I might have gathered, too. I’d much rather avoid the rather large mess that would lead to, and having to fix the...far-reaching plans it would spoil.”

There was another moment of silence that Loki vaguely noticed. How did she even get here? He wondered. Has she been here ever since the war? Did she somehow manage to hide from Odin’s armies? And would that make her more dangerous, or less? She would be old, but she would also have lived on Midgard for centuries without causing more violence than these other mutants did...

“You truly believe this could endanger your plan?” Magneto asked from somewhere nearby.

“Yes,” Anthony replied. His eyes went to Loki, and that drew his attention to the conversation once more.

He quickly ran over it in his head. “Fatally so,” he then confirmed. “It could cost us some rather
crucial allies. A large amount of crucial allies, in fact.”

“So the geas would only last until the war was over?” Magneto pressed.

“Yes,” Anthony said immediately, before Loki could consider other options.

“Very well, then,” Magneto agreed after a moment. “If my daughter agrees, Amahl will...look her over, and see what can be done.”

Maximoff tossed her head. “Let him try,” she said, before anyone else could express their opinion. Not that Loki would consider doing so. Her overconfidence played into their hands nicely, and he was a little amused as he watched her march towards the largest companion of Magneto.

Vision seemed worried, but he followed after her, hovering a little.

They began to discuss Maximoff’s unique problem, and Loki felt free to turn his eyes back to his actual object of interest. He decided that, the matter of Maximoff dealt with, there was finally time to address the potentially much more dangerous issue. “What is the frost giant doing here?” He asked.

Magneto stared at him. “A frost giant? What are you talking about?”

“Her,” Loki indicated with a toss of his chin and a roll of his eyes. Was the man stupid?

Magneto frowned. “This is Mystique, my second in command, and she, like me, is a mutant.”

Loki scoffed. “Of course. And pray tell, what is her power? Shapeshifting, perchance? And extreme capability in a fight?”

“How do you know?” The giant asked sharply.

Loki gave another snort. “Please.”

“Shazad has had...some experience with non-terrestrials, in various...visions she has encountered,” Anthony interjected, reminding Loki of the role he was supposed to play. “Does she really look completely like a frost giant?” He asked then with curiosity that was relatively well faked. He knew precisely what a frost giant looked like, of course. Loki had no doubt his monstrous form was burned into the man’s mind. He was leading Loki towards noting the differences.

“The eyes are wrong,” Loki conceded, “but that is a small detail.”

“Could she be only part-Jotun?” Anthony continued pushing.

“I suppose,” Loki agreed reluctantly. It could explain the eyes, but there was any number of other plausible explanations.

The way Anthony had the question ready also told Loki he had noticed the similarity as soon as they arrived, too. Of course he had. The man was a genius, after all, and this was glaring. Amused, Loki realized it was a good thing Thor was not there with them. He might have attacked the moment he spotted her.

“Jotunn? That kind of frost giant?” The creature before him interjected. “The Norse mythology kind? So...it’s not just Thor and Loki who are real?”

“Apparently not,” Magneto commented drily. “Are these Frost Giants tied to Thanos in some way?”
“No,” Anthony reassured immediately.

Magneto frowned. “Then why did she,” he nodded towards Loki, “see them in a vision?”

“Thanos chose various ways to terrify me into submission,” Loki replied bluntly, to divert attention from his blunder. “The Jotunns are...they can be...” he struggled with his words, his conversation with Anthony about the relative monstrosity of Jotunheim and Asgard still fresh in his mind. “They can be hard and unrelenting towards their enemies,” he said at length, “and watching them fight can be disconcerting.”

The giantess in front of him gave a sharp grin. “Then we’re definitely related.” Then she turned towards Magneto, and in a much more uncertain tone, asked: “So...if this was true, I’d be an alien, in fact, not a mutant?”

He shook his head immediately. “You’re one of us,” he said. “It doesn’t matter if part, or all, of your powers comes from somewhere else. Amahl dos not have his powers from an X-gene mutation either. Humans would not see you as any less of a monster, and so I will not see you any less as a mutant.”

The look of relief in her eyes was almost palpable.

Loki still didn’t know what to do with the situation, and Magneto was now looking at him with a calculating expression in his eyes.

“Right,” Anthony said suddenly, sharply. “Mr. Lehensherr, would you mind stepping aside with us for a moment? Not out of sight, just...out of hearing.”

Magneto nodded, looking almost like he expected it, and Loki, though he had no idea what it was about, made their conversation private.

“So, would you mind getting under a geas as well?” Anthony asked him the moment it was done. “Good of the whole world – worlds, in fact – and all.”

“Is it?” Magneto asked archly. “Or is it just your...girlfriend's good we’re talking about?”

Anthony seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then he turned to Loki and said simply: “Explain. I can’t, because, you know. Geas.”

It was a testimony to Loki’s shock over the frost giant's presence that it took him this long to catch on.

Oh.

“I have means of controlling Asgard,” he said simply, seeing no point in dancing around the matter now that Magneto has realized the truth, “and through that, three other realms. With their alliance, defeating Thanos should be not just possible, but even likely. Without them...the chances are very slim indeed. And if Thor finds out where I am – if he even suspects – I will certainly lose this means of control.”

Magneto stayed silent for a moment. “I could refuse, and you could attempt to go against my wishes, and then Amahl would attempt to remove the geas again, and we would descend into an endless battle for the control of my mind. I dislike those. I am usually protected against psychic interference, but being alien, your powers may well work differently, and I am not willing to experiment on my own mind. So yes, I will concede to a geas to protect this information, performed by Amahl under your supervision - if you give me honest answers to my questions. Questions both
about my daughter and about Mystique’s heritage.”

Loki winced a little, internally. But what choice did he have? However, first, it was time for some bargaining. “If your colleague does the geas,” he said, “he can just as easily remove it afterwards. That is not satisfactory.”

“I will not give you access to my mind,” Magneto replied simply.

“Would you give it to Vision?” Anthony tried.

“No.”

Loki considered the problem. “It might be possible,” he said, “to join my powers to your colleague’s in such a way that I would be able to install a failsafe but, if I tried doing anything else, he would be able to stop me. However, I will not know until I speak to him, and he is busy at present. Will you agree, then, to let the geas be done by the least invasive method possible that would ensure you cannot simply have it removed without my knowledge?”

Magneto pressed his lips together in contemplation. “Yes,” he said then, curtly.

“Good. Then we have an agreement.”

Magneto nodded sharply, and cast one look back to Maximoff and his companions, who were still working. “Mystique first, then,” he said.

Loki hesitated. Mere months ago, he would have known what to say immediately, if someone had asked him about the frost giants. Now...now he was torn.

Anthony gave him an encouraging look, and Loki decided to simply start with indisputable facts. “The Jotuns are the people of one of the realms of the Yggdrassil. Yggdrassil, to give a simplified explanation, is a connection of magical pathways between nine worlds. Midgard – your world – is one of them. Asgard, where I was raised, is another. Jotunheim is yet another. Jotuns are not- well. Among mammalian sentient species, there are groups that look alike, due to certain interferences in evolution. It’s complicated, but the point is, whereas Midgardians and Asgardians – as well as the people of Vanaheim – belong to the same grouping, the Jotuns...do not. They are taller, their skin is blue, and their eyes are red. This all in their natural form. Shapeshifting, however, is a common talent. It is not known whether all have it or just most, but...it is widespread.”

Magneto took a moment to absorb the information. “You say there are groups,” he said then. “How do you know Mystique is Jotun, then, and not member of some of those others?”

“Two reasons – the raised markings on her skin, and the shapeshifting. I do not know all the races in the universe, but I do know that the only sentient one who falls into the same group as Jotuns and who lives near enough to be even considered are the Kree. The Kree do not shapeshift. Ever. It is the ability they most despise.” The irony of that has always amused Loki.

“But Mystique’s eyes are different and she is smaller that is usual with the frost giant. So it is, in fact, possible that she is from another species from this group, one you are not aware of?”

“In theory, yes,” Loki confirmed, “but given how well everything else lines up...it is extremely unlikely. Anthony’s theory of mixed blood is much more probable.”

“Is it known to lead to such changes?”

“Truthfully, I do not know. I have never known a half-Jotun. I do know that the size is...not
necessarily a problem. There have been known to be small frost giants. The eyes are more telling, however. And also...well. There was never seen a female Jotun, and it is whispered they only have one sex. I am not certain it is true, but your colleague being visibly female is perhaps another hint.”

Magneto frowned at that. “If the Jotuns are so different from humans, even in their system of reproduction, how could there possibly be a child between them?”

“Shapeshifting,” Loki replied succinctly, not too keen to discuss this. “The Jotun parent would have to be shifted into a human at the time of conception, and if they were the one carrying the child, then for the whole pregnancy.”

“But wouldn’t the child be born completely human then?” Anthony interjected.

“No,” Loki answered, feeling more and more uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. “It would be born looking human – for it would have gestated as such – but the moment it was born, it would revert into its...natural form.”

“It seems extremely complicated and rather far-fetched,” Magneto commented. “Are you certain it cannot be simply accidental similarity?”

“Yes,” Loki replied a little curtly, trying to keep his impatience and discomfort at bay. “It only seems so to you because you are not familiar with shapeshifting species. As I said, if it was only the visual aspect, I could perhaps consider an accident, but...the shapeshifting? The ability to fight? And other small things, like the fact that your colleague is standing over there naked, and Jotuns are known to prefer as little clothes as possible?” Loki was taught to regard it as a sign of their barbarity, but now he wondered. Was there something in Jotun skin that made it uncomfortable wearing clothes, that even one who seemingly – unless she was a very good liar – didn’t know what she was still made this choice?

Magneto exhaled. “Very well. Let us say I believe you. Are there some books available to Mystique to learn more? You seem to know suspiciously little, given that this is supposed to be one of the realms Asgard protects, if I understand the concept correctly.”

Loki shifted on his feet. “Ah, well...there was a war with Jotunheim, around the time I was born. The frost giants are...very unpopular in Asgard now, and not much is written or read about them.”

Magneto nodded, and looked like pieces slotted into place. Loki supposed his rather hostile reaction at the start was in want of an explanation.

“We will return to this problem later, then,” he said. “Now for my daughter.”

Anthony took the word on this. He struggled with speaking neutrally just as much as Loki had on the Jotnar, but still, it did not take long to recall Maximoff’s whole sordid history with him and the Avengers, and Ultron before them. It was when Magneto asked in more detail about that first encounter, and found out Maximoff had joined HYDRA, that all hell broke loose.

“My own children,” he muttered, too many emotions rolling in his voice for Loki to identify, but certainly there was anger and despair there. “My daughter. I will burn them all to the ground.”

“Um, too late for that, I’m afraid,” Anthony muttered. “We took care of that. The base where we found your children was the last active HYDRA base in existence.”

“What of their mother?” Magneto wondered frantically, seemingly not even hearing Anthony. “She knew who I was. What did she teach her children, that they would join HYDRA without hesitation? Did she not tell them where they came from? Did she not tell them they would have
been eradicated like vermin by them, had they not needed them for their power?” He raised his voice enough to carry, and Loki just had time to remove the privacy spell around them. “Amahl! Are you done?”

“Almost,” came the answer. “I have enough information to go on.”

“Good. I need to speak with my daughter.”

Maximoff walked towards them, shooting them all distrustful looks. Magneto’s face was as calm and cool as the surface of a lake, the depths of which were impenetrable.

“I asked them bout your history,” he said. “Now I’d like to ask you. Before you joined the Avengers, what did you do, aside from your short-term cooperation with Ultron?”

“I tried to liberate my country, though the means I chose to do so were misguided,” Maximoff replied in a tone bordering on defiant.

“Misguided?” Magneto asked, and his voice grew dangerous.

Maximoff hesitated.

Loki’s curiosity, however, was piqued. “That sounded very much like a rehearsed line to me,” he muttered. “Tell me, who fed it to you?” An idea occurred to him. “Captain Rogers, perhaps?”

Maximoff frowned at him. “I discussed it with Steve, yes,” she said, more towards Magneto. “He fought HYDRA in the past, and so he wanted to understand how I could join them. When I explained, he understood I was merely trying to protect my country.”

“Did you know who they were?” Magneto asked, like a snake ready to strike.

Maximoff shook her head. “Not when we signed up.”

“And later?”

“We became...suspicious.” She frowned a little as she remembered. “Strucker originally claimed he was a representative of the US government – of the Avengers, in a way – but it became obvious soon enough that it wasn’t true. But honestly, though we didn’t like being lied to, it was mostly a relief. America was the enemy at the time. We wanted nothing to do with them. And we didn’t prod too deep about what exactly Strucker was – he gave us the powers he said he would, and that was enough.”

“So in exchange for that – in exchange for some power – you let yourself be in service of an organisation the goals of which you didn’t even know?” Loki fought the instinctive need to step back. This, he knew, promised to get very dangerous very quickly.

“I wasn’t in service to anyone!” Maximoff snapped. “I don’t care what Strucker wanted to do with us, what we were intending to do was drive every single foreign soldier out of Sokovia. Once we had the powers, we didn’t have to care about Strucker.”

Magneto scoffed. “And it never occurred to you he was planning for precisely that attitude?”

Maximoff curled her lip. “And look how that worked out. He is dead, and I’m still here.”

“But your brother is not!” Magneto barked. “And you are only alive because of the mercy of an organization beholden to the American government you claim to despise!” He calmed a little, and
his voice grew colder. “Mercy, and pragmatism,” he added. “So now you are beholden to them. Very convenient. You signed the Accords, did you not?”

“I did,” she admitted bitterly. Then her eyes flashed. “But what right do you have to criticize? If you are my father at all, you disappeared from my life before I was even born—”

And the blazing anger was back. “I have a right to criticize,” Magneto said in a raised voice, “in fact everyone has the right to criticize, because you used freedom from the persecution my staying would have brought you by joining di farkakte hitlertshikes!”

“I didn’t know that!” Maximoff shouted back. “I didn’t know they had anything to do with Nazis, okay, it’s not like they were shooting Jews in front of me!”

Magneto slapped her.

Her powers came up in defence, and Loki, as before, simply reacted and put her to sleep.

Magneto took a few deep breaths, then turned on the spot and stalked away.

Loki and Anthony simply stood and took deep breaths for a moment.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Anthony muttered at length. “But on the bright side, at least he is probably not gonna be all that interested in recruiting her now?”

Loki looked around, at the shocked expressions of Magneto’s companions – and furious, Mystique looked furious and like she wanted to kill Maximoff – and the worried look on Vision’s face. “Is she well?” The creature asked, drifting closer.

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “She just sleeps, as before.”

“I do not...entirely understand what just happened,” Vision confessed.

“Magneto is Jewish,” Anthony told him succinctly.

“...oh.”

Yes, oh indeed. Loki’s mind was now running in all sorts of unpleasant directions. He made the mistake of trying to draw parallels from his own world to understand the emotional implications better, and perhaps because of the previous topic of conversation, his mind immediately went to the frost giants, and the...genocide he himself had tried to commit.

It’s different, he tried to tell himself. The Jotuns were aggressive too, they were not innocent victims... But his conversation with Anthony about Asgard’s past kept coming back to him, and what was worse, he remembered, too, the few times he had come to Midgard when the last great war was in progress and directly before. He remembered, too well, what was said of the Jewish people at that time. He knew that those who killed them did not believe them to be innocent either.

He suddenly felt a sense of vertigo, and felt Anthony’s hand on his back, steadying him. Magneto was coming back, and Loki forcefully locked all his distress behind his masks. But they needed to wrap this up fast, he knew. He wouldn’t last long. Fortunately, Magneto was unlikely to disagree.

“This is not productive,” he said in that forcefully calm voice one more. “Mystique will want to know more about her origins, my daughter about hers, and I about her history. We should establish regular meetings, an exchange of information, but...later, I believe.”
“Later,” Anthony agreed, “but for now, I do need the geas on her. And on you.”

“Of course.” Magneto sounded resigned now, like he no longer cared. “Amahl?”

The large man approached. “I found a way it can be done, but I am not certain if I am...capable.”

Magneto merely raised his eyebrows at him in clear disbelief.

“It is not about power,” the man hastened to assure him. “It is more...theoretically, I see a way, but it is not a way I am sure my powers are suited to.”

Loki gave the man a more intent look at this hint that his power was great, and the more he looked, the more astonished he was. It was yet another proof of how distracted he had been about the frost giant that he had not noticed until now.

“I believe,” he said to the large man, “we might find a way, and come to a deal, but I need to speak to the jinn in you.”

Amahl blinked at him in surprise, and then his eyes changed.

“What do you offer, then?” He asked in an entirely different voice.

“You will make a geas that will prevent Magneto, Mystique, you and the one other who came with you from speaking of my identity, or give any hints thereof, and share any knowledge about Shazad’s abilities. You will give your word that you will not alter the geas without my say-so.”

“And in return?”

Loki gave a sharp grin. “In return, I will provide you with the opportunity of tasting a different world.”

“Agreed,” the spirit boomed immediately.

Loki looked around, and at nods from all of Magneto’s companions, the deal was struck and the spell was cast. “So,” Loki said then, “what is your idea about the geas on Maximoff?”

The spirit let the man back in, and in a more human-sounding voice, the answer came: “As far as I can tell, all of her abilities are offensive. She has no ability to shield. She is also more capable of blunt work that anything refined, much like myself. However, her offence can be turned inward, to any foreign element she finds in her own mind. So what needs to be done is bypassing this...”

“You speak of tricking her mind,” Loki realized.

“Essentially, yes,” the man agreed.

In spite of everything, a slow, honest grin spread over Loki’s face. “That, I can do,” he assured.

Of course, it means working while Maximoff was still asleep, but with Magneto no longer inclined to oppose it, the only one to truly protest was Vision.

“I get why you don’t like this,” Anthony told him tiredly, “and I’d have preferred to avoid it, too, but...do you have another solution?”

Vision did not, and so he resigned himself to watching attentively as Loki set to work.

It was a delicate process, necessarily done in such a way that Maximoff’s more blunt powers would
not notice anything amiss, and so it was much more time consuming than the instantaneous geas
would normally be. But within half an hour, they were still done, Maximoff thoroughly
discouraged from mentioning Shazad’s special powers to anyone but those who already knew of
them.

“Impressive work,” Amahl muttered when Loki stepped away.

“Thank you,” he conceded with a nod. “Are we ready to go?” Meeting the spirit had distracted him
a little, but the effort just now had exhausted him, and he could feel his intrusive thoughts clawing
their way to the surface once more.

“We are,” Anthony confirmed. “Wake Maximoff, please.”

Loki did.

“We’re leaving,” Anthony told her curtly, before she had time to speak, and with a nod to Magneto,
turned around. As the group of mutants started to walk away, too, Maximoff followed after him
with some hesitation, and only after Vision put a hand on her elbow. Loki went last, to make sure
nothing untoward happened before their escape.

The, finally, it was back to the quinjet and to the Avengers compound, where Anthony let
FRIDAY know to tell Thor to come for Maximoff the following day even as they nodded to her
and Vision and headed to the man’s rooms.

Once alone, Anthony simply collapsed into bed.

“I’m exhausted,” he muttered.

“No wonder,” Loki agreed. “Sleep.” He waved his hand, and Anthony was without clothes.

“You just missed Valentine’s Day, you know,” the man muttered sleepily. “It was yesterday. The
perfect opportunity to have extravagantly good sex. I’d hoped we could make up for it today.”

Loki lightly caressed his exposed back. “Tomorrow,” he said. “What’s one more days’ delay?”

“All right,” Anthony agreed, borrowing deeper under the covers, already half-asleep. “Tomorrow.”

Loki himself did not sleep. His thoughts were troubled and restless, coming back to Magneto’s
expression when he heard about his daughter joining HYDRA, and to his own crimes, to directing
the Bifrost to Jotunheim and letting go…

Would Laufey had looked the same, he wondered, had he known before he died? Had he known
his son was raised by his greatest enemy, raised to despise him and his entire race?

But no, this at least was not the same. Magneto left his children because he had to, while Laufey
had abandoned him to die- Maximoff might have felt abandoned, when she found out, but she
hadn’t been, not truly, and as soon as she had a proper conversation with Magneto she would
know-

And suddenly Loki’s mind came to a screeching halt.

As soon as she had a proper conversation with Magneto… Something he never had with his
biological father, had he?

How did he know, actually know, that he had been abandoned?
The shock of this realization was such that Loki couldn’t stop the sound from leaving his throat, something between a groan, a sob and a scream, a feeling of fury and despair starting to consume him.

Anthony, next to him, woke.

“Loki?” He asked sleepily. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Loki tried to say, but he choked on his words.

He could feel Anthony becoming more alert, and his arms around him tightening. “Babe,” he said. “Something’s obviously the matter. Was it nightmares?”

Loki shook his head. “I did not sleep.”

“Then...” he could feel Anthony frown against his neck. “Is it because of meeting the half-Jotun yesterday?”

“Partly,” Loki admitted, his voice more under control now. “I simply...realized something, another likely lie of Odin’s. It is getting to be a little too many.”

“Tell me about it?” Anthony prodded softly.

Loki hesitated, but his anger demanded to be spoken of. “Odin told me that my biological father, Laufey, cast me aside, left me to die,” he said. “I just realized I only have his word for it, and he, as we know, is a liar.”

Anthony pulled away a little. “All right, I grant you that’s suspicious. Would you...consider asking Laufey?”

Loki laughed bitterly. “I killed him, quite some time ago,” he said.

Anthony stared at him mutely for a moment. “Was it before or after you found out...?”

“After.”

There was a long silence. “I don’t want to pry too much,” Anthony said then, “but would you consider sharing the whole story? Because otherwise my brain won’t stop trying to fill in the blanks, and I’d much rather have it from you, and in the way it actually happened.”

Loki shrugged. He might as well. Perhaps it would distract him from the growing desire to go and murder Odin where he slept. “It all started when Odin tried to make Thor king when he wasn’t ready,” he began. “Or, well, when he was even less ready than he is now. Since my objections were ignored and just called jealousy, I arranged for a few frost giants to get inside the weapons vault in the middle of the coronation, thus disturbing it. I knew they would be killed by our defense mechanisms, so there was no actual danger to Asgard.

“Thor was furious, and he insisted on retaliation. Odin forbid him. I saw an opportunity to further illustrate my brother’s – as I believed then - complete lack of fitness to be king, since so far I was not certain whether I have achieved what I wanted, even though Thor’s argument with Odin was fierce. So I prodded at Thor’s resentment a little and told him that he can do nothing unless he wants to go against Odin’s orders. His arrogance did the rest.”

He scowled in remembered anger, on with Odin but with someone else this time. “This was when my plans went awry. I expected Heimdall to stop us, but he was too curious to find out how had the
frost giants escaped his notice, and was willing to risk his prince’s life to get his answers. He let us
go to Jotunheim. Thankfully, I always have fail-safes in place, so I also told a palace guard to let
Odin know where we went beforehand. Because of course once among the Jotnar, Thor let himself
be provoked into an attack, and we would have all died there had Odin not come to rescue us. He
then banished Thor to Earth to punish his disobedience. That’s how he first came to be here.”

“So...this was what happened before you sent the Destroyer here?” Anthony asked.

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “That and...a few other things. In the fight in Jotunheim, one of the frost
giants touched me, and instead of being burned by the cold, my skin turned blue. Jotnar blue.
I...began to suspect, and went to the weapons vault to test it against the stolen weapon of Jotunheim
I told you about. It turned me into a frost giant. Odin found me there, and I confronted him and
asked for the truth. So he told me. He told be he found me abandoned in a temple and saved me
and raised me. Then, in the face of my anger, he fell into Odinsleep, and my mother – Frigga -
headed me the throne.”

“It must have been...hard,” Anthony muttered. “To take on the rule under such circumstances.”

Loki laughed, bitter. “Well, I reacted by sending the Destroyer, attempting to kill Thor and
succeeding in killing Laufey. Also, do you remember when I told you I believed it was my duty to
destroy all the Jotnar? That was directly after I found out, too. That was how well I took it.”

Anthony closed his eyes. “Why killing Thor?” He asked after a moment.

“It hadn’t really been my plan,” Loki confessed. “I just wanted to stay on the throne long enough to
prove my loyalty to Asgard, to prove that I might be a frost giant by blood but I would never be one
by choice...and I think I also wanted to wipe out the monsters so that no one could link me to them
any more. So I went down to Earth and told Thor Odin was dead, and I could not revert his last
order, which was banishing Thor, without being disrespectful. It would have worked, except
Thor’s friends promptly went to Heimdall, who did not hesitate to betray his lawful king one more
and sent them to Midgard. I could also point out that to a smaller degree they were my friends, too,
but in truth I never saw most of them that way. Sif, at least, has always detested me. Some of them
I expected more of, yes, and I was...not at my best, so I perhaps took it more personally than I
would have otherwise. I saw the Destroyer to try and prevent them from talking to Thor, but I was
too late. So then I wanted to incapacitate him for some time to stop him from coming, but I
underestimated how fragile his humanity made him. I would have killed him, if not for his powers
coming back in that moment.”

Anthony frowned. “Convenient. How did that happen?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Odin took them away until he becomes worthy. He put himself between the
Destroyer and his friends, and voila!”

“Wait, are you telling me that until then, your brother was enough of an asshole that he never
risked his life for his friends, even though they were in battles all the time?” Anthony asked
incredulously.

“No...but I suppose, him being mortal at the time, it counted for more.”

“So what happened then?”

“Heimdall went against my orders once more – but who’s even counting now – and brought Thor
and his friends back. Meanwhile, I had gone to Jotunheim and tricked Laufey into coming to
Asgard to kill Odin. I then stopped him – in front of my mother, to have a witness no one could
doubt – and killed him. Thor arrived in that very moment, and…” He trailed off, less willing to talk about that part.

“And?” Anthony asked. When the silence continued, he ventured: “Was this when you fell?”

“Yes,” Loki admitted. “I meant to turn the Bifrost against Jotunheim, use it as a weapon. You know what it is, you know how destructive it could be.”

Anthony only nodded.

“Thor followed me there. We fought, he won and destroyed the Bifrost. The resulting explosion threw us off the bridge. We were barely clinging to it when Odin arrived to save us, my actions having woken him from his sleep.”

Anthony gave him a horrified look. “He didn’t pull you up?” He asked.

“Oh no, he would have,” Loki returned. “But I let go.”

There was a very long silence, and then Anthony was embracing him tightly, his head buried in Loki’s neck, and slightly shaking.

Loki had no idea how to react, and so he simply held him in turn.

Then, hesitantly, Anthony spoke. “Do you still…?”

“No,” Loki assured him immediately. Not even now, when his hatred for Odin burned brighter than ever and he hated himself more than at any point before, was he considering it. “After all, the first attempt did not go too well for me, did it?” He tried to joke feebly.

“That’s not-” Anthony pulled away to look at Loki, and there was despair in his eyes. “Please. I can’t- I don’t have any words for this, just don’t, I-” Anthony gave a sharp exhale. “Fuck it. I love you, all right?”

Loki could only stare at him.

“I tried to play it cool, to remember it’s been like a month or so for you, I tried to go slow, but I just- I have nothing else to say to this, all right? So I don’t care if you think this is just convenience talking or whatever, I love you. Please don’t- don’t leave me,” the last words were whispered against his neck again, like a dirty secret Anthony was ashamed and afraid to admit.

Loki did not know what to feel or thing. His anger at Odin and bitterness about the past receded to the background, to be supplanted by confusion and surprise. “I- I don’t-”

“I know, Loki,” Anthony interrupted him, his voice shaking slightly. “I know you don’t feel the same, all right, you don’t have to say it.”

“That’s not what I was about to say,” Loki corrected him sharply, Anthony’s panic giving him unexpected clarity all of a sudden. “I…care for you, at the very least. And after some more time spent together, I have to concede that we have much to build on. But I can’t promise you not to leave. I don’t know where my duties will take me. I might die in this war. I might be imprisoned again. There are so many possibilities, and I-”

“I know,” Anthony interrupted once more. “I know. Just don’t- please don’t leave me willingly. I know it’s selfish, but if you ever want to, for any reason, in any way, could you come to me, please? Could you talk to me? There might still be a way out, and I...”
“I will,” Loki promised, without even thinking about it.

And, he supposed, that was its own confession.

Chapter End Notes

So. That was turbulent. Also did not go the way I planned it at all, but oh well.

Writing with one character talking in All-Speak is complicated. So yes, technically he would hear the meaning of Magneto’s Yiddish, not the particular phrase, but I wanted to convey how angry he was by slipping into his mother tongue, so this once you got what Tony heard instead. And when Loki says jinn, he is actually using some Asgardian term for that, and Tony probably hears spirit, but Amahl hears jinn, and since Loki is speaking chiefly to him in that scene, I chose to write ‘jinn’. Never mind the fact that Amahl also hears Loki in Egyptian Arabic, probably. If I took that into account (and Wanda hearing him in Sokovian), I’d go entirely insane.
Forgiveness

Chapter Summary

Loki considers what happened, and what will happen next.

Chapter Notes

This is a bit of a transition chapter, but oh well. Has to be done,

TW for Loki, as part of his personal hangups about himself, using derogatory language for the not-sexually-dimorphic characteristics of the Jotnar. If you want to skip, go from Loki beginign to discuss his Jotun skin to the next break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They lay curled together for a long time, Loki’s arms around Anthony as he petted his back and thought.

He should not, he felt, be so affected by this, so moved by the confession from this man. Yes, it was true that no one had told him they loved him since Frigga died, but it hadn’t been so very long since her death in Loki’s count.

It was more that...there was a dearth of other people in Loki’s life who had ever told him they loved him. Or rather, who had told him that and meant it.

When he had still been young, at the time of his first sexual encounters, plenty of his Asgardian dalliances liked to confess their love. It was before he got in the habit of masking his identity, and they believed they could worm their way into their prince’s favour by a few words and a good handjob.

Loki soon learned to ignore this. Thankfully, his mother had taught him how to spot manipulation, aware that in his position he might be subjected to it, from an early age.

But for those who were genuine, or at least believed so..

*He could be lying because he knew you were vulnerable and so receptive*, his mind whispered to him, but he shut those thoughts down. He couldn’t stop them from coming, but when he was not completely emotionally fraught, he knew it was not productive to think in this way without a hint of proof. Whatever issues he had with betrayals from the past – trust issues, Stark called them – he knew, from his books about anchorage if nothing else, that he must not allow them to poison those of his relationships that remained at least a little healthy. Given that, at this point, it was only the one with Anthony, that made it all the more crucial.

So, no. Anthony had in all likelihood meant what he said, and of others who did so in the past...only one came to mind.
Loki had still been relatively young, it was only the second man he had ever lay with with all it entailed. He had been young, too. Loki had managed to steal whole three weeks on Alfheim, in a different form, to spend with him. The boy – young man, really – had not know who he was, and he confessed his love within a week.

Leaving had broken Loki’s heart back then.

He learned his lesson from that and never stayed this long afterwards, and picked older lovers and those more casually minded, where the danger of emotional entanglement was minimal.

Until now, apparently.

But Anthony was not a man in his adolescence, by years lived he was perhaps as much as twice Loki’s age – not quite, but near enough - and to hear the confession of love from him…

And when he heard it, too – when Faelan had confessed his love, Loki, though he valued it, also knew it was false in a way, because Faelan did not truly know him, did not know who he was.

But Anthony…Anthony knew all of Loki’s darkest secrets.

He didn’t know every single thing about him, no, but all the most repulsive things about Loki – his monstrosity, his crimes – and his plot in Asgard now, his manipulation of Anthony when they met in Siberia, all those things he could mind...he knew about them already.

And he still…

He told Loki he loved him directly after Loki reminded him of the terrible crime he had tried to commit and Loki had not a shadow of a doubt that Anthony found the act itself repulsive - he still remembered the man’s face from when he had first mentioned it – but Anthony was still willing to put it aside, to forgive it as a crime lying in the past.

It was incredible. It was something far beyond Loki’s understanding. It awed him, but he also felt that he owed a debt, a debt he could never repay.

He lay in Anthony’s embrace, drifting between wakefulness and sleep, most of the night. Every time his mind became a little clearer, as the night proceeded, the same idea kept returning: that he was not worthy of all this. Of this man, this love, this forgiveness.

He was tired of that – it reminded him of Odin too much, or years of trying to be good enough, only to fail so miserably. He even felt flashes of anger at Anthony, which he knew made no sense. But why, why did the man forgive him? Why something as terrible as this?

By the time Anthony woke for the first time, in early morning, he was so highly strung that he almost barked the question, rising on his elbow: “Why do you forgive me?”

Anthony blinked up at him sleepily. “Forgive you...what?”

“All of my crimes, in truth, but what I mean is the most terrible one,” Loki said sharply. “What I tried to do to the Jotnar.”

Anthony sighed, and suddenly seemed much more awake. “I don’t think I could have,” he said slowly, shifting up to half-sit in bed, “if you did it in your right mind. Ever since you told me, it kept coming up in my mind, and I told myself over and over that I didn’t know the context, and that you admitted that you messed up, but at the same time you spoke about it like it was in the past and you no longer believed these things, so it was no longer you, it was no longer
relevant...but still, if you simply told me that at one point in your life you decided, after some serious consideration, that the best solution to the problem of Asgard’s enemies was destroying their planet...I don’t think I could have forgiven it, not really. I’d have always wondered if it could happen again.”

“And now you don’t?” Loki asked him bitterly.

Anthony shook his head immediately. “No, because I don’t plan to let anyone ever do something like that to you again, even if I have to engineer a golden apple and go kick Asgard’s ass in person,” he said forcefully, but then his voice gentled. “What you told me wasn’t an evil master plan, Loki, it was a tragedy. If it tells me something, it’s that no one should have so much power – power to simply destroy a world when they’re having a mental breakdown. But the blame in that situation wouldn’t go to you.”

“I still made the decision,” Loki pointed out stubbornly.

Anthony shrugged awkwardly from his position on the bed. “Sure. How long was it since you found out about your heritage?”

“Hours,” Loki admitted.

Anthony gave a nod. “That’s what I thought. You had no business being on the throne, and...” He trailed off.

“What?” Loki asked impatiently.

“Well, don’t hate me for this, but I can’t help but wonder what your mother was thinking.”

Loki sighed. He had wondered the same thing many times in the past, had even asked her when he was imprisoned, and so he had a very good idea. “She believed that not giving me the throne would be even worse,” he explained. “She wanted to express her support, to tell me that she trusted me even though she knew what I was.”

“And so she put the fate of an entire planet in the hands of someone mentally unstable at the moment,” Anthony finished drily with a raised eyebrow.

“I never said it as a good decision,” Loki reminded him. “But...I understand why she made it. She was...I think she was always our mother more than she was a queen. I suppose someone had to balance out Odin.”

Anthony sighed. “Without wanting to defend him in any way...you know someone had to put the country, or realm or whatever, first.”

Loki scoffed. “Yes, but that is not what Odin did, as should be apparent by him wanting to crown Thor when he did. No, when I said he was always more of a king than a father, I mean that he always looked at us more like pieces in a political game than his sons. Me, chiefly – understandable, given that I wasn’t his son.”

“No, there’s nothing understandable about that,” Anthony protested.

Loki rolled his eyes. “I blame him for his lies and crimes, but not for this. It would be different if he simply adopted me out of a sentimental choice, but he took me as a war prize from a conquered world, because I could possibly turn out to be a useful piece, politically speaking. This is not the sort of child you try to become emotionally attached to. No, but even with Thor...I have had a lot of time to think when I was imprisoned, and this was one of the things I considered. I have seen
fathers with children in Asgard, and that was not how Odin treated Thor. He couldn’t afford to, not entirely, but still.”

“Thor always seemed to speak of his father fondly, at least as long as he remembered his childhood,” Anthony mused.

Loki simply gave him a look. Anthony was surprised by this? “Of course,” he said. “Thor is blind. The fact is, Odin always did his best to turn us against each other for some reason. Frigga did what she could to undo his work, so we managed to mostly get on for a long time, but the more I remembered his interactions with us, the more I realized how much he did to make us be jealous of each other, and competitive instead of brotherly.”

Anthony frowned. “If this whole thing with Hela is true...do you think it might have something to do with that?”

Loki considered it. “I suppose it is possible. If one child turned against him, he might be afraid of us doing so as well. From what I saw, it cost him a lot to defeat her. Perhaps he thought that if we managed to unite our powers, he would be defenceless against us. And...I’ve been assuming she was kept a dirty secret, but if she wasn’t, if she was raised at court and indulged and then turned against him...well, it would perhaps explain why he kept his distance, in a way, from Thor.”

“Oh he was just a bastard,” Anthony pointed out.

“Oh that, yes,” Loki agreed easily.

There was a short silence, then Anthony reached for him and pulled him to his chest to embrace him. “What you did to Jotunheim was fucked up,” he muttered into Loki’s ear. “But given the circumstances, as long as you never try anything like that again, we’re good.”

Loki allowed himself to relax a little, but still he continued with being contrary. “I still have the power,” he reminded Anthony. “The power you said no one should wield.”

“Yeah, well...I’m willing to pronounce you provisionally mentally stable enough that it can stand until we’re done with Thanos. After that, we can start discussing what to do about it.”

Loki raised his eyebrow at him. “You would try to take Bifrost from Asgard?”

“Nah. Just...do you know something about how our nukes are managed?”

“No much,” Loki admitted.

“There’s a bunch of keys, usually, and at least two people – sometimes more – have to be present with their keys and codes to launch the bombs. I think you guys would benefit from something like this.”

“It is used for everyday travel,” Loki pointed out. “It cannot be overly complicated.”

“Between us, I’m pretty sure we can think of something. But for now, we’re good.” Then Anthony grimaced. “Unless you get mind-controlled again. Please never get mind-controlled again.”

“I assure you,” Loki answered grimly, “after Thanos, I have made precautions. Even for Vision, it would be difficult, and no one with less power than the Mind Gem should be capable of it.”

“Good,” Anthony said, satisfied. The he tugged himself lower on the bed even as he asked: “So, can I go back to sleep again?”
Loki nodded with a resigned expression, and as Anthony tucked himself around him, contemplated what he found out.

It was reassuring that Anthony’s devotion wasn’t blind, that he could still see Loki’s failings clearly and simply decide to accept them, instead of overlooking them. It eased Loki’s feeling of unworthiness.

This kind of love wasn’t absurd and incomprehensible, but it was still precious. It was precious beyond measure, and Loki felt grateful and humbled by it.

But there was still a hint of imbalance in it.

There were months of devotion behind what Anthony had said, what he felt, months of appreciation and longing, and all Loki could give back was the light, surface affection of a few weeks, be them few weeks they saw each other often.

The time difference had never brothered him before, but now it did, acutely.

How was he ever to repay this in kind? How was he to erase the inequality between them?

He pressed Anthony closer to himself. He did not know, but he knew he wished to try.

- 

Loki didn’t sleep exactly easily even later on, and Anthony barely let go of him during the night. They woke again late in the morning, entangled with each other, and transferred seamlessly into languid sex – lovemaking, Loki supposed he could call it now, at least from Anthony’s side – that nevertheless left them both flushed and out of breath.

“I’m sorry to disturb, boss,” FRIDAY’s voice sounded into the silence, “but Thor’s gonna be here in about fifteen minutes, to take Ms Maximoff away.”

Anthony groaned. “Responsibilities,” he muttered. “Sometimes I hate them.”

Loki’s agreement was more than wholehearted.

Nevertheless, they got up and dressed and welcomed Thor in a mostly presentable state, Loki as Shazad. Thor was all serious, understanding what such a conflict as this between shield-brothers meant, but Dr. Foster seemed to be mostly brimming with curiosity. And since Thor took Anthony aside to discuss the matter with him, she was left talking to Loki.

“What happened exactly, do you know?” She asked.

Loki gave her a surprised look. “I thought Thor consulted with you?”

“Yes, but he only told me that there was conflict and distrust from both sides, and some bad blood from the past. Darcy – my assistant, don’t know if you remember her – keeps pestering me for details.”

“That’s a good enough summary, I suppose,” Loki replied lightly. “Bruce has no memory of Maximoff except from when they were enemies, and she hurt him a lot, where it hit him the hardest. He expected an apology. She wasn’t too keen to give one, and they argued. Maximoff thought she was in danger from the Hulk, and so she tried using a sleeping spell on him.”

Foster grimaced. “Ouch,” she said. “What happened then?”
“A timely intervention prevented something worse. FRIDAY called Tony,” Loki replied, technically not even lying. “But...Bruce was very, very angry, and so was Tony.”

“I get that.” Foster paused, then frowned. “Do you think she’ll try something like that on Thor?”

“Hmm. Interesting point.” In fact, Loki didn’t even consider it, since Maximoff, as far as he knew, had no personal issues with Thor, but now that he thought about it, it wasn’t all that unlikely. “Maybe he should ask Vision to give him some mental shields?” He suggested. “Just to be sure...”

Foster nodded. “I’ll tell him.”

Thor and Anthony had left some time ago to get Maximoff, but the moment they came back, Foster presented the As with her proposal. A sad look appeared on his face.

“Thank you, Jane, that is an excellent suggestion indeed. My brother would often provide me with such shields...I can only hope Vision’s are half as good.”

Anthony’s grimace was small, but to Loki, plainly visible. Frankly, he had to fight one himself. Suddenly he felt very uncomfortable. As Odin, he was used to lying about this to everyone’s faces, but here he was used to more honestly.

Dangerous, he thought, this is all so very dangerous... And yet, he did not even truly consider stopping any more. Not after last night.

He would see this to the end, whatever it may turn out to be.

-  

After Thor left with Foster and Maximoff, Anthony turned to Loki with a hopeful expression. “So,” he said, “about making up for Valentine’s Day – since, you know, there is no longer any point in me pretending it’s just about sex – wanna go to the museum with me? Finally see that other Met I mentioned last time?”

Loki agreed readily enough. Visual arts were never of primary interest to him, so while he frequently – for him – attended different theatres and concerts, he had never been to one of the galleries.

As it turned out, that was a mistake.

It was, Loki had to admit, truly worth seeing. Midgardian art had a much wider variety of subjects than Asgardian one, and more recently, less propensity to overuse gold and to display their glorious warriors.

When Anthony noticed his tastes ran decidedly more towards the modern, he was amused. “Not very patriotic of you,” he muttered.

“If you had to admire as many heroic paintings of someone raised as your brother, you would understand,” Loki replied.

Anthony only grimaced in response. “Next time, I’ll take you to the MoMO,” he said. “Modrian has to satisfy even you with its lack of heroics.”

Loki had no idea what Anthony was talking about, so he stayed silent and concentrated on the paintings.
There was one that captured him especially, and he stood in front of it, transfixed, as Anthony moved several steps away before he noticed Loki wasn’t with him.

“Ha,” he muttered. “Should have known something like this would be to your liking. It’s really famous, you know, so you have good taste I suppose. I don’t know shit about art, so it’s not like I can judge.”

“This is celebrated art here?” Loki asked a little incredulously. He himself found it amazing, but he did not imagine many would agree.

“Depends who you ask. There’s plenty of people who dis abstract art as a whole, to be honest. But the actual experts...yeah, they love this.” He peered at the plaque. “Right, Pollock. I knew it was famous.”

“He is...celebrated for this?”

“Yep. One of the most famous 20th century painters.”

Loki shook his head in mute astonishment. For an Asgardian, he went to Midgard often, but clearly not often enough, and not for long enough time.

Anthony had to almost drag him away from the painting, promising to return at some point, and all in all they spent so much time in the modern art section they didn’t have enough left for the rest of the exhibition before the museum closed.

“I think you wouldn’t have liked it that much anyway,” Anthony assured him, “but we can check it out next time we come here.”

Loki inclined his head. “Did you wish to have dinner now?” He asked then.

“That was the original plan, but to be honest I’m knackered. Would you mind if we went home and had that dinner some other evening? Museums always tire me.”

As they were currently in a secluded enough side street, instead of an answer, Loki teleported them back home.

True to his words, Anthony collapsed into bed once more, but then he extended his arms towards Loki. “Come here,” he muttered. “What I said about extravagant good sex on Valentine’s still stands.”

Loki went willingly enough, and given Anthony’s tiredness, took charge, putting him on his back and bending over, his mouth and tongue devoting much attention to every sensitive spot he could find before he finally took Anthony, to his ecstatic moans.

“Your lips,” the man said afterwards, when he could breathe again, “should be a crime. Actually, every part of you should be a crime, it’s all so unfairly perfect.”

He stroked Loki’s chest as he said it, gazing up at him with a smile that was a bit besotted, but Loki’s mind went into an uncomfortable direction and he frowned a little.

“What is it, babe?” Anthony asked, a little worried.

He shook his head. “Nothing.” There was no need to bother Anthony with his personal issues.

At the patient look his lover gave him, he sighed in resignation and explained: “I simply wonder if
you are always seeing my Jotun skin when you look at me now.”

Anthony gave a small sigh of his own. “No. I told you, if this is how you see yourself, this is how you look to me. The end.”

Loki shook his head incredulously. “Really? Just yesterday I spoke of another aspect of Jotun monstrousity, and you do not care at all?”

Anthony blinked at him in confusion. “Monstrosity?”

“Do not play stupid with me.” Loki’s tone was gaining in sharpness now.

“I’m not, I genuinely don’t...oh. You mean that Jotuns don’t have sexual dimorphism?” Anthony’s voice took on a careful aspect that Loki could not entirely identify. “What, exactly, do you find so monstrous about that?”

Loki pursed his lips. “It just is.”

“So...you don’t mind being turned into a woman, but the thought of this bothers you?”

“It is different.”

“Different how?”

Loki searched for words, in vain.

“Let me help you out,” Anthony said after a moment of silence. “There are humans who exhibit aspects of both of our sexes. Do you find that monstrous?”

“No,” Loki replied immediately.

He felt Anthony relax against him. “So it’s just another manifestation of your Jotun hang-ups, then,” he summarized.

“I suppose.” Loki sighed. “I remember what you told me, about monstrousity, but it is not so easy to accept and internalize. I have despised them for a very long time.”

“I understand. And it’s fine.” He chuckled a little. “I know that if I found something like that out, about a species I had some claim to, I’d have been too curious not to try and find out as much as I could, but I get why you weren’t.”

Loki couldn’t help his grimace of distaste. No, he was not indeed. “I certainly have a penis in that form too, if that is what you are wondering about,” he replied drily.

Anthony rolled his eyes at him. “I’m not wondering about anything, Loki. I told you I’d never push you to have sex in that form unless you wanted to.”

Loki stared at him for a moment. “You truly would have sex with...with me in that form, even with knowing this?”

Anthony gave him an unimpressed look. “I’ve slept with both intersex and genderfluid people before. I don’t discriminate in my bed.”

And the thing was, Loki had too. People who objected significantly limited their options in Alfheim, and while Loki preferred his partners to be within the roughly three men-like genders the elves had, he had made exceptions often enough, especially when the partners more unlike his
usual preference came as part of a bigger group.

It has never bothered him with the elves. With the Jotnar, on the other hand...

Yes, it was all prejudice, just prejudice sitting in his head, but he could not dislodge it. And that, that was irritating beyond measure.

The next day, as they emerged from Anthony’s rooms, they found James, Danvers and Drew sitting in the communal space.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Drew said as soon as she spotted Anthony.

“All right,” the man said hesitantly, sitting on the sofa opposite to her.

“First, let me say that I absolutely understand your decision to send Maximoff away, and I’m not disputing it,” she began.

“But?” He asked, tense. “I’m sensing a but, and I don’t like it.”

Drew sighed. “How much has Carol told you about the origins of my powers?”

Anthony shrugged. “Nothing, really. Just that you were her best friend and were powerful.”

“Yeah.” She bit her lip. “So, the thing is, I used to work for HYDRA, too.”

Now Anthony was tense as a bowstring. “What?” He snapped.

Drew merely shrugged, as if the whole thing didn’t concern her. “My father was a HYDRA agent, worked for them as a scientist. I accidentally became his experimental subject. After my mother found out, HYDRA took me and kept me in an artificially induced coma for ten years, then woke me and did their best to mould me into their obedient little soldier. It didn’t go well for any of us, thanks to your friend Fury’s intervention. But the point is, out of all of you here, I can perhaps relate to her position best.”

Anthony shook his head. “If what you’re saying is true, I don’t really see the similarities. You were kidnapped and brainwashed. She joined voluntarily.”

Drew shrugged again. “The way I understand it, she was misled about the nature of the organization she was joining, just as I was.”

“Oh? And what did they tell you?”

“That they were all about setting the world right, about justice and charity and all that.” Drew’s tone was so bitterly mocking Loki was almost jealous.

“Right,” Anthony said curtly, and Loki noticed some of the tension actually leaving him. “They promised Maximoff power to destroy her enemies.”

Drew sighed. “Isn’t that what we all want, on some level? We’re not planning to have tea with
Thanos, after all.” She put up her hand against objections. “I’m not condoning what she did. I believe I could get through to her, that’s all I’m saying.”

Anthony gave her a tired look. “So you want to be transferred to New York, is that it?”

She frowned at him. “I don’t want to be transferred anywhere. I like it here. But I feel that’s where I would be most useful, so I was thinking perhaps part-time? I didn’t discuss it with him, but maybe we could take turns with Vision?”


He rose to leave the room again. Loki followed, but James soon caught up with them. “Tony,” he said, with emphasis. “She’s not taking Maximoff’s side. Trust me. You weren’t there for that conversation, but...well, I don’t know if you noticed, but as the two experiments gone wrong here, Jessica and Bruce have bonded a little.”

Anthony grinned, though it was tense. “Oh? Does our good doctor have a propensity towards spiders?”

James rolled his eyes at him. “Platonically, though I’m sure that’s hard for you to understand. Anyway...she was pissed after what happened, trust me on that one. But she and Carol weren’t here for Ultron and the Civil War, and so they have a bit more distance. That distance might be helpful in this situation.”

Anthony merely nodded. “I get it,” he said. “It still doesn’t feel great.”

“And I get that,” James agreed with a nod of his own, and left them to return to the communal space with a remark thrown over his shoulder about how Loki should find time for him and some books discussion at some point.

“Look at us,” Anthony muttered as they walked back towards their room. “You told me we should base this around a bit more professionalism than the previous Avengers, and what happened? We’re all tied together by romance and friendship once more.”

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing, Anthony,” Loki replied.

Anthony only looked at him. No, but it could be, sat, unsaid, in his gaze.

Loki went back to Asgard three days later, three days of great sex and pleasant company, not only Anthony’s, but James’ and Bruce’s, too, when his...partner, he supposed, was busy. He was as reluctant to leave as always, but at least he was rested, and he had very particular plans for his stay.

The first of these was to send Fandral for Thor.

He spent the day with some diplomacy and, mostly, careful checking of the palace security. And also with steeling himself for what was to come, because when Thor arrived, he took him aside for a private conversation.

“Your visit to Sakaar, and the insubordination of its Grandmaster, caught my attention,” he said, settling behind a desk in Odin’s office, preferring to have some barrier between himself and Thor for this. “I grew more interested in the realm. I kept my eye on it, you could say.” He made a dramatic pause, then added in a falsely casual tone: “Imagine my surprise when I caught hints of your brother’s possible presence.”
Thor stared at him for a long moment. “My brother is dead,” he stated then, stonily. “He died in my arms.”

“I remember,” Loki replied, trying his best to sound solemn and not vaguely frustrated, which was how he felt. “It could, naturally, be an impostor – in fact, under the circumstances it is probably the most likely answer. Still, that is not something we can simply let be either, someone pretending to be a Prince of Asgard.”

“That is true,” Thor agreed reluctantly and grimly. “I will go there and find the truth of these rumours,” he added then, determined.

“Ah, no,” Loki interrupted him, hoping he did not sound too quick to do so. “I fear that if it is truly your brother and he is hiding from us, you would only put him on his guard. You were never quite his match in subtlety.”

“No,” Thor agreed with that sad smile that got on Loki’s nerves so much. “Hardly anyone was.”

“Precisely. That is why I cannot send anyone else from Asgard either. Loki knows us, knows our ways and the people I have at my disposal for such tasks, the few people I trust enough for such a task. He would spot them from a mile away.”

“What do you intend to do, then?” Thor asked him with a frown.

“That is why I called you here – beside, of course, informing you that your brother might still be alive,” Loki added a little hastily. It would not do to be too honest. “But I could have had Fandral tell you that. I have a favour to ask of you – or rather, of your Midgardian shield-brothers. Surely, having fought him, they will understand the danger of Loki? Find a volunteer or two to go to Sakaar and discretely look into it. Someone relatively inconspicuous, ideally, since we do not wish them to stick out as outsiders too much...it is a pity the mighty Hulk was seen departing the planet, otherwise he would have been ideal, as someone who already knows the place and is known to be local...but your public association makes this impossible.”

“It does not, Father, for it was all done in secrecy,” Thor informed him solemnly. Loki had already known this, of course – Banner had told Anthony and Anthony had told Loki. But the idea needed to come from Thor.

“The Grandmaster did not wish his people to know their champion was gone,” the thunderer elaborated, “and so he had us depart under the cover of the night. People would be pleased to see the Hulk again.”

“That is excellent, then!” Loki went as far as to clap his hands, and hoped it was not overboard. “If he will be willing to go, send him and someone inconspicuous with him, and tell them to investigate the rumours. And tell them, too, to keep absolute secrecy. The other realms must not known, otherwise I could have sent elves to do this business for me.”

“Of course, Father,” Thor agreed immediately. “If you do not need me for anything else…? I would wish to start as soon as possible. If my brother is truly alive...”

“Of course.” Loki gave a grim nod. “Give my thanks to your shield-brothers for their assistance.”

Thor left with a nod of his own, and Loki slowly exhaled. One step closer to unwrapping this mystery. Now he could only hope Asgard would not fall apart before he did.
With Odin trying to turn them against each other, I’m thinking of the line “you were both born to be kings, but there is only one throne”, which to me has always been exhibit A of Odin’s A+ Parenting.

There will definitely be a Science Bros Redux chapter after all this, though I don’t know when. (Like I ever do...) Posted.
Chapter Summary

Someone tries to move against Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The moment Loki made himself visible in the Avengers compound, he heard FRIDAY say: “Boss asks you to go see him in the workshop as soon as possible.”

Curious and a little worried, Loki headed in that direction. Hopefully it was simply an exciting discovery, but FRIDAY’s tone did not entirely sound like it.

When he reached Anthony, the man gave him a look that eliminated the discovery theory with finality. Or at the very least, eliminated the exciting part. “So, we have a problem,” he said.

“Oh?” Loki asked, walking over to him.

“It’s Odin.” Anthony scowled. “I placed monitoring equipment around him, and...something’s draining him of life.”

“What?” Loki asked, horrified, stopping in his tracks.

“Yeah. It’s not fast or anything, but it’s definitely happening. Come check these readings out.”

Loki did, forcing himself to move again even as his mind whirled. Anthony briefly explained how he was monitoring heartbeat and breathing and a host of other bodily processes. “And they’re all slowing down,” he explained. “In tiny increments, so without the monitoring and saving the data you’d never notice, but the pattern stayed basically steady over the three weeks you were gone.”

Loki stared for a moment, studying the readings, then turned and marched towards Odin’s room, still thinking furiously.

“It was a ploy,” he muttered at length. “It was a ploy, and I fell for it like a newborn babe!”

“Ploy? What was a ploy?” Anthony asked, panting as he tried to keep up.

“That whole danger to Odin in Asgard,” Loki explained impatiently, “he was beyond secure wards there, the most secure I can cast, with some help from the realm itself...I can do nothing approaching that here, some are physically impossible and some would draw too much attention in this mostly non-magical realm...the entire matter with Hela was a ploy to get me to send him away from Asgard!”

Anthony frowned at him as they stopped in front of Odin’s door and waited for it to unlock for them. “It’s a bit too elaborate, don’t you think? I mean, why invent a forgotten half-sister for you? There was a much bigger chance of you simply dismissing the danger than if it was some other bad guy...maybe, you know, someone from your stories to lend it credibility...”
Loki saw where he was going immediately. “I wouldn’t consider the Jotnar dangerous enough for this...but yes, there are others who, perhaps...you are right, it is...” He frowned as he entered and checked on Odin cursorily. “It is perhaps more plausible that Hela truly exists, and she was simply made use of for this. Likely because the last Valkyrie knew of her and remembered the fight, so the memory would be convincing for me, being as emotional as it was.”

“So you think there’s absolutely no danger?” Anthony probed.

Loki scowled, trying to find the spell responsible for this, that managed to bypass all of his wards. “Difficult to say,” he replied. “The easiest way to do what they did would have been to simply let the Valkyrie overhear the conversation and let her do the rest, which would mean she at least would have to believe that Odin’s death could release Hela and that she would be dangerous. In fact, it might have been the point of this whole plot – kill Odin by these means, and so release Hela and make this into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Let her tear the Nine Realms apart. Or they simply meant to kill Odin, and there is little danger from her.” He sighed. “I still need to talk to the Valkyrie, so I am afraid I won’t be able to free Bruce from the ‘space trip’ just yet.”

Anthony nodded in understanding. “Not to argue with you,” he said then, “but just, oyu know, not to miss anything...could it be that Odin is simply, I dunno, allergic to Earth or something? Missing something crucial here?”

Loki shook his head. “Think back to your monitoring data,” he said. “The drain started only some time after Odin was placed here.”

“I did notice that, actually,” Anthony commented, coming closer and looking down at Odin. “But it could still be that he was fine for a time because he was running on his reserves or whatever.”

Loki shrugged. “Well, it will be easy to confirm or deny. If I find the spell responsible for this, we know it was no allergy to Midgard. To that end, I need to concentrate for a moment.”

Anthony gave another nod and stayed silent as Loki went through all of the possible cracks in these week wards. It took him several more minutes to find it. “Oh,” he said. “Quite ingenious, though actually not that strong at all...”

“Can you remove it?” Anthony asked.

“Now that I know of it, yes,” Loki confirmed. “Though it is very well done and unobtrusive, I have to grant whoever is responsible that much.” He looked down at the king of Asgard for a moment. “For now, however,” he continued then, “I would prefer to simply replenish some of Odin’s strength. I want to find the culprit, and that will be easier to do if I can simply track the spell back to them. Fortunately for us, the only way to do this sort of continuous effect so unobtrusively is to have a constant connection to the caster.”

“That sounds unpractical,” Anthony muttered.

“Normally you would do this with runes or curses, but they could not have achieved anything of the sort without triggering my wards,” Loki explained. “This was the only course of action left to them.”

“All right,” Anthony agreed. “Let’s go get them.”

Loki blinked at him, confused. “Let us go?” He asked.

“The Avengers,” Anthony clarified. “We’re going with you, at least everyone who’s here at the moment, which means me, Carol, Bruce and Vision. You said it was sophisticated magic, there’s
no reason for you to face this alone when the effects potentially concern everyone. Oh, and that reminds me…” Anthony put up a finger as if struck by a thought. “There was some new development after you left.”

Loki merely raised an eyebrow. After this shocking bit of news, he had little trust in any other new developments.

“The Accords got a better magical service,” Anthony explained. “There’s a guy – called Dr. Strange, used to be a top neurosurgeon, I’ve actually even heard of him from Dr. Cho – apparently he became a sorcerer or something. Not long after you left, he announced himself to the Council, signed the Accords and offered his services. He has his own mystical order or whatever, so he’s not joining the Avengers, but he consults with us. Maybe we should call him in for this?”

Loki considered. Having another magician on his side could be advantageous, since he knew nothing of his enemies, but he knew nothing of this Strange either. If the man was worth anything, he would soon realize Loki was powerful. There was always inherent danger in betraying his identity in that. On the other hand, learning about Midgard’s magicians could be important to him, and perhaps it was better to do it as part of a quest, where the Strange man would have less time to focus on what exactly Loki was doing.

“Does he have mental capabilities?” He asked at length.

“You mean like reading minds and stuff?” Anthony checked. “Not as far as I know. It’s mostly portals and different dimensions, and some illusions maybe?”

“Ah.” Loki couldn’t help his small smile. His favourite kinds of magic. “In that case, I believe I would like to meet him, if he can agree to the geas.”

“Which one?” Anthony asked, right to the point as always.

“The one about Shazad, for now,” Loki replied. “A sorcerer won’t recognize shapeshifting, so no need to tell him who I am, and I would rather know a little more about him before he does.” Like, for example, if there was any chance of him breaking the geas.

“Awesome,” Anthony clapped his hands. “FRIDAY, can you call Dr. Strange please? And get Vision to the communal space.”

They headed there too, and on the way, Anthony took the call on his tablet and explained the situation. Dr. Strange agreed quickly enough when he understood his magical assistance could be required and that the geas was one even an Accords council member was under, and so by the time they reached the communal space, a portal was opening there.

Loki, fortunately in the form of Shazad already, reminded himself he needed to give this place a proper magical protection.

“Good afternoon,” the man who existed the portal greeted. Loki looked him over with interest. He was the first contemporary Midgardian he had seen who was dress in a way that would not shame him in Asgard. And the cloak the man was wearing seemed of particular interest.

“Hey, Doc,” Anthony said. “This is Shazad,” he added, gesturing to Loki. “Babe, this is Dr. Stephen Strange. He has some fancy magical title too, but I’ve forgotten that one.”

Strange gave him a look that seemed to say plainly he was an idiot. “Master of the Mystic Arts,” he said. “But I do not expect that title would be familiar.”
“It isn’t,” Loki confirmed. “But Tony told me you have some kind of order?”

At that, Strange seemed amused. “It is not my order,” he said. “It’s thousands of years old. I am merely the guardian of the New York Sanctum.”

“So that’s what, your US branch?” Anthony asked.

“...effectively, yes. We have such branches in cities around the world, each guarded by other Masters of the Mystic Arts.”

“How many are there?” Loki wondered.

Strange gave him a look. “I am sorry, but I would prefer not to give away the order’s secrets. Especially since I do not truly know anything about you.”

As in on cue, Vision arrived. “You said there was need for a geas, did you not?” He asked, not quite looking at Anthony. Obviously, the tension after the disaster with Maximoff had not yet disappeared.

“Yes,” Loki answered him, to spare them some of the awkwardness at least. “Dr. Strange over here is meant to keep his knowledge of my special abilities to himself.”

Vision inclined his head in understanding, but Loki could feel him brushing against his shields, looking for clarification. He let them slide open just the tiniest bit, enough to show Strange was not expected to know about his true identity just yet, and then shut them back down on Vision’s silent thanks.

Well practised in this already, Vision was done in a moment, and with a nod to everyone present retreated into a distant corner of the room. Loki made a mental note to speak with him later.

For now, he turned to Strange and said: “Thank you for arriving the way you did, this reminding me I need to update the Compound’s magical protections.”

Dr. Strange raised his eyebrows. “You have magical talent?” He asked. “And you believe you could keep me out?”

“Yes,” Loki replied simply.

Doubt was written all over the man’s face. “All right,” he said then, “tell me what you need.”

“First, if you’d follow me,” Loki said, “I’d like to see if you can sense the energy of one particular spell. It is a life-draining one.”

“If you can sense it yourself,” Strange said, even as he did indeed follow Loki, “what do you need me for? That is not my particular strength.”

“We will have to track it to the source to find the current source of our trouble,” Loki explained, “and if both of us can feel it, there is less of a chance of loosing it.”

They reached the door to Odin’s rooms. Strange frowned at it. “I am not certain...”

“Concentrate on the flow of bosons,” Loki advised.

Anthony stared at him, but kept silent, thankfully, as Strange obeyed the instruction. “Yes, I believe I...yes, I have it,” he confirmed after a moment.
“Excellent. Now, can we set off?”

“I just need to call Sikorski,” Anthony replied. “We need his OK for the mission, but I don’t expect it’s gonna be a problem.”

Loki had almost forgotten about the Accords. “Does the whole council need not agree?” He asked.

“Not for something as small as this,” Anthony said. “If it turns out to be bigger, we contact them to get their agreement, but so far Sikorski’s enough. They changed the rules after they realized having the council meet every time was just not practical. FRIDAY, let the others know we’re setting out and call the guy for me, please?”

“On it, Boss.”

They walked back to the communal space just in time for the call to connect. Sikorski seemed a little surprised when he saw them together. “Mr. Stark,” he said. “What do you need?”

“Just a little of your approval,” Anthony replied with a grin. The he turned to ask Dr. Strange to leave, but Loki simply waved his hand for a spell that prevented any sound from reaching the man and nodded at Anthony.

“All right,” the man muttered, and turned back to Sikorski. “So, there’s someone on Earth trying to interfere with Asgard very seriously. Given the alliance it provides us for the upcoming fight, I thought it would be a good idea to go deal with it – and, you know, a better idea than Odin sending down a bunch of Asgardian soldiers to deal with it.”

“The king prefers it too,” Loki added. “The nature of the matter is rather secret, and given Thor’s propensity to babble, it has been kept from him, as things frequently are. But it would be difficult to mask the arrival of Bifrost and soldiers with it.”

Sikorski nodded. “I understand. What kind of intervention are we talking?”

“We are not sure yet,” Loki admitted. “There is a spell we can track to its source. We expect to find its caster, and perhaps one or two others with him, not any great resistance. If there is more, we will contact you.”

“You do not expect the magician to be very strong?” Sikorski probed.

“Whoever it is had to be stationed on Earth for a time to wait for this opportunity,” Loki explained. “I do not know the identity of people behind this, but they are extremely unlikely to be Midgardian, and as such, would not send anyone but a lower level minion here, since it means losing them until the task is finished. So certainly it should not be anyone more powerful than me, and likely on Strange’s level at most.” Not that Loki had such a precise idea about Strange so far, but he did have an estimate.

Sikorski considered. “Very well,” he said then, “but I want detailed report, and keep in touch, understood?”

“Of course, councillor,” Anthony said with a nod, and the call ended.

Loki recalled his spell. Strange was frowning at him. “How did you do that?” He asked.

Loki shrugged. “Redirecting sound waves.”

“Yes, but how?”
Loki sighed. “Perhaps I could explain on the way back? We should get ready.”

They did. James and Captain Danvers were the first to come in, both already in their battle suits, and were introduced to Strange. Bruce joined them only minutes later, and in another moment they were boarding the quinjet. At Loki’s direction, they set out south.

And then continued south.

And south.

Their flying speed varied greatly – at times it was the most the quinjet was capable of, at other times they stopped almost to a standstill as Loki made sure they were still going in the right direction. Still, it became obvious within the first half an hour that they were heading outside the United States.

“All right,” Anthony muttered. “I’m calling Sikorski again. I lost track of all the non-US superheroes, but I’m pretty sure there were some in South America, so if we’re coming to their home turf, we should probably let them know or something. Seems like professional courtesy.”

“Wait until we know which country we’re likely to end up in,” Rhodey told him with an eye roll. “South America is not exactly small, and, you know, not actually one country. Besides, the direction we’re going, it could still be in the Caribbean.”

Anthony grimaced. “Please don’t let it be Cuba,” he said. “I can’t deal with the political bullshit if it’s Cuba.”

“I thought the Council represented all countries on Earth?” Loki asked, wondering if he had been misinformed.

“Yeah, but...not everyone signed the Accords, and even out of those who did, some are more reluctant to let US superheroes onto their soil than others. I think Cuba signed only recently, after the whole thing became a bit less US-centric, and they’d likely demand the entire Council agreeing before they let us in.”

In that case, Cuba would have been the logical place to pick for any enemies of the Avengers, Loki realized. He simply hoped that his opponents, not being Midgardian, would not be aware.

The next two hours passed without an incident. Loki had good enough hold on the spell by now that they hardly ever had to slow down, and as it became obvious the flight would take a while, the group relaxed and James got out of his suit to take over from Danvers, who was flying the quinjet.

She came into the back and settled next to Dr. Strange, asking him probing questions about the ‘mystic arts’, as he called them. Loki listened with interest.

“Most of it truly is secret information,” the sorcerer said. “But I suppose I can tell you a little. The order was founded when Master Agamotto realized he could draw power from other dimensions to fuel what would be considered magic.”

Loki frowned. “That is how you gain access to magic?” He asked. He had assumed Strange and his colleagues simply had to have some Vanir or Elven blood deep in their ancestry, but...as it possible that Midgard truly had its own, specific kind of magic? And if so, how had no one noticed for thousands of their years? Even if it was only decades or centuries in Asgard, someone should have seen this...

“Yes,” Strange said, meanwhile. “Do you do it differently?”
“Very much so. What you has inherent dangers my forms of magic do not.”

Strange nodded. “It is dangerous,” he agreed. “That’s why Agamotto founded the order and only shared the secrets with select few, who were always, at the same time, tasked with protecting the world from these dangers.”

“Dangers like…?” Danvers prodded.

“The dimensions we draw power from have their own natural inhabitants,” Strange said.

“I have always wondered,” Loki muttered, “why some centuries ago, it was assumed that magic came from possession and collusion with evil spirit. But if this is how magic works for some of you...then yes, I can see how people would make the flawed connection.”

“All right,” Anthony said, clearly running out of patience. “Explain properly.”

Just then, however, James called from the front. “We crossed the border of Brazil,” he said. “Given the course, there is really no other country we could be going. So maybe call Sikorski now?”

Anthony nodded, with a look to Loki which clearly said he would still want that explanation later. Loki nodded to him, and looked out of the window at the country where his enemies were hiding.

He had hardly ever been in this part of Midgard. He had always concentrated on those which were at least somewhat connected to the cultures that worshipped them as gods centuries ago. So he looked curiously at the vast expanse of forests he could see underneath. He couldn’t remember seeing such big ones anywhere else on Midgard, except perhaps in Russia.

Sikorski, when contacted, confirmed there was a superhero in Brazil, and gave them a contact number. It didn’t take long to arrange to meet in the country’s capital, as the man – Roberto da Costa – would be flying in from south and the capital was apparently roughly in the middle.

“That name sounds familiar,” Anthony muttered. “If only I could remember...”

But he didn’t, not until they reached the rendezvous point at a small airstrip on the edges of the city.

“Bobby?” He said, clearly shocked at what he saw.

“Tony?” The other man asked equally incredulously. “Oh my God, it’s been ages!”

“Yeah, let’s not talk about how long, I’m feeling uncomfortable with all the eternally young around me.”

“I’m older than you, son,” James said drily, “and don’t feel exactly eternally young, if you catch my drift.”

Anthony only waved his hand. “So,” he said, “this is Bobby Da Costa. We knew each other when we were embarrassingly younger than we are now and both had really rich fathers.”

“I think we actually met a few times even after we both came into our fortunes,” Da Costa pointed out.

“Eh. I was probably too drunk to remember,” Anthony muttered. “At any rate, Bobby, these are the Avengers, or the core part of them, anyway.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” the man said with a smile that was, Loki had to admit – if only to
himself – rather charming.

“How the hell were you surprised to see me here?” Anthony asked after all returned the greeting. “Sikorski must have told you I was coming.”

Da Costa shrugged. “He said the Avengers were coming, I didn’t think it’d be you in person! And why were you surprised? Didn’t they tell you who you were meeting?”

Anthony shrugged. “I’m better with faces. Like you said, it’s been a long time.”

Da Costa rolled his eyes and then clasped his hands. “So,” he said, “what’s the issue?”

Loki and Anthony explained. Da Costa simply nodded in understanding. “So I’m mostly in a local flavour then,” he said, “you don’t actually need my help.”

Anthony grimaced. “Pu that way, we sound like assholes.”

“Nah, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just good to know I can mostly sit back and relax for this one. Shall we?”

They headed back to the quinjet, and as Danvers entered the pilot cabin once more and Loki gave her the new course, Anthony turned to his once-friend and asked: “So, is your superpower being rich, like mine, or…?”

Da Costa shook his head. “I’m actually a mutant.”

“Oh?” Anthony seemed surprised.

“What’s so strange about it?” Da Costa asked. “I thought it was the most common way to get powers.”

“I guess…it’s just that I’m sued to all mutants interested in superheroics being with Xavier. But I guess that’s only a US thing.”

Da Costa nodded. “I was actually with him for a time,” he said. “But when I decided to return to Brazil, obviously we parted ways.”

Anthony gave a nod of his own. “Are you alone in this in Brazil, then, or do you have an organization too?”

“Not yet. I’m trying to convince a few people, but…they’re worried about payback.”

Anthony shrugged. “Then have them work in a mask,” he said. “We don’t have that many who do that any more, but some do. The Council knows their identity, but that’s about it, so…”

“That could actually work…thought the government would bitch, I bet.”

“They always do. I just go around them directly to the Council. They are usually just glad to have another fighter…”

Their conversation diverted to the matter of political strategies and Loki stopped listening, concentrating on the spell. They followed the thread north towards the forests. He was beginning to worry about landing the quinjet when he finally felt the tug downwards that indicated they were over their goal.

“Here,” he said, and obligingly, Captain Danvers went in to land near the small city bellow them,
looking for a good place to hide their transport.

They disembarked, and slowly approached the direction from where Loki and Dr. Strange both felt the spell. Loki absently made them hard to notice, which gained him another frustrated look from Strange. Who taught that man, that he did not know such basic things?

Soon enough they reached the house which was their goal, and ascended the stairs to the fourth floor. By now, Loki could have just let go of the spell, because the wards on the flat could be sensed from the moment they entered the building.

“This might take a moment,” he muttered, concentrating on breaking through as unobtrusively as possible.

“What’s going on?” Anthony asked him.

Loki was concentrating too much to answer, but Strange said: “There are wards. Rather complex ones. I could tear them down, I suppose, but definitely not in a way the person inside wouldn’t notice.” Then he returned to watching Loki attentively.

Finally, after minutes of detailed work, the wards gave way and Loki opened the doors. What they found was a woman striding across the room. She noticed them immediately, and shifted into a battle stance.

And in that moment, Loki felt a tug at the wards he had placed around Odin.

“Someone’s trying their luck at the compound,” he barked. “Bruce, come with me?” Judging by the wards, he didn’t think the woman would pose any problems for Anthony, Danvers, Vision and Strange together, let alone Da Costa, whose powers he knew nothing of. They magical defences had been complicated, but not very strong.

“Sure,” Bruce said, sounding a little uncertain, and in a blink Loki teleported them back.

“FRIDAY, is anyone here?” Loki asked the moment the compound materialized around them.

“I can’t sense anyone,” FRIDAY replied, clearly a little surprised by his presence.

Loki set off towards Odin’s room at speed, Bruce following after him. When they approached, he sent out a wave of air and paid close attention to where he encountered resistance. Sure enough, there were two invisible people there. Loki summoned a barrel of paint, the easiest way to deal with this, and poured it out on the floor with a flick of his hands. Their footprints immediately became visible. He nodded to Bruce and as the man began to transform and attack, Loki concentrated on fighting the magical intrusion.

Bruce was entirely capable of occupying both intruders’ attention fully, and so Loki had all the space he needed to work. They had not managed to get very far with their attempt to unwrap the security, thankfully, and so it was over within minutes, the two men unconscious on the floor and the spell broken.

Loki turned from the door and had to make a conscious effort not to step back when he was faced with the Hulk, who was peering at him from up above.

“Puny god?” He asked.

“Indeed,” Loki muttered. He felt like it at the moment, anyway.
But there was no time for reliving his nightmares. This was one of the less significant ones, anyway. And he knew that this was unlikely to be the last attempt at Odin’s life, unless they managed to catch all members of this unknown group.

“Would you mind staying here as guard?” He asked the Hulk a little tentatively, unsure if he would be understood. “I have to ensure the safety of what’s inside.”

The beast scowled at him. “Hulk no see bad men,” he said.

That was actually a very good point. “FRIDAY, contact Anthony,” Loki said. “As soon as they are done there, have Dr. Strange teleport here.” He turned back to the Hulk. “It shouldn’t take them much longer and he will help you. The others will get here in their time.”

Hulk grunted, but nodded, and Loki entered the secure room, gathered up Odin and stepped to Asgard.

It didn’t take long to get him back to the chamber Loki used to keep him in, but it took much longer to cast strong wards, such that Loki would feel safe leaving him here. Even though he was now almost entirely convinced that there was actually no danger in Asgard, and that the whole thing was a ploy to get Odin away from there.

Consequently, when he returned to Midgard it was a whole day later. It was afternoon again and Anthony was sitting in the communal space, reading something on his tablet. He looked up when Loki arrived, a small frown on his face. “So,” he said. “I have news.”

“Yes?”

“Vision was able to read the minds of some of those guys from yesterday – there were three in Brazil, by the way, and then the two here. Some of them had mental shields, but some had nothing, and...” Anthony took a deep breath. “They were working for Thanos.”

Loki stood as if struck for a moment, shocked, and then he turned and punched the bar so hard it dented.

“Of course,” he muttered. “How could I ever be so idiotic- of course, the Tesseract is on Asgard, and if he means to reach the other gems then Tesseract would be invaluable to him...and he could never get through Asgard’s defences, not now...it should have been obvious he’d try a trick, how did I not see that...”

“Well, he did kind of hit you in a weak spot, with the whole family thing,” Anthony pointed out.

Loki scowled. “All the more reason to suspect – it was so absurd-”

“You still don’t know that,” Anthony reminded him. “I’ve been thinking about it since we found out and I mean sure, it’s likely, but you did say the Valkyrie sounded pretty genuine.”

“That is true...and if she wasn’t I need to find her anyway, to find out who hired her and any other details...” Loki was already changing and adjusting his plans for when he finally spoke to the Valkyrie again. “Where are Thanos’ people?” He asked then.

“We put them at the Raft, with some extra security courtesy of Strange and Maximoff both...Strange wanted you to contact him when you got back, though, and I think at least partly it’s about this.” Anthony grinned. “The other part, well, I think he has questions for you. So do I, for that matter. Like...why was I hearing physics terms when you talked to him? Is there no magical jargon on Earth?”
Loki shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, would I? But I assume there is...you are simply not familiar with it, so the All-Speak translated it into something you do know.”

“Oh. All right. That makes sense, I guess. At any rate, you were impressive. Everything went well in Asgard?”

“Yes, it was fine. I am almost certain Odin is secure there, anyway.”

“Yeah, probably. But the sooner this is dealt with the better. Thor already came to Bruce with the mission about finding you on Sakaar, so Jane is ready to come over and do science with you on your say so.”

“Call her, then,” Loki replied, resigned. He would have preferred to rest a little, but Anthony was right, the sooner it was done, the better.

Foster said she would come in the morning, though, and after Anthony had FRIDAY arrange a room for her, he turned to Loki with a smile. “So, we have a bit of time...can I take you out to an early dinner?”

Loki smiled in return, but then said: “Perhaps tomorrow? Frankly, I would prefer to stay inside for now. I am too focused on our current problem still to be good company.”

“That’s fine,” Anthony agreed immediately. “There was this one TV show I’ve been dying to introduce you to, if you feel up to that...”

Loki considered. He had thought he would speak to Vision, both to discuss the Maximoff problem and to ask for details about the men he had interrogated, and then call Strange, but just the idea exhausted him.

“A television program sounds good at the moment,” he said instead.

So they settled in Anthony’s rooms in front of the television and watched a few episodes of Star Trek. It was highly comical in some ways, but, Loki had to admit, intriguing in others. He was particularly appreciative of the episode that included spy work. And not only because when seduction began to take place on screen, Anthony began to enact the same on their sofa.

“I knew you would like the Enterprise Incident,” he muttered into Loki’s ear when he heard the praise, his hand trailing over Loki’s stomach. “It’s a great one, anyway, you have very good taste.”

“Of course I do,” Loki returned. “I am with you, am I not?”

Anthony grinned at him. “For that,” he muttered, sliding lower on the sofa and pausing the playback at the same time, “you deserve a reward.”

It was, Loki realized, exactly what he had needed. It allowed him to release the remaining tension, and as he came, not too long after, in Anthony’s mouth, he felt completely boneless with how much he had let go.

He pulled Anthony back up to return some of the pleasure he had received, and afterwards cleaned them both with a wave of his hand.

“Soo, another episode?” Anthony asked then.

Loki sighed. “I truly should call Strange, at least,” he said. “It might actually be something important.”
Anthony shook his head. “He’d have said so. He sounded pretty relaxed.”

“Hmm.” Loki considered. “Let me pop in to the Raft, check the wards on the prison cells, and then I’m yours for the rest of the evening.”

Anthony smiled at him in satisfaction. “You got yourself a deal.”

Fortunately, the visit to the raft was quick – Loki found the wards mostly satisfactory and only made a few minor adjustments – and the rest of the night returned to its previous pleasant note. Loki tried not to think about everything that awaited him the next day.

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In the morning, they welcomed Foster looking mostly decent – Loki, given that he was posing as Shazad, entirely so – and explained the necessity of a geas. Foster seemed a little reluctant and called Thor to discuss it with him before she agreed. From her expression, she did not find the information that ‘it is perfectly fine, Loki sued to do that all the time’ all the reassuring. Given the circumstances, Loki considered it all rather ironic.

Nevertheless, it was all arranged in the end, and they headed down to the workshop, where Bruce was already waiting.

“So,” Loki began, “the reason why you needed the geas before we could start working is that while you and Bruce are here to manage the theoretical part, and Tony to possibly provide any technical support that’s needed...I’m to guarantee the magical expertise.”

Foster seemed a little surprised as she looked Loki’s shifted form over. “So what exactly is the plan, then?” She asked after a moment.

“We need to locate the portals to Sakaar,” Loki said. “I can provide you with the data upon which to base the calculations – what kind of particle output you should expect from the portals and so on – and then I’ll ensure your equipment has enough of a reach you can actually examine such distant parts of the galaxy.”

“Sounds intriguing. How is Bruce getting there?”

“I understand an Asgardian spaceship is implied?” Loki pretended at confusion.

“Oh, right...” She shook her head. “I always forget that they have those, what with the Bifrost. So...what are the specifications, then?”

Loki started to dictate the different ways to identify portals in space, the way they disturbed flows of energy and how to recognize their direction. Foster asked many detailed clarifying questions, with Bruce chiming in from time to time, but while he seemed mostly excited by what they were discussing, Foster kept frowning more and more.

“How do you know all this?” She asked at length.

“I have studied magic for a long time,” Loki replied.

Foster scoffed. “You look as old as me at most, but you clearly have a grasp of every concept of physics I know and then some – and then a lot, actually. And I thought we don’t even really have proper mages on Earth? Where can you learn this kind of magic slash science thing, and why have I never heard about it?”
Loki hesitated, but there was little he could do to explain – secret societies only went so far, and as Foster worked on some quite crucial secret projects, she quite rightfully expected someone would have told her of this hypothetical organization or individual teachers of magic. In the end, he decided that as she was under a geas, it did not matter, and said: “I might...not be from Earth exactly.”

Foster froze for a moment, and then her eyes narrowed.

“You are Loki.”

Chapter End Notes

Belated Eid Mubarak to everyone who celebrated...I wanted to post this as an eidi, but well. Time management. I guess I didn’t say “God willing.”

Also, sorry for another cliffhanger...they just happen when I write a scene which is too long for a chapter and I need to cut it somewhere.

And, 300 bookmarks and comments both! Thank you guys. <3

As for the whole thing with Thanos tricking Loki: This is my headcanon for the idiotic idea that Loki simply shipped Odin off to Earth and forgot about him. I imagine Thanos pulled the same trick in the canonical timeline, but since there was no Thor’s visit on Sakaar, his attention was never drawn to the Valkyrie and so he never used her and her very real memories of Hela. Instead, he probably threatened with one of the known dangers to Asgard, like Tony suggested would have made more sense. The crucial part is that he made Loki feel Odin was in danger on Asgard, and lacking an ally on Earth, Loki simply stuck Odin somewhere until he sorted it out...but since time passes more slowly on Asgard, Odin woke up before Loki managed to come back for him. Also, you know. Died.
Introductions

Chapter Summary

Some more reactions to Loki's identity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Foster froze for a moment, and then her eyes narrowed. “You are Loki.”_

Loki, still in the form of Shazad, stared at her. “What?”

“Of course it’s you,” she spat. “I’ve been listening to Thor’s stories about you for years, I know your abilities and your knowledge, portals and shapeshifting, how did I not see it immediately—” She stopped herself and shook her head. “You bastard,” she said then. “You absolute- do you know what faking your death did to Thor? After losing his mother and leaving his home? Do you know how he mourns you, how he-?”

“I lost my mother as well, Dr. Foster,” Loki said icily, turning back into himself, which only served to deepen her scowl. “I also had Thor quite unequivocally declare he no longer saw me as his brother. You will forgive me if, under the circumstances, I did not take particular care of his heartbreak.”

She scoffed. “It’s not like you didn’t deserve it-”

“Jane,” Anthony interrupted, and his voice was sharp, a clear warning in it. “Stop. Let’s just...take a break here. You...might not have all the information, all right?”

She turned on him. “Are...was the bit of you two together true? Are you actually dating him?”

“Yeah,” Anthony replied, a little sheepish. “And I’m kinda...well.” He looked away from her, playing with a screwdriver. “Let’s just say, there’s more to the story than Thor’s side of it.”

Jane scowled. “You haven’t seen how upset he was after-”

Anthony shook his head, looking back up, his face serious. “That’s just it. I have, some of it, though not as much as you. That’s why I convinced Loki to let Thor know he was alive, which is what we’re doing here.”

That managed to successfully derail Foster’s angry rant. “So- wait. This whole trip is just...?”

“No,” Anthony said quickly. “I wouldn’t let Bruce fly to Sakaar just for that. There’s another reason. There’s a potential danger to Asgard that Loki learned about, and that he needs to investigate as unobtrusively as possible.”

“Oh? So he just wants to protect Asgard?” Foster asked mockingly. “And you simply believe him?”

“Yeah,” Anthony confirmed without a hesitation, and his voice was firmer now. He put the
screwdriver down and, straightening, went to stand by Loki’s side. “I believe him.”

There was a long silence. Foster simply looked at them, partly incredulous, partly contemplative.

“I’m afraid we’ll need you to take another geas now,” Anthony said then, when the quiet had gone on for too long.

“What happens if I say no?” Foster asked, looking directly at Loki for the first time since Anthony had joined the conversation.

“If you say no, Dr. Foster,” Loki replied, keeping his voice even, “I will put you to sleep and then have Vision erase the memory from your mind.”

Foster seemed surprised, and then dubious. “You think he would do that for you?”

In fact, Loki was not certain, but he had no intention letting it show. “I believe so. Not so much for me, but he knows all that is at stake.”

“A lot of our alliances against Thanos hinge on Loki,” Anthony explained, and though his tone had gentled a little, there was still that firmness in it. “He’s kinda better equipped for interplanetary contacts than we are.”

Foster frowned. “Thor could have done that,” she muttered.

“Come on, Jane,” Bruce joined the conversation unexpectedly. “You know he is no good as a diplomat.”

She gave him an astonished look. “You knew about this too?”

Bruce gave a small shrug and smiled his small, sheepish smile. “Ever since I returned from Sakaar.”

Foster blinked at him in mute surprise for a moment. “Who else knows?” She asked then.

“Everyone who lives in the compound, and Sikorski from the Accords council,” Anthony replied, and that seemed to shock Foster even more. Anthony gave her a look. “I signed those papers,” he said. “I meant it.”

“I’m more surprise Loki didn’t try to kill you for spreading the knowledge that far, if he’s so determined to keep it a secret,” she muttered, with a fleeting look at Loki. “

Anthony raised his eyebrows. “I haven’t told a single person without his leave,” He paused. “I can’t, anyway.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re under the geas, too?”

“As is every single person who knows,” Anthony confirmed.

“Including the man from the Accords council?”

“Yeah, including him.”

There was a short silence, in which Loki could feel Anthony’s tension next to him, and then Foster exhaled. “All right,” she said then. “Put me under. But you can bet I’ll be asking them about it.”

Anthony merely shrugged. “Help yourself. I recommend starting with Rhodey, they have similar
taste in books.”

The look Foster sent Anthony in response was sheer incredulousness. The one she gave Loki, however, was much more hostile, and suggested he was a long way from being forgiven, either for his crimes against Earth or for those against Thor.

Well. If there was a feeling he was used to, it was this.

Vision came for the geas and went away again, not lingering a moment longer than he had to. After he left, they returned to work, but the atmosphere was tense now, with no traces of the earlier friendliness. Loki curtailed his explanations only to what was strictly necessary for their work, and Foster did not allow her curiosity to reign supreme and repressed any follow up questions. Bruce did try his luck with one or two, but she cut him off soon enough. “Let’s just concentrate on the job,” she said, and with a small sigh, he acquiesced.

The rest of the morning went like this, and when the time to break for lunch came, Loki was immeasurably grateful. Anthony seemed to feel similarly, since when they arrived to his room he as good as collapsed on the sofa and just stared at the containers of take-out food he had ordered for a time.

“So,” he said then, “what about taking the rest of the day off?”

It was a nice dream. “We already did that yesterday,” Loki reminded him. “And I truly do need to call Strange.”

Anthony waved his hand. “Calling Strange is...fine. Just...let’s not go work with Jane again until she at least has time to sleep on it, all right? That kinda tension is bad for my stress levels.”

“I am not so certain it will help,” Loki replied. “No doubt she will call Thor in the evening, and while she cannot tell him, she is likely to ask about me, and he will get...emotional, which will only make her angrier.”

Anthony gave him an exasperated look. “You’re a real asshole sometimes,” he said, though the tone was fond.

Loki looked away. “Forgive me for not feeling all that sorry for someone who feels tender towards me only as long as he believes I am dead,” he muttered.

Anthony opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. “Yeah, all right,” he said with a sigh. “Fair point.” There was a pause. “I need someone to take my mind of this mess,” he confessed then, and before Loki could say that he knew just the way, he suggested: “So, Star Trek?”

Loki shrugged and agreed. It was not what he had in mind, but why not? Anthony hesitated a little over the selection, though. “What is it?” Loki prodded. Did he perhaps change his mind?

“I just thought of a really good one, but...it has father issues, so...perhaps another time. I think we need something properly relaxing today.” He grinned. “Of course!”

And that was how Loki spent three quarters of an hour watching ridiculous balls of fluff on big screen.

He had to admit, he was laughing, and he was feeling a little more up to contacting Strange.

Shazad slipped over him like a second skin by now, and when Strange stepped through a portal, Loki welcomed him in the communal space with a friendly smile, Anthony by his side.
“So,” he said. “I heard you had questions?”

“And also information,” Strange added. “I did the warding on the cells of those we caught...”

Loki waved his hand. “I stepped onto the Raft yesterday to look it over. You did a good job, though I strengthened it a little.”

“You...stepped onto the Raft?” Strange stared at him for a moment. “You are actually aware that it is supposed to be the most secure prison in the country – in the world, probably – and does, in fact, have magical protections?”

Loki shrugged. “Not good enough protections, clearly.”

“...all right,” Strange said in a resigned tone, collapsing onto one of the sofas in a manner less graceful than he usually moved, from what Loki knew. “To my questions then, the first of which would be, how do you do all this stuff? Especially if you don’t draw any energy from the other dimensions?”

“I really wanna hear the answer to that too,” Anthony added, sitting down opposite Strange. “Also, other dimensions? Is that like, the same kind of dimensions we talk about in string theory, or...”

Strange was already shaking his head, but as he was settling next to Anthony, Loki interrupted him by saying: “Yes, Tony, it is precisely the same kind of dimension.”

Strange stared at him. “What?”

Loki shook his head. “This tendency to separate magic and science is frankly ridiculous,” he said. “You will never get anywhere when it comes to progress if you insist on it. Of course it’s the same, what did you think?”

“But...I’ve been in the mirror dimension,” Strange protested weakly.

Loki arched his eyebrow at him. “Yes. And?”

While Strange struggled to formulate his response, Anthony was clearly having a different problem. “You said something about demons or whatever the other day. You mean to tell me there are demons in the collapsed dimensions?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Not if you are imagining red men with horns,” he said. “But there are...beings, yes.”

“That much, I can confirm,” Strange added. “The creatures that come from there are nothing like the more conventional villains you are used to fighting.”

Anthony was still frowning. “So, um...okay. But. You also use these dimensions to store stuff, right?” He gave a short but pointed look to his own chest. “So...can you, like, reach into your pocket and get a demon instead?”

Loki grinned a little. “In theory, it could happen,” he explained then, “but just the same way it can happen that you will reach into your bag and find a venomous snake. Possible, but not all that likely unless you habitually leave your bags in areas with dangerous snakes. You have to pick your pocket dimensions carefully.”

“You store things on the Mirror Dimension, I assume?” Strange asked.
Loki hesitated. But this truly was a logical conclusion to make, so after a moment he inclined his head.

The doctor shook his. “I still don’t get how it could be a collapsed dimension. And some of the others...how do parallel universes enter into this?”

Loki gave him an uncomprehending look. “What do they have to do with anything?”

“Well, they are just another form of alternate dimensions, so...”

“What?” Loki stared at him. “No,” he said then, decisively. “It is a completely different matter.”

“I know what I was taught,” Strange said firmly, with an undertone that clearly implied that no woman barely in her thirties – because that was how Shazad looked – would make him believe differently.

It made sense, Loki had to admit. Even possible prejudices related to gender aside, what authority did he really have that Strange would trust his word?

He hesitated. In some sense, he would have even less authority as Loki – Strange would distrust everything he said on principle. But in another, he would have more. Foster didn’t leave him exactly keen to reveal his identity to another who would disapprove. He felt tired at the mere thought of it, and all he wished to do was take Anthony’s offer of a free day. But this matter of Earth magic was fascinating and he needed to get at the bottom of it if he wanted the forces against Thanos to be as effective as possible, and if he wanted to prevent Thanos’ mages exploiting the weaknesses this kind of magic had.

And perhaps, just a little, he also wished to be able to openly discuss magic with someone. It was, after all, a cornerstone of his identity, and while he could explain many things about it to Anthony, the man would never make a true partner in such a discussion. Surely revealing his identity to someone who could hardly do any harm, but could be very beneficial to his mental state, was worth it?

On some level Loki knew he should give this decision more time, but again, he was exhausted. And what did it matter? So many Avengers already knew. Yes, Strange was less of a known quantity, but he would be under a spell. Loki now knew enough of his abilities to know he would not be able to remove it. It was safe, and he was suddenly tired of considering every eventuality.

“Would you consent to another geas?” He asked Strange at length. “To answer your questions properly, I need to dwell into things that are more secret than merely my talent as such.”

“By all means,” Strange agreed immediately.

Vision was called once more, and performed what was required. After he was gone again, Loki gave Strange a considering look and then turned into himself.

Strange jumped up from the sofa, staring at him. “What-?”

Loki smirked. “Loki Liesmith, at your service.”

“Yeah, I gathered that much,” Strange muttered, giving Anthony a look that seemed almost betrayed when he realized he was the only one surprised. “What is the meaning of this? We register you as a threat to Earth.”

“You might wanna update your database,” Anthony said cheekily.
Loki shrugged. “It’s not as if they could have known,” he said in a falsely appeasing tone. “Remember that only one member of the Accords Council knows of my identity, and he is bound by secrecy, too.”

“So...this is actually official?” Strange pressed.

“Define official,” Anthony replied. “I’m far from the only one who knows, if this is what you’re wondering about.”

“Which I only have your word for.”

Anthony shrugged. “Feel free to ask around the Compound. Outside of here, only Sikorski and...two other people know, I think?”

“Three, counting the Spider-Woman,” Loki corrected.

“Ah, right. So, there you have it.”

Strange pressed his lips together for a moment. “Why is he here?” He asked Anthony then.

Anthony rolled his eyes. “He can be addressed directly, you know.”

“Very well.” Strange turned to him, even as Loki noted Anthony had not made the same remark to Foster. “Why are you here?”

“For the alliance against Thanos,” Loki replied, “and for Anthony.” At Strange’s confused look, he clarified by holding out his hand to the man, who immediately took it, linking their fingers.

Strange blinked. “All right,” he said then slowly. “That’s...not what I expected.”

Anthony grinned. “Frankly, it’s not what I expected either, but I’m far from complaining.”

Strange’s eyes went between them a few times, and then he seemed to shrug it all off. “You say he’s not a threat and that the Council knows about him. I’ll call Sikorski later, but for now, who am I to judge if the higher-ups have approved? It’s none of my business, really.” He nodded once, as if confirming something in his own mind, and settled back down on the sofa, turning to Loki. “So. You were saying about parallel dimensions?”

Loki smirked, quietly satisfied the acceptance was so easy. He did not feel up for any more conflict at the moment. If he had to handle it, he would, like he handled everything, but...he was glad he didn’t have to. “I merely wished to show you the source of my information when I tell you you are wrong,” he said.

Strange tilted his head back a little as he thought. “Let me see...there is the darkforce dimension—”

Loki frowned. “What is that supposed to be?” All-Speak was being surprisingly unhelpful.
“The dimension the dark force comes from.”

Loki gave Anthony a look of complete helplessness. “I need to save these people,” Anthony stated decisively. “They need some science education, like, yesterday.”

More like a hundred years ago, Loki thought desperately. “Darkforce is not produced in another dimension,” he said then. “Negative energy is simply one of many aspects of this world. What more?”

Strange grimaced. “Well...for some reason the quantum realm is included in this, but I feel like I know what you're going to say.”

“Indeed,” Loki confirmed, while Anthony groaned.

“Astral, Mirror and Dark exist, though, right?” Strange reassured himself.

“Generally, they do,” Loki replied, “but I have heard enough on Earth to realize that you might actually ascribe things to the astral one that would not be part of it at all. But we can speak of that later. Anything else?”

“Well...these I am really doubtful about and feel like I’m about to be laughed at, but for the sake of completion...Fear dimension and Hell.”

“Both parallel universes,” Loki said simply, then considered. It would be easy to dismiss the humans as foolish and primitive, but he knew enough of Anthony’s work to realize it wasn’t as easy. “You said your order was thousands of years old, did you not?” He asked after a moment of thought. “I assume this teaching comes from its early stages?”

“I believe so, yes,” Strange agreed.

Loki nodded in understanding. He had seen this before, though never with magic. Vanaheim, in particular, tended to religiously conserve some maxims of life even though the lore in other realms had advanced far enough to be able to tell them that no, a few days’ rest was not the best way to cure any illness any more, though it might have been so in times before most modern healing was invented.

“It was before your science was able to describe anything even distantly approaching these concepts,” he said, “so I expect your founder simply put them together under one heading. It is scandalous, however, that you have not evolved in this. Without innovation, every art dies.”

“I know,” Strange agreed easily. “I don’t know if Stark told you, but I used to be a doctor. I’m well aware one needs to modernize constantly. But...I have only been a member of the order for roughly half a year. I have to educate myself properly on it before I can try and come up with ways to modernize it.”

Loki considered. The man was right, but... “At the same time, there is no point in you studying books that are outdated and inaccurate,” he said. “I understand you have little enough reason to trust me, but you can trust my wish to destroy Thanos. Having you, as the magical defence of Earth, well prepared is certainly in my interest. If you showed me the books you are studying, I could perhaps tell you which are relevant and which to avoid.”

Strange seemed undecided. “I’ll think about it, and consult with some of my colleagues,” he said at length.

“You will be unable to tell them who I am,” Loki reminded him.
“I am aware...but I can still ask their opinion on consulting with a shady but knowledgeable individual.” Strange rose from the sofa. “For now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, and stepped away through a portal.

The moment he left, Loki began to work on magical defences.

Anthony watched him work. “So, up for that mini holiday now?” He asked when Loki was finished.

The sorcerer shook his head with a wistful sigh. “I still need to speak to Vision,” he said. “I will see you in your rooms afterwards.”

Anthony grimaced but nodded, and with a slight sense of dread, Loki had FRIDAY call Vision.

The first part was easy – Vision shared the memories of the sorceress and her helpers with Loki, but there truly was nothing much but the fact that they worked for Thanos to glean from them. Loki was not even certain Thanos knew he had been thwarted and discovered, which was rather crucial information for his plans. On balance, it was likely he knew the first but not the second, but Loki still knew he should have contingency plan in place in case Thanos decided to expedite his mission now that they were aware he was on the move.

But Loki pushed all of this back for the moment, and instead, holding back a sigh, turned to Vision and said: “How is Ms Maximoff?”

Vision looked away. “You need not pretend to care about her well-being,” he said. “I know you have little reason to.”

“I don’t care for her well being,” Loki told him plainly. “But you do, and I can see that her situation upsets you, and there is still tension between you and Anthony.”

“There has always been tension between me and Tony,” Vision replied. “Now it is simply more pronounced.”

Loki examined him for a moment, thinking about all that he knew about the situation. “You know he doesn’t blame you, don’t you?” He asked.

“For Wanda? I am aware. He blames her, exclusively.”

Loki opened his mouth, but Vision put up his hand. “No,” he said. “It is understandable and natural. I do not quite...comprehend the situation myself. Wanda acts differently with me than she does with anyone here. I know some of the reasons for the hostility, and I read, of course, how difficult such things are to overcome to humans, but still it is all a little incomprehensible to me.”

Loki shrugged with a small smirk. “I believe it is frequently incomprehensible to humans, as well, so in this you are not behind in any way.” The he paused. “It would be good, I believe, for the coherence of the team, if you and Anthony came to some sort of an agreement.” The last thing Loki wanted or needed was another split. And it was definitely the last thing Anthony needed.

“We are not...warring,” Vision pointed out. “I simply do not wish to burden him with my presence.”

This time, Loki didn’t fight the sigh. He knew that kind of excuse intimately. “Are you truly avoiding him for him, or is it rather for yourself?” He asked.

Vision hesitated for a long moment. “Both, I believe,” he said at length. “I understand why he
acted the way he acted, but my split loyalty here causes me discomfort.”

“And are you able – or willing – to overcome this discomfort for the sake of the functioning of the Avengers?” Loki continued probing.

“I...do not know,” Vision admitted.

Loki gave him a look that was just a little exasperated. “You need to find out, Vision. I do not believe you are one of those people who would pretend ignorance of the things that happen as direct result of their decisions. So look at the possible risks, and at the cost to you, and make up your mind.”

Vision hesitated for a moment, but then inclined his head. “I understand, and realize you are correct,” he said.

Loki gave him a nod of acknowledgement. “Now,” he said, “was there some aspect of the Mind Gem you wished to consult me on?”

They spent the rest of the time until dinner working together, and as they parted, Vision promised he would speak to Anthony. Loki could only hope it would lead to come sort of resolution. He was not well suited to the role of a mediator when the matter was this closely personal instead of political, he knew, but someone had to say something, and it seemed none of the others could be bothered. Loki was a little surprised James Rhodes had not intervened, to be honest. But he had no idea what the man’s relationship with Vision was. Perhaps there were some issues there too, ones he was unaware of.

Anthony was waiting for him with a tense expression when he returned to the man’s rooms, so Loki tried to be as reassuring as possible. “Vision will speak to you,” he said.

“Great,” Anthony muttered.

Loki sighed. “You know it’s needed.”

“I do,” Anthony agreed, reaching for his glass. “Still not looking forward to it.”

Loki stepped closer to him, putting one hand on the man’s hips, the other taking the glass. “May I compensate you for your suffering?” He asked archly. He had been desiring intimate touch for half a day now.

Anthony smiled, though it looked just the smallest bit forced. “Always,” he assured, and so Loki leaned in to kiss him.

He sensed Anthony might need some time to get in the right sort of mood, so he went slowly, nibbling at Anthony’s jaw and then kissing along his neck until he had the man moaning. He scraped his teeth lightly along the side, and got Anthony to buckle against him very satisfyingly.

Yes, now his lover’s mind was where he wanted it to be.

He pulled the man’s shirt over his head to get to the prize of Anthony’s chest, pushing him towards the bed and then onto it. Anthony went more than willingly, pulling at Loki’s shirt in turn, and reaching up for him to pull him into a kiss. Loki obliged him for a moment, but then his mouth drifted lower, to the naked chest and hard nipples, and then down across the stomach, his hand unbuckling Anthony’s jeans in time for him to be able to mouth at him through his boxers.

Loki only smirked at him, and continued what he was doing even as he pulled the jeans off. Only when Anthony was panting and his hips were twitching continuously did he remove the last bit of clothing and gave Anthony what he wanted.

He brought him to the brink before removing his mouth and leaving only his fingers, which, however, were soon replaced with a different part of him. With such thorough preparation, Anthony wouldn’t last long, he knew. It didn’t matter. He knew he would have no trouble keeping up with him.

When he collapsed next to Anthony afterwards, the man curled against his side. “You’re amazing,” he muttered in that soft, fucked-out voice Loki so liked to hear.

“As are you,” Loki returned.

Anthony smirked up at him, but then muttered: “I didn’t just mean in bed you know.”

“Neither did I,” Loki replied after a moment’s hesitation. Anthony’s only answer was tightening his embrace.

They lay in silence for a moment as Loki contemplated his words. It was true. Anthony was amazing.

Loki’s astonishment at the love he had been given aside – and it was some enormous aside – there was the loyalty that went with it, the understanding and the competence. In his life, the two people who had loved him – apart from Faelan, whom he preferred not to think of much – were Frigga and Thor. But Thor gave him neither understanding nor loyalty, and Frigga, while she did understand him in most things, was always more loyal to her husband and to the realm than to him in the end. Loki didn’t blame her exactly, but it was still felt.

Anthony had other loyalties, too, of course, and Loki did not doubt for a moment that if he went against Midgard, Anthony would turn on him in a blink. But then again, it would have meant Loki had turned on him first, by attacking something the man held dear.

That aside, Loki had never actually experience Anthony giving someone priority over him ever since they began their strange relationship. Now he considered the matter in more seriousness. Who would Anthony give preference to over him?

James Rhodes, definitely. If James Rhodes ever turned against him, Loki would lose any affection from Anthony’s side in a heartbeat. Virginia Potts and Bruce Banner would likely not be very different. The rest, he was less certain about. Anthony did not know most of the other current other Avengers too well, but like Frigga had, perhaps he would feel bound by duty to take their side? At least with the rogue members of the team, Loki had some hope that their betrayal had been great enough Anthony would not take their side.

The Avengers, then, and Virginia Potts. That was what he had to contend with.

Part of Loki wanted to make sure none of these people ever turned on him so that he did not have to lose his illusions of Anthony’s loyalty, while the other part wished to provoke them immediately to test its limits. Surely it was better to know? Before he was in too deep – even more so than he already was?

But then again, a test of this kind would be a breach of trust from his side. He knew Anthony enough to know that what loyalty he might have in truth, he would lose with such an action. So...was there a different way to find out?
He went over all of his past conversations with Anthony in his mind, looking for clues, and suddenly his thoughts caught on a small thing, a moment from what would be months ago to Anthony. Vision had only been learning to read surface thoughts then, and he was learning on Anthony. Anthony had not wished them voiced to Loki. He had not minded, but now he wondered. What reservations about him were hidden there? What worries, what fears of him? Anthony had his right to them, but he found that he wished to know. He wished to know where he stood.

“Some time ago,” he said aloud, “I’m not sure you still remember, it’s probably been months for you, but you...didn't wish for Vision to say what was inside of your head out loud. It was your right, naturally, but I got the sense that it was not about secret Avenger business, that it was personal instead. Would you...tell me what it was?”

Anthony raised his head to smile at Loki, which surprised him. To his mildly panicked mind, the circumstances did not call for a smile. “Yeah, I remember,” the man said. “It was a little too embarrassing for me at the time, you know?” At Loki’s questioning look, his grin widened. “My head was completely full of you,” he confided in a stage whisper, “like I was really fighting wanting to have you over the back of the couch or something, so...”

Loki stared at him for a moment, dumbfounded. That was definitely not an answer he had expected. After a moment, he raised an eyebrow at Stark, suspicious. “You, shamed because of your desire?” He asked in a dubious tone.

Anthony shook his head. “It wasn’t so much the desire, more like...how hard it was for me to to think about anything but that, you know? I kinda figured, no need to let you know how deep in I am...” He shrugged. “That ship has well and truly sailed, though, so. Enjoy the knowledge, I’m sure it’ll do terrible things to your ego.”

Loki stared a moment longer, and then he pulled Anthony closer, hiding his face in his neck, and with it his need to laugh.

*There you have it,* he said to the ever-suspicious voice inside his head. *Sometimes, there can be an innocent answer.*

*Sometimes,* the voice replied. *But not always.*

Loki did his best to pay it no mind. The voice, he knew, could never be entirely silenced, only ever quieted. And so he did what he could to achieve just that.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t remember which one of you it was who wanted the answer to this question many chapters ago, but in any case here you go!

I’m about as interested in Stephen “I’ve been a sorcerer for three months” Strange besting Loki as I am in Wanda “exposed tot the sceptre” Maximoff doing it.

Stephen’s list of other dimensions is taken from the MCU wiki. The list there made me groan at the stupidity, and I channelled the feeling into Loki and Tony...

I feel I’ve gotten to the stage with this story where the initial enthusiasm that I have for every new thing I start writing is abandoning me. It lasted for four months and
eighteen chapters, which I think is a decent score. It doesn’t mean I won’t be finishing this by any means, but it does mean the updates are likely to be less frequent than the current once-or-twice per week. At a guess, I’d say maybe once a fortnight, once a month? Summer is coming and I’ll have less chances to write, so that complicates it further. But, anyway, just so you know, even if the update frequency drops, I’m not done! I think we have about ten more chapters ahead of us. To wrap it all up.
Preparations

Chapter Summary

A space adventure takes some time to put together.

Chapter Notes

So. For the first time in my life, I encountered an actual, honest to God writer’s block.

Normally when I stop updating, it’s because of real-life issues, mental health issues, or because I get too involved in another fandom/story. While all of these played a part it why it took me half a year to get this chapter out, the biggest reason is still that in July, I sat down to write it and, for the first time in my life, I just couldn’t. The same happened at the beginning of November, when I had every intention to work on this for my NaNo. I’ve managed to somehow finish it now, but it’s a bit shorter than usual and feels a bit fillery and I’m not entirely happy with it, but I’m hoping that I will help me get back into the swing of things. It needed to be gotten out of the way, anyway.

(The new fandom is Captive Prince, by the way, and I especially recommend it if you like Thorki, since the dynamics is very similar; but even for someone like me, who really doesn’t, Laurent – the Loki-like character in the series – is amazing enough that it’s worth it to suffer through the POV of a Thor-like protagonist.)

For those of you who forget where we were in the story in the meantime, Jane Foster just found out that Loki was Loki, Loki introduced himself to Dr. Strange with an offer of magical cooperation on the table, and he’s working with Jane, Tony and Bruce to send Bruce and Captain Marvel to Sakaar to bring back the Valkyrie, because Loki needs to find out more about the plot that made him drag Odin to Earth and almost led to the old king’s death and potential fall of Asgard, if the rumours about Hela are true.

I am sorry about the delay, and here you go, my Christmas gift to all of you, a new chapter in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following morning, it was back to the workshop with Foster, and working on locating the shortest way from Asgard to Sakaar. Just as Loki had predicted, the atmosphere was just as tense as the day before, only with Foster giving him more covert looks now, or looks she probably believed to be covert.

There were the small comments, too, that she sometimes made under her breath, like when Loki used a projection spell to help with their calculations and Foster muttered “of course, projections,” like she should have known it was him all along, or when he pulled out an orange from his pocket dimension to share with Anthony for some energy and she just said “oranges” and Loki immediately knew which story Thor had told her the night before.
It was irritating, not terribly so but like a light drizzle against one’s skin, contant and persistent, and after a few hours of that Loki longed for a break, and so he took Bruce aside to try and help with the problem of his transformation.

“I am sorry,” he began once they had some privacy in a side lab just off the one where the others were still working, “I didn’t even ask if you had any trouble after the Hulk dealt with the intruders here, I was too preoccupied with other things...”

“No problem,” Bruce said easily. “It wasn’t...without complications, to be honest. It took a few hours and some experimental drugs Tony gave me to make me turn back.”

Loki grimaced. “I really do apologize. It was on my business that you transformed, and-”

Bruce waved it aside. “The safety of Asgard is the safety of us all, you made that clear enough. And if it weren’t that, it’d be something else a bit later. If you can make me something to help, we’ll be more than even.”

“Then let me get to it,” Loki said with a nod.

He had delved into the doctor’s mind before, to perform the geas, but that had only required a small amount of surface brushing. This was something else entirely: Loki needed to map the connections between Bruce and the Hulk, and the differences, needed to understand where one became the other, and how that all tied to the physical transformation, if he was to make it simpler.

It was deeply personal, and Loki had to admit that what he saw was fascinating on several levels.

First, naturally, there was the unique case of the two personalities, distinct and yet not, in the doctor’s mind.

But even more so, there was the way this tied to Bruce’s personal history and traumas of his past, traumas Loki got many glimpses of as he mapped the lay of the land.

And then, of course, there was the way Bruce dealt with it all.

When Loki finally emerged, Bruce looked away from him, clearly aware how much of his mind had been seen. Loki considered how to put him at ease. “I believe,” he said at length, “that you have a concept of doctor-patient confidentiality on Midgard. You should be familiar with it.”

The doctor nodded, still not looking at him.

“We would term it differently,” Loki said, “but it is one of the most sacred rules that when you are granted access into another’s mind, you never abuse that trust.”

Bruce nodded, and it seemed to catch his curiosity after a moment, when he was able to look beyond the personal implications for him. “So mind control is never used-?”

“Oh, it is,” Loki assured him. “To control someone, you do not need to see their mind.”

“Okay, thought reading, then,” Bruce amended with a small grimace, no doubt remembering his own experience with the Scarlet Witch. “Never a form of aggression?”

“Surface readings are quite common in magical societies,” Loki explained. “But reading someone’s innermost thoughts without leave...that is considered an act of violation. Sometimes, it is used on prisoners to extract crucial information, but then it is considered a form of torture. Otherwise, the difference between a surface touch and a deep delving into someone’s thought is like the difference
between tapping someone’s shoulder and...well, I am certain you can imagine.”

Bruce nodded. “Doesn’t everyone shield?”

“Yes, that is another thing – in magical societies, when someone’s surface thoughts are not shielded at all, it is seen as a sign that they do not particularly care about having them read. Trying to break a shield, even just to skim the surface, is certainly considered deeply impolite, and duels have been fought over such things.”

“With you?” Bruce asked shrewdly.

“Once or twice,” Loki admitted, “but in my defence, I did always turn out to be right to suspect the people in question.”

At this point, their conversation was interrupted by Anthony sticking his head in. “Are you two done? It’s lunchtime.”

Bruce turned a questioning look to Loki.

“Effectively,” Loki confirmed. “I should be able to prepare the amulet, and I won’t need your presence for it, Bruce. Let’s eat.”

The meal was a welcome break. Loki might be finished with Bruce, but there was still a lot to do in the lab, and even aside from that, they were, sadly, still not quite done with the duties part of Loki’s stay on Midgard. And he knew that the part which was coming next would be the most exhausting.

Well. The most exhausting of those he had known about in advance. He had not anticipated Foster’s moment of brilliant insight.

Considering that he needed her here precisely for her brains, perhaps he should have.

But there was no point in crying over spilled mead, so he tried to focus on gearing for the trouble that was still ahead.

In particular, the meeting with Magneto.

Well, no, it was not Magneto who worried him, though speaking of expecting insightful questions, he should get ready for the man’s uncomfortable observational skills too, including the possibility of him guessing Loki’s own origins from his reactions.

He grimaced merely thinking about this, and not for the first time, he wondered why exactly he put himself through all of this. Wouldn’t it be better to, as always, do everything alone?

You know what happened the last time you tried to take Thanos on alone.

Loki shuddered at this reminder his own mind had provided him with. Of course, he was in a better place now that he had been then, but still. No, it would not be better to do things alone.

Besides, there were other benefits to this, aside from just possibly surviving what was to come. In particular, there was Anthony.

Loki lost himself in contemplation of that particular benefit for a moment, before he shook himself and forced himself to focus on the task at hand: Magneto, and the frost giant - giantess, he supposed, as strange as the notion was - that was apparently his right hand.

When Anthony came from his workshop to fetch him, Loki had ran through various scenarios that
could come to pass today and was, he supposed, as prepared as he would ever be. He was generally good at improvisation, but, he had to admit, not so much when his...heritage was concerned.

Well. How was that for an understatement?

“Ready?” Anthony asked him.

Loki merely gave a sharp nod, and taking Anthony’s arm, teleported them to the site of the meeting, arranged the same way as it had been last time.

Also like last time, Magneto was already waiting, with the frost giantess by his side. Loki looked around for their transport.

“I sent Azazel to wait to the side,” Magneto explained when he noticed his look. “As far as we are concerned, the less witnesses to this conversation, the better.”

“In this, we are in agreement,” Loki said curtly.

There was a short silence.

“I have thought about...Wanda,” Magneto said at length, stiffly. “About what I wish to happen. I was...bitterly disappointed in her, but I realize that as I was not present for her education, I can hardly put any expectations on her. Nevertheless, she is still the child of a woman I loved, and she is my daughter by blood.”

He gritted his teeth, his discomfort almost palpable to Loki, as he continued: “I don’t wish to entirely burn all bridges before they are even built. I would like a chance to meet with her at regular intervals, if she agrees to that much of course, to understand her past better and, perhaps, to finally get a chance to offer her some direction.”

Loki wondered how much pride it cost the man, to effectively come begging to them. He felt for him more than he had expected.

“I realize that the thought of me offering direction to someone who is technically a member of your team might make you uncomfortable—” Magneto continued.

“Not in the slightest,” Anthony interrupted him, shaking his head.

At Magneto’s mildly surprised look, he shrugged. “Honestly, there are areas where I think she could use plenty of your guidance.” He waved his hand. “Others not so much, grated, but then I think the whole holding a grudge thing is in the family without you having to teach her anything, just as the idea of eye for an eye, so...unless you directly recruit her, which, yeah, I would have major issues with, I don’t think you can make it much worse.”

Magneto frowned a little. “You are being very...honest, Mr. Stark, considering we are speaking of my daughter.”

Anthony shrugged again. “Well, I figured, after what she said to you last time, I could afford some honesty. We’re not each other’s fans. But I’ll ask her if she agrees to your proposal.”

Magneto gave a sharp nod. “Now for the other matter.” He redirected his gaze to Loki, and more firmly, said: “The Jotnar. What do you know?”

“The information I can give you is limited,” Loki cautioned, slipping into his habitual diplomatic tone. “As I have explained the last time, we do not know much in Asgard, and about half-Jotnar I
know nothing at all.” He looked at the giantess. It was still a little difficult for him, even after all he knew, not to have an automatic fighting response when he saw one of them. “Have you ever demonstrated any ice-related abilities?” He asked. “Full Jotnar are able to form weapons made of ice in battle, and I understand they prefer it to fighting with more conventional weapons.”

She shook her head. “Never. It’s one of the reasons I was so surprised. I’ve never noticed any kind of affinity for ice at all. Except - I suppose when I change form, it does look a little like ice shards, but I might just be projecting.”

Loki pursed his lips a little, curious in spite of himself. “Would you be willing to show me…?”

She did. It was uncanny, the way Loki saw the manner of his own transformation mirrored in someone else the way he never had before. It reminded him of ice shards, too. He usually covered it with illusions, especially since he found out the truth.

“Yes,” he said, trying his best not to let his complicated feelings show either in his face or in his voice. “That, I believe, proves things quite conclusively. But nothing else?”

“No.”

“It might be you do not have the ability…or it might be that it requires some special training to develop.” Loki himself had never tried it. He had absolutely no desire to.

She nodded in understanding. “Are there any…side effects, or I don’t know, just things I should know of?”

Loki considered. “Well…how old are you?”

“Seventy-seven.”

Loki nodded. “To the best of my knowledge, frost giants live until about a hundred and fifty Earth years. I wondered if, you being only half one, you would have a shorter lifespan, but it does not appear so. Of course, you living on Midgard might prolong your life too.”

She frowned, and even Magneto next to her looked surprised. “How so?” She asked.

“The gravity is much less here, and the conditions are less harsh,” Loki explained. “Obviously there are no crucial elements you are missing here - you would not have survived this long - and so, overly, I believe it might be beneficial to you.”

She nodded again, clearly thinking about the implications and possibilities. “Anything else?”

Loki tried to think of anything relevant. It was difficult for him to think of what might be different for a human-raised Jotun, when his base comparison was always the Aesir. “I believe you would know most of it better than me, from your lived experience,” he said.

“We would appreciate if you could try and look for books on the topic and either relate the content or, even better, if possible bring them to us,” Magneto interjected.

Loki hesitated. “I can try, but…what I have access to is Asgardian, and therefore extremely biased. I am only these days realising how biased exactly. I could have it translated for you, I suppose, but I would...not recommend reading any of it.”

“We’ve thought of this problem,” the half-giantess said, “and to counterbalance it, I’d like to meet another Jotun.”
Loki could only gape at her.

“Is that so strange?” She asked when he was silent for a long moment.

“I suppose not,” he admitted slowly, “but it might not be within my powers.” Also, in the elaborated scenarios he had run in his mind, this demand had somehow never occurred to him. Now he felt like an idiot.

She scoffed. “Don’t tell me you’re unable to convince one Jotun to come here? I read up on you. Wasn’t your epithet Silvertongue?”

Loki tried not to think about all the nonsense she would have come across in the myths too much, the slander Thor’s friends had made up about him. “I told you Asgard was not on good terms with them,” he said simply, avoiding that part of what she said altogether.

Magneto frowned at him. “We’re not asking you to bring official representatives. It’s a whole planet. There must be someone on it who’d be willing to come with the right incentives.”

Loki supposed that was true enough, he had just never thought about it that way. Of course, there was also that other issue. But he had absolutely no intention of mentioning his attempted genocide to a survivor of one, and another person who was a member of the species he had tried to eliminate.

“I will have to think about this,” he said. “May we meet again tomorrow?”

Magneto gave him a hard look. “We may,” he said, “but note that I consider this part of the deal we have. It is non-negotiable.”

With that, he turned to leave. Loki stared after him and the giantess, and it took him a long time to recollect himself and transport Anthony home.

“I cannot go to Jotunheim,” he said as soon as they were in the privacy of their room.

“No,” Anthony agreed immediately. “You know there is only one way out of this.”

Loki shook his head sharply. “No,” he said simply, realizing what Anthony meant but refusing to as much as entertain it.

“They need not know it is you,” Anthony reasoned. “A few illusions to change your face and voice a little..”

Loki didn’t reply. I would know, he thought. Nevertheless, Anthony was right. This was the only way. He just didn’t know if he would ever be ready for it.

“You can tell them about the time dilation,” Anthony continued. “It’ll get you time. I know you don’t want to do this, I do, but…”

Loki only nodded. Yes. He knew, but once again he wondered how many more distasteful things he would still need to do.

“You need to be cheered up,” Anthony said decisively. “Watch a silly movie with me?”

Loki was too tired to censor himself, and so he simply shook his head. “I’d prefer something rather different.”
“Oh! Of course, even better,” Anthony conceded with a grin, stepping closer and pulling Loki towards him by the hips.

He kissed with intent, and soon Loki was distracted properly, his mind far too busy with the hands roaming under his tunic and trousers to think of anything undesirable. He got them both naked with one efficient spell, and then found himself pressed to the nearest wall as Anthony sunk to his knees before him.

He carded his hands through Anthony’s hair. “I’d prefer you to fuck me,” he muttered.

“In a moment,” Anthony returned before he took him in his mouth.

He stopped only when he was two fingers in with the hand that wasn’t supporting Loki’s cock, and Loki was on the brink, and then simply tugged him towards the bed, Loki following without any resistance, only to groan his orgasm into the mattress not too much later, after Anthony penetrated him in one smooth motion.

Anthony didn’t take much longer to finish, and they lay next to each other panting for a moment. As the bliss retreated slightly, some of Loki’s worries returned. It was a matter that had been running through his mind lately, adding to his worries even though, by rights, it should be inconsequential compared to everything else. Under normal circumstances, he would never bring it up, fearing the answer too much, but in his post-coital haze, he muttered, before he could stop himself: “You seem...less eager, lately.”

Anthony blinked at him. “Wasn’t eager enough for you just now?”

“Oh no, I meant generally,” Loki clarified. “When I first...started coming here, you couldn’t keep your hands off me. It is different now.”

Anthony sighed and turned to his side to be able to look Loki in the eyes better. “That’s another effect of the time differential, I’m afraid...or maybe it’s a human/Asgardian thing?”

“You know I’m not actually Asgardian,” Loki said, furrowing his brow.

Anthony shrugged like it made little difference. “Human/Jotun, then. At any rate, it’s not that I don’t want you, as should be patently obvious. But with humans, normally in relationships after the first half a year or so the initial urgency to have sex all the time fades and you start to prefer other activities part of the time. But I always want to have sex with you, Loki,” Anthony continued. “It’s enough to just hint, really.”

Loki frowned a little. That was comforting in a way, he supposed, but it wasn’t quite...

Anthony seemed to read his mind, because he drew closer and gave Loki a peck on the lips. “I’ll try to show my very great appreciation more, I promise,” he said. “It’s just that I already know you like having sex with me, but I’m a bit less sure about spending time together, so...”

Loki turned to lie on his side as well, to face Anthony. “I suppose this is fair,” he muttered. “I made you ask – almost beg – for the dates you wanted, so...”

“And just as – I hope – you wanted the dates too, in the end, I want the sex. I swear I do, Loki.” He snorted. “Honestly, this is not something I ever thought would happen to me, someone doubting I wanted to have sex.” Then he considered. “I suppose part of it is that I’m tired, too, with all the things we have to arrange these days, but you are right, this is a great way to relax and get my mind of things.” He pulled Loki closer. “In fact, perhaps I could interest you in another round...?”
They spent the entirety of the next day in the workshop with Jane Foster. Loki had got to the point where the uncomfortable atmosphere actually motivated him. He wanted to have this over with once and for all, and so he helped more than he had originally planned and shared more of his knowledge, to get the process to move along.

The only proper break they took was in the evening, when they went to see Magneto again for Loki to give his reluctant acquiescence to the demand.

“It will take me time, however,” he cautioned.

“How long?”

“Three weeks at the very least, but could also be two months or more.”

Magneto gave him a hard look. “Two months. Later than that, and you better have a very good explanation for why it is taking so long.”

Loki gave him an arch look. “I meant to say that if I gave you the task of bringing an arch nemesis of yours somewhere, we would see how quickly it would go, but then, we all know Professor Xavier would go anywhere you told him to.”

Magneto turned and walked away without a response. It gave Loki a twinge of petty satisfaction, even as he could sense Anthony rolling his eyes next to him before he was pulled in and kissed soundly, motivating him to transport them directly to the bedroom.

Afterwards, when Anthony fell asleep, Loki lay away thinking, wondering if he hadn’t pressured Anthony too much, and wondering if what the man mentioned was, in fact, a difference between humans and Jotnar. He wouldn’t know, seeing that he had never had a relationship longer than the six months that had been mentioned. He didn’t really have anyone to ask, either.

He thought of the frost giantess again, and of her need to know someone else of her race. Yes, he supposed it made good sense. If only he didn’t have the crimes he did on his conscience, and if only he could free himself from the poison Asgard raised him in. He hadn’t thought, back when he had first found out about his true origins, that he could ever have a stronger reason than that lie to hate Odin, but now, slowly but surely, the probable lies or at least misinformation about his own people of birth was slowly becoming the crime against him that he blamed Odin for the most.

Not telling him about his race, at least, he could understand as an attempt to protect him in some way. But that he was allowed to believe all the things he had believed about the Jotnar all his life – the things he still believed on some level – there was no excuse for that.

It took Loki a long time to fall asleep.

The following day, they were finally done with calculations and projections. Loki started to work on the amulet for Bruce, only to discover that it was in fact easier than he could have ever hoped for, and he was finished in just over an hour. There was nothing in the way of Bruce and Danvers departing to Sakaar. With that in mind, the captain was called to the workshop.

“Everything ready?” She asked cheerfully.

“As ready as can be,” Anthony confirmed.

“The calculations are really rather precise,” Foster added, and with a small frown, conceded, “I was
given very good grounds to work with. There should be no issues.”

“Anything special I should know about Sakaar?” Danvers questioned.

She was looking at Bruce, but he only shrugged, and Loki answered for him: “The atmosphere is similar to Earth’s, only with a little more oxygen, so you might feel a little...high while there. Also, the gravity is a little lower, so get ready for that. As for the social structure, I’m sure you’ve heard.”

She nodded. “Yeah, something about a crazy master.”

“Grandmaster, to be precise - he does like his big titles. There’s no structured government as such,” Loki explained. “Most of the planet is a huge trash heap - because so many wormholes end there, junk keeps falling through. The Grandmaster managed to turn that into a feature in his specific way. He found the place with the least portals opening over it, and built a Palace and an arena there, diligently using what was usable out of the trash piles. That obviously drew people to him. First he only recruited servants and such, and organised scrappers. I have no idea how he first came across the idea of running an arena, but now it’s his chief source of entertainment, and also of the power he holds. Everyone who has fighting potential fights and dies in the arena. The rest work for the Grandmaster. It’s quite straightforward.”

There was a short silence when Loki finished, then Foster gave him a suspicious look. “How do you know all these things?” She asked, her tone just as hostile as it had been for the last three days.

He gave a languid shrug. “I read.”

Danvers rolled her eyes. “All right, kids, deal with your issues another time, I need to prepare for my space mission. Any useful tips? I’ve already asked Thor, but I figure the more information sources, the better.”

“I understand the Valkyrie works as a scrapper for the Grandmaster,” Loki replied. He had pierced that much from the glimpse of her mind he had had before focusing on the right memories. “You could try getting caught by her on purpose, I suppose, though I leave the tactics to you.”

“What does she look like?”

Loki projected the illusion.


Foster grinned. “If you could see Heimdall, you'd be even more astonished.”

Loki gave them an uncomprehending look.

“I assumed she would be white and blonde,” the Captain explained, looking embarrassed.

“Oh.” Loki nodded in understanding. “Most upper-class Aesir are. The planet we came from was as ethnically diverse as Midgard, though not all of the races were the same...but the part that they managed to save was nearer to the pole than to the equator and so, for historical reasons, the ruling class mostly contained the blonde, blue-eyed variety of people. Nowadays, that is indeed considered the quintessential Aesir look.” He remembered when he was a child and his mother had told him this story when he felt ugly with his dark hair. Lies wrapped in truth...how he wished black hair was the only problem.

“I admit it gives me some pleasure,” he said aloud, “that the last remaining Valkyrie is so very far
from what certain aristocratic circles would like to pretend was the only true Aesir look.”


“Not that I can think of.”

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow afternoon?” Loki suggested, and when there were nods all around, dragged Anthony away from the workshop. They had one last night together before he had to return to Asgard for another day. He meant to make the full use of it.

The next day, the journey was prepared for with all ceremony. The Avengers gathered in front of the compound to bid goodbye to their first space-faring members – except Thor, who, for obvious reasons, didn’t count. He was coming with them as far as Asgard to get them a ship – and also, as far as he knew, to call the Watcher for them, so Loki was to bid them goodbye in the form of Shazad and had had to share all the last-minute useful advice that occurred to him before his not-brother arrived.

“They’re going to be alright, aren’t they?” Anthony asked him in an undertone as they now watched the gathering team.

“You know I can’t guarantee that,” Loki replied equally quietly. “I don’t believe the danger is high, but...things can happen.”

Anthony sighed. “I know – things can happen on Earth, too, but just...the idea of Bruce being hurt – of dying – somewhere where I can’t help him makes it all the more frustrating.”

“He is very powerful, and so is the Captain,” Loki did his best to reassure. “The chances are very good that they will come to no harm. You know how long he managed to survive on his own there, the first time he was present.”

“Survive, but not stay free. What if...”

Loki sighed. “If the worst comes to pass, we will send another Asgardian delegation to free him. But I am confident it will not come to that.”

Anthony nodded. “All right. I’m just...nervous. It’s not like we organize space expeditions every day, and my memories of space are not the best.” He forced a grin, then, and more loudly, so that others could hear as well, he said: “We’re lucky that this falls outside the Accords Council jurisdiction. Otherwise it would have never gotten approved.”

“How come they have no say?” Loki asked curiously.

“We’re not employed by them in the same sense the military is,” Anthony explained. “We get some compensation on a mission by mission basis, but we don’t draw regular pay from the government. That was one bit I was very insistent on. If we wanted to keep any degree of independence, it was necessary.”

“So what do the rest of the Avengers live on?” Loki wondered.

Anthony shrugged. “Stark money, mostly, though not exclusively. I created a fund and transferred some money to it, but we also get donations and we have merchandise. It wouldn’t be enough to keep this place running, but it would be enough to support all of us if we needed it. Anyway, so because of this, the Council gets to approve our missions, but they can’t actually order us
anywhere or limit what we do unless it counts as heroic activity. And the point is, they only have jurisdiction over Earth. Bruce and Carol won’t be engaging in any heroic activity on Earth, so they don’t need permission. Brilliant, isn’t it?”

“Rather,” Loki agreed, “though I’m not sure what Sikorski is going to say when he hears about it.”

Anthony waved his hand. “Sikorski will be fine. Ross will kick up a fuss, but since he’s not really in control of us, as much as he likes to pretend he is, we can mostly ignore him. The only one who will actually get into trouble is Rhodey, who just won’t listen when I tell him to finally say goodbye to the military.”

“Why is that?” Loki asked with interest.

“I think he keeps it as the last resort,” Anthony mock-whispered.

“Too true,” the Colonel agreed. “The idea of being reliant solely on your whims is terrifying.”

Anthony grinned at him, but before he could add anything, Thor said solemnly: “It is time.”

Loki just managed to prevent himself from rolling his eyes and Bruce and Carol stepped to him, Bruce changing into the Hulk preventatively, and then Thor called and they were whisked away by the rainbow bridge.

The moment they were gone, Loki stepped through to Asgard as well. Now he needed to monitor things closely for a time. As ever, he would miss Midgard, especially as his last glimpse of it was Anthony’s melancholy face.

Chapter End Notes

The space adventure will get a side story in the series, because, I mean, come on. It’s a space adventure. Already posted. There might also be a new chapter in Sciences Bros Redux for Loki’s little venture into Bruce’s mind, depending on my inspiration and time.
It was the evening in Asgard when Loki, who had been sitting on the throne for a few hours now waiting for this, spotted the ship with Bruce and Danvers approaching, and carrying the Valkyrie aboard.

Loki had had Odin retreat to his quarters very early that day, asking not to be disturbed, and was now invisible, so there wasn’t anything stopping him from teleporting to the ship instantly.

The moment he appeared, the Valkyrie turned from the controls to look at him and commented: “I thought you were a Jotun? Is this your Asgardian disguise?”

Loki flinched, and turned his accusing eyes to Danvers – as Bruce was now in the form of the green creature – but she put up her hands. “Hey, don’t look at me! She figured it out herself.”

Loki gritted his teeth and turned to the warrior. “I am not fond of that form,” he admitted. After all, if Bruce and the Captain had followed his script, she already knew he had been raised in Asgard.

Brunhilde shrugged, seeming disinterested. “All right,” she said. “What do you want?”

“We told her exactly what you said we should,” Danvers interjected.

Loki nodded, and explained: “First I would like to transport you to Earth.”

“You?” She gave him a sceptical look.

“Indeed. As you have probably noticed, I am a mage,” Loki said drily.

She rolled her eyes at him. “A bit of teleportation wasn’t the same as realm-hopping, last time I checked. I’ve heard of just one or two people who could do that. Are you saying you’re one of them?”

Loki fought the pleasure he felt at hearing this. It was absurd and childish, but he couldn’t help it. She was the last surviving Valkyrie, and she was – however indirectly – complimenting his magic. Apparently, some childhood pains never quite left you. “Indeed,” he said simply.
“Hmm,” she frowned. “Maybe it’s more common with the Jotnar.”

And just like that, the pleasure was gone again. Loki did his best not to flinch again, and he didn’t comment on the theory, though if it had been true the Jotnar wouldn't have needed him to get them to Asgard back then before everything went pear-shaped. “I believe you would prefer to avoid Asgard,” he said instead, “and I would much rather you are not seen there, and I would prefer even more that Thor, who is in Midgard at the moment, doesn’t notice the Bifrost landing and come to investigate.”

“The Crown Prince of Asgard is in Midgard?” She stared at him. “Why?”

Loki sighed. “It’s a bit of a story.” But since he needed her trust for her to cooperate, eh briefly explained: “He was banished there some Asgardian months ago and became fond of the realm. He rejected his royal heritage and became its protector instead.” Loki shrugged. “He also knows Bruce and Captain Danvers went to Sakaar, though he’s been misinformed about the reasons for that, so he’ll be awaiting their return. Thus, we need them to visibly return without you, while you, if you are willing, come there with me.”

Brunhilde simply nodded. “And once there, what?” She asked.

Loki spread his hands. “Once there, I’ll return to arrange the smooth sailing of the Asgardian part of the ruse, and then, when I come back to Midgard, hopefully you will tell me exactly what you know about Hela.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Shouldn’t you know enough? She’s your adoptive sister, if I get the story right.”

Loki grimaced. “From what I can gather, she has been...erased. There are no traces of her in any documents I could get my hands on.”

The Valkyrie looked shocked for a moment, and then her face clouded. “That fucker,” she said. “They all died – they all fucking died and je just erased them?!” She looked around herself, and scowled. “I need a drink.”

“In Midgards,” Loki promised. “As for the lie, well, that’s Odin for you. Rather than admit a mistake...People still remember the Valkyrie, but no one seems to know what exactly was the heroic last battle. Most probably assume it was the Dark Elves?”

Brunhilde scoffed. “As if,” she muttered. “All right. And after I tell you about Hela, what happens?”

Loki shrugged. “Your choice. I can get you back to Sakaar, or you can stay and help me plan to stop her.”

The Valkyrie considered. “You said something about alcohol?”

Loki laughed. “You are in luck – the leader of the heroic group on Midgard is a great connoisseur in this. True, it’s weak to Asgardians, so you will need to drink a lot of it, but then I believe you had a similar problem on Sakaar as well.”

She nodded glumly. “All right then,” she said, extending her arm for him to take, “Midgard it is.”

They appeared invisible in Loki’s rooms in the Avengers compound, and without taking off the
spell, Loki asked: “FRIDAY, is Anthony here?”

“Boss is in the workshop. Should I send him in?”

“Please,” Loki confirmed, and only then took off the spell.

“Anthony?” Brunhilde asked archly.

“The leader of the local group of heroes, who have been of considerable assistance to me. He will arrange for your comfort while I am back in Asgard – it might take a while, since time is markedly faster here.”

She gave him an ironic look. “Is he meant to be my jailer?”

Loki scoffed. “I’m not naive. I couldn’t hold you if you decided to leave, but then if you wanted to leave, I don’t see why come with me at all.”

“To get off Sakaar?” She suggested.

“I happen to know you were fully capable of doing that on your own,” he pointed out.

Before she could answer, Anthony entered, and gave her her practised smile. “The Valkyrie, right?”

“Brunhilde,” she corrected him curtly.

“All right,” he agreed easily. “I’m Tony Stark.”

“I heard you have booze,” she replied.

“Well,” Loki muttered, “it appears you will get on swimmingly, so I will leave you to it.”

Anthony gave him a nod and an intent look, and Loki stepped back to Asgard.

He took over the illusion of Odin working in his rooms he had left behind and waited for the guards to get him, which happened a few minutes later. They took him to the same private receiving room where he had spoken to Brunhilde a few Asgardian days ago, and where the Hulk and Captain Danvers were now waiting.

He nodded at the guards to leave them, and waved his hand to ensure the privacy of the room, before he turned to Danvers as said: “Let us go over what you will tell Thor.”

She grimaced a little, but obediently repeated what they had agreed on previously: “Loki was on Sakaar some time ago, spent a bit of time in the Grandmaster’s palace, and then managed to escape by stealing one of his ships after he charmed the release codes out of the man.” She grimaced. “Why exactly would you imply that you slept with the Grandmaster to your brother?”

“Thor is not my brother,” Loki corrected calmly, “and because, on one hand, it will convince him it was actually me, and on the other, it will make him uncomfortable and make him ask less probing questions.”

“It certainly makes me uncomfortable,” Danvers muttered. Loki wondered at that – from what he knew about her and her friends, he would not have expected her to be ‘homophobic’, as the Midgardians would say. He supposed he shouldn’t idolize Anthony’s friends too much. “What about the direction you were headed?”
Loki grinned, which must have looked a little strange on Odin’s face. “Oh, feel free to tell him I flew out through Devil’s Anus. I’m sure he will love that.”

“It will make him think you went to Asgard,” she pointed out.

“Or to Midgard,” Loki confirmed with a nod, “and he will be ever so worried about my intentions with that realm.”

She frowned a little. “Is that...convenient?”

Loki shrugged. “Not exactly, but certainly more than thinking I’m somewhere else in the galaxy and trying to come and get me.”

Danvers nodded in understanding. “Why tell him you’re alive at all, then?” She asked.

Loki grimaced. “Because Anthony can be rather stubborn sometimes,” he admitted, and Danvers grinned.

They parted soon after, and Loki told the guards he did not wish to be disturbed again, this time making sure to look a little upset – one had to be careful not to overdo it with the ever-stoic Odin – before he cast his usual spells and stepped to Midgard.

He found Tony and Brunhilde drinking together – Tony had a glass, and the Valkyrie had a bottle.

“You didn’t tell me she was going to be such an expensive house-guest,” the man whined when Loki appeared, pointing a finger at him. “That’s my best whisky!”

“I didn’t know,” Loki admitted, “but it’s nice that you have something in common, is it not?” Anthony gave him an evil look.

Loki settled on the bar next to them, poured himself a glass, and turning to Brunhilde, said: “Not to disturb your companionable drinking, but are you ready to speak now? Because when the Bifrost lands, Thor will probably be here within the hour, and then we will have to be much more discreet at the very least, which probably means less alcohol.”

She scowled, and opened another bottle of whisky. “Fine,” she said. “We can talk now.”

“So,” Loki drawled. “When I first heard about Hela, I wasn’t sure whether it was real or whether it was some plot by you to cause panic in Asgard.”

Brunhilde looked at him like he was an idiot. “I wouldn’t have gone to Odin, then, would I? I hate the man all right, but even I gotta admit he doesn’t fall for tricks.”

“That, unfortunately, is mostly true,” Loki conceded. “But the thing is, when I investigated the matter, it turned out that Asgard in disarray would be very convenient for some other parties right now.”

“For Thanos,” she said with a nod and a gulp from her bottle. “I heard.”

Loki frowned. “I see Banner got chatty.”

“The woman, actually,” Brunhilde corrected him. “Be glad she did, I wouldn’t have come otherwise.”

Loki gave a reluctant nod of understanding. “So, you see my suspicion,” he continued. “It would be
very convenient for Thanos if Asgard fell right now, since he knows he can’t quite defeat them by the regular means, and he needs something from the vault.”

Brunhilde shook her head. “And that makes you suspicious of me? Shouldn’t that just make you doubly worried about Hela stirring?”

“If she is stirring,” Loki pointed out. “If she exists at all.”

The Valkyrie frowned at him. “So, what, you think Odin is playing a trick?”

“Perhaps.”

She scoffed. “I wouldn’t put it past him, but trust me, Hela is real. Or if you don’t, go take a look yourself. It’s not like you can do nay harm. She’s locked up in Nifleheim, in her own part of it. I’m sure you can pop right in just behind the walls of her prison and wave at her through the bars. Maybe even have a nice chat with the big sis, hmm?”

She took another big gulp from her bottle, and Loki considered. Yes, he probably could get to the edges of the prison if he wanted, unless there were some very unexpected protections. “Perhaps I will do just that,” he muttered.

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Thor arrived not long afterwards to speak to Bruce and Danvers, and so Brunhilde was shuffled away into a room Anthony had prepared for her.

Loki retreated to his rooms, too – he could not be present, but he needed to know exactly what was said, and so he settled to watch the conversation on a screen provided by FRIDAY, and Anthony joined him there not long after.

It was a good thing, clearly, that Thor was still not good at spotting lies after years of being lied to, because Loki himself could see how obviously Bruce and Danvers were dissembling even through the camera.

“We found several witnesses,” Danvers was saying, “claiming that Loki spent some time on Sakaar a few months of their time ago.”

“What witnesses?”

“Ah...people in the palace.”

Thor frowned. “You were in the palace? Wasn’t it dangerous for you?”

“We got into a few fights,” Bruce conceded. He was better at this – he at least could misdirect with the truth, which, after all, was one of Loki’s favourite disciplines.

“Were you hurt?” Thor asked in alarm.

Bruce smiled. “We can take care of ourselves, though we did need to leave in a hurry.”

“Did you manage to find out where my brother went after Sakaar?”

“Not exactly,” Bruce replied, looking convincingly sheepish, “but we did hear that he flew out of the Devil’s Anus, whatever that is...”

“Devil’s Anus!” Thor said, shocked and also managing to look entirely serious as he did, which,
Loki had to concede, was quite a feat. “If it is true, that means he is headed to Asgard – or to Earth!”

Bruce and Danvers did their best to look suitably alarmed.

“Have you told my father?” They nodded in unison. “Good, then I can focus on protecting this realm…” He heaved a sigh. “I wish that did not have to be the first thing I think of when I think of my brother.”

Anthony, next to Loki, grimaced in sync with Loki’s own internal flinch. “Can we turn the feed off now, please?”

“Unfortunately, I need to be completely certain nothing else is said,” Loki said reluctantly, and so they watched a few more minutes of Thor being uncomfortable at the implication of Loki’s liaison with the Grandmaster before the Asgardian departed and the transmission was turned off.

“So,” Anthony said then, “leaving that shitstorm behind us and coming back to the actually interesting conversation with the Valkyrie, I gather Hela is actually real?”

“Yes,” Loki reluctantly admitted. “At least that would be my quite confident bet, though of course I will not be certain until I go to Nifleheim.”

Anthony frowned at that, a little. “Is that a good idea? You going?”

Loki shrugged. “It is a necessary idea. I do not believe it truly dangerous, but it is a problem of time. It does not go quite as slowly as in Asgard there, but slowly enough, and it would take me some time to find her prison, I fear. I am not certain I can afford to stay away from Asgard for that long, and it would almost certainly mean missing one of my visits here.”

Anthony grimaced. “Okay,” he said, “but you could still drop in for an hour or two in between, right? It wouldn’t mean I’d have to go six weeks without my fix?”

Loki allowed himself a small smile. “Not necessarily.”

“Good, okay. Then I can-” He took a deep breath. “I can handle it. But I want you to come and let me know as soon as you can after your return from Nifleheim, all right? I will worry otherwise. I wish cell phones worked between realms, really.”

Loki hummed as he considered it. “I gave you a talisman that can send you a signal,” he said. “We can agree on a pattern I will send from Nifleheim to indicate I am uninjured, but you are right that it is no proper communication.”

Tony frowned in thought. “Well, if you can send a signal you can send a Morse code message, but that’s not exactly elegant…but more importantly, if you can send a signal, it should be possible to transfer any digital file, you know...with enough signals...so...how long exactly does it take you to create a signal?”

Loki tilted his head to the side, intrigued. “What are you planning, Anthony?”

Anthony’s eyes were gleaming. “Well you know how our computing is digital? So, would there be a way to combine that with your magic to-”

“Yes,” Loki interrupted him slowly, now excited by the idea as well, “I believe that could be possible, though it would take some doing-“
“Great!” Anthony jumped up, clearly eager to go into the lab, but then he stopped himself. “No. First things first.” And he stepped closer to Loki with clear intent.

Loki stopped him with his hands on his shoulders. “My observation last time wasn’t an absolute demand,” he said gently. “You are allowed to have other priorities than sex with me, Anthony.”

The man shook his head. “I have been looking forward to that for the last fortnight, all right? I just get distracted easily, but you deserve better than that. And it’s late, anyway. Sex, then sleep, then maybe morning sex, and then we can go to the lab, all right?”

Loki hesitated, but Anthony seemed serious and intent as he looked at him, and so in the end, Loki said “all right” and allowed Anthony to approach and kiss him.

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In the morning – after, yes, a bout of morning sex – they did indeed head to the lab.

“All right,” Anthony said, standing by a clean workspace. “So, I can produce a device that will convert any information you input into a series of zeroes and ones, no problem – or, in other words, convertible to your signals.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Yes, thank you, Anthony, I understood that. The fact that Asgard does not use digital information transfer does not mean I lack the most basic information about how it works.”

“All right, all right. So, question number one: can you convert this digital output into magical signals? And question number two: can this conversion be fast enough to be in any way effective?”

“I am not certain,” Loki admitted. “It is not something I have ever tried. Perhaps Vision could be useful in this? He is, after all, a unique combination of magic – in a way, though of course the Stones are different – and digital information.”

Anthony pointed a finger at him. “Great idea! FRIDAY, call him for me?”

“Sure thing, boss!”

Vision appeared in a few minutes, and was intrigued by the request. “You wish to know how the Stone inside me interfaces with the rest of me?”


“I am...not entirely sure how to explain. It is intuitive.”

Loki nodded. “I expected as much. Without meaning the slightest offence, would you mind if we studied the interaction? I believe that asking you is similarly ineffective as asking someone how their, say, breathing works. One does not truly know, and it is difficult to observe in oneself.”

Vision inclined his head. “By all mean. Do you need something particular from me?”

“No, simply make yourself comfortable. We will of course inform you of all we see as we see it,” Loki assured him, and then he cast his probing spells at the same time Anthony had FRIDAY start diagnostics.

“I have done this a million times,” he muttered. “diagnostics on Vision I mean, but I’ve always focused on the digital aspects...didn’t really want to focus on the stone, because...well, you know
“Yes, I understand perfectly,” Loki confirmed. “You know I was uncomfortable for a time too, but I assure you it is completely safe.”

They spent an hour or so staring into their diagnostics before Loki said: “I believe I see it...or at least I see something, but without truly understanding the digital part of it, I cannot be certain what...”

“All right, can you visualize it for me somehow?”

Loki was frustrated. “I can visualize it in a way it would be comprehensible for me, but I do not know how to...”

Anthony frowned, clearly trying to find a way around the problem. “Do you think Strange knows anything about computers?”

Loki considered the implicit proposition. He didn’t see any harm in it. “We can find out,” he conceded.

“FRIDAY, call Doc Strange?” Anthony suggested.

“Dialling.”

The doctor responded quickly enough, and when he did, he asked brusquely: “What is it?”

“So, we’re trying to combine magic and cell phones-” Anthony began.

Strange blinked. “You’re what?”

“Yeah, so I was wondering, do you have any experience with coding at all?”

“I will be right there,” came the answer.

“Just a moment-” Loki began, but the connection was already cut. Oh well.

The doctor appeared fifteen minutes later, looking rather irate. “I couldn’t open a portal here,” he complained.

“Yes, I did try to warn you,” Loki muttered, looking intently at his magical diagnostics. “I improved our magical defences.”

Strange frowned at him, but instead of commenting, came closer and looked over his shoulder. “All right,” he said. “Walk me through this. What am I seeing?”

Loki explained, and Strange hummed for a moment and stepped over to Anthony and had him explain, and and then he frowned again, this time in concentration, and said: “Of course!”

His terms of explanation were imprecise and made both Loki and Anthony cringe, but they both gathered the gist from it, and Loki’s gave a satisfied smile. “Yes,” he said. “I can replicate this.”

Strange stared at him. “How?”

“Watch and learn,” Loki said with a smirk, and Strange gave him a scowl in turn.

It was, to be truthful, an intriguing and difficult piece of magic, and just enough out of Loki’s usual
specializations that it was challenging for him. He thought fleetingly of his mother, who would have been better in this, but that was never a good place to dwell, so he focused back on the task before him.

Essentially, what needed to be done was make the electrons that were behind every bit of digital information nudge the magic bosons that formed the basis of most magical transference to code the message, and then do the reverse to decode it again on reception. That was what he had glimpsed from Vision.

Of course, if he wanted Anthony to have a chance to respond to his message, he would also need to find a way to send this information through timespace fast enough that it did not arrive to the other side of the galaxy in thousands of years. On his side, that was easy – microscopic wormholes were the basis of any instantaneous magical communication – but how to allow Anthony to open one…

Well, one thing at a time, he supposed. First he needed to get down that transference business.

Muttering under his breath – he was sure this would have been a matter of minutes for an expert in this specific field – he ultimately managed, after a few hours of work by trial and error and half-recalling textbooks he had read years ago when he was still a naive Prince of Asgard, to create the spell.

He straightened, and gave a heavy exhale.

“Very well,” he said. “Anthony, give me two of your Stark phones.”

The man, who seemed a little startled from his own work to which he had apparently retreated when it became obvious Loki’s would take quite some time, handed the devices over.

“Explain what you did?” He suggested.

Loki did his best.


Loki frowned in incomprehension for a moment, and then understood. “What did All-Speak translate it to?”

Anthony blinked. “Um...so bosons, that translate all right?”

“Naturally.”

“All right, so it just put ‘magic’ in front of that.”

Loki shrugged. “It is oversimplifying a bit, I suppose, but not entirely wrong, so I do not quite see…?”

Anthony blinked. “Do you really name your particles like that? Because...do I get it right that this is a new, on-Earth-unknown kind of boson, different from photons and Higgs bosons and all the rest?”

Loki inclined his head.

“Well, the others are not called ‘light boson’ and ‘mass boson’ over here,” Anthony explained. Loki shrugged. “Then I suppose I understand why it sounds strange to you, but it really is not.”
“I suppose...it just sounds stupid. But really, some people call Higgs boson the God particle, so I guess I have no right to criticize.” Before Loki could express his opinion on that entirely idiotic notion, Anthony put up his hand. “Wait,” he said. “Two things. One, FRIDAY, call Bruce here. Tell him the gap between magic and science is being bridged right now and he has to see it. And another - how was calling it a magic boson oversimplifying?”

Loki sat down on the nearest worktable, settling in for a long conversation. “I told you how we define magic;” he began. “Not all interactions of magic bosons are magical – though that sentence must sound comical to you – and not all magic processes are due, or entirely due, to the magic boson.”

Anthony scowled at him. “So why not define it through this?”

“Because it would narrow the field considerably, and only serve for the species of Nine Realms with inborn magic,” Loki explained patiently. “There are many different ways.”

“All right…?”

Anthony still sounded confused, and Loki frowned. “This should not be difficult to comprehend. Take my shapeshifting, for example. It is considered magic by Midgardian standards, is it not? And yet the basis is different, and I get the ability from different ancestry.”

“But you wouldn’t consider it magic?” Anthony prodded, just as the door opened and Bruce stepped in. To Loki’s amusement, it looked like he had run part of the way.

“All right, what did I miss?” He asked.

“Magic has a special boson, only not all magic uses it, apparently,” Anthoyn summarized. “Shapeshifting doesn’t, so now I’m trying to find out if it actually should be considered magic or not.”

“I, personally, tend to see it differently, knowing what I know,” Loki explained, “but in Asgard it is certainly classified as magic, because it is achieved by manipulating particles, just like my more regular magic – but it is different particles.”

Anthony threw up his hands. “Just how many more are there exactly?”

Loki blinked at him. “But your world knows about these,” he pointed out. “The Pym particles.”

Anthony stared. “Wait...seriously?” he said after several seconds of silence. “The method Hope uses to become tiny is the same method you use to shapeshift?”

Loki was not entirely certain how they got to that. “I would assume so, yes,” he said a little hesitantly. “Have you consulted her on this?”

Tony furrowed his brow. “No, I just- Oh, right, All-Tongue again. It just translated the name of the particle you mentioned with her dad’s name, so...”

Loki snorted. “Then, yes, apparently.”

Anthony thought about that for a moment. “How come she can’t change shape, only size?” He asked then.

“Because she is not a born shapeshifter,” Loki explained. It was sometimes easy to forget that Anthony really didn’t know even the basics about magic. “Trying to change shape would kill her,
as it would anyone who was not born a shapeshifter, without other supportive magic.”

Anthony actually seemed disappointed. “So changing people into toads…?”

Loki grinned. “It can be done, but frankly it’s just needlessly complicated...so I only do such things when I am in a very particular mood.”

Strange gave him a look that seemed to imply he had just confirmed all his worst suspicions. He was still new to magic, after all, and from what little Loki had seen, his order didn’t seem to encourage much light-heartedness when it came to it. It probably seemed like sacrilege to him.

Anthony, meanwhile, was clearly contemplating something else. “I’m really tempted to ask you about the Pym particles,” he said, “but I guess the guy hates me enough without trying to steal his patent, so I’ll control myself...for now. Instead, I wanna go back to the difference between magical and non-magical stuff, because, like, isn’t everything done by particles in the end?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Certainly, but some things you can cause by interacting purely on macroscopic level. You push a chest off the table, it falls.”

Anthony shrugged. “You decide to shapeshift, you do. Not seeing that much difference here.”

“I suppose the term ‘magic’ is a little like our ‘force’?” Bruce interjected. “I mean, when Newton first came up with it he had no clue what it actually was, just stuck a word on it to be able to do the equations. Later, when we discovered how it actually worked, we had to work around that a little, because there are different kinds of forces and all that…”

“Then it is a good simile,” Loki confirmed. “At first, much like Midgard, Asgard simply used the word magic for strange abilities of their enemies they did not understand.”

“Speaking of which,” Anthony interrupted, snapping his fingers, “how does All-Speak work?”

Loki smiled. “It is a form of telepathy, but to be honest, no one knows entirely.”

Anthony blinked at him, his thought process obviously derailed. “What?”

“Yes. It is sometimes like that, is it not, that some of the very basic things are not truly understood?”


Loki grinned at him. “Ah, well, Asgardian science does know that, in actual fact, but I believe I really should not interfere with your progress.”

Bruce frowned at Anthony. “Have you started him on Next Generation already?” He asked somewhat incomprehensibly.

“No, he is just naturally that way,” Anthony said with a put-upon sigh. “All right, back on track. So you manipulate magic bosons. How?”

Loki considered his explanation. “I wanted to compare it to bioluminescence in your animals, but I believe they cannot produce it at will…?”

“Electric eels would be a better example,” Strange offered. “They control their electric discharges.”

“Electric eels, then,” Loki conceded, “only the way magic bosons are created is more similar to photons.”
“Magic bosons?” Bruce turned to Anthony with a grimace.

Anthony waved his hand. “All-Speak issue, don’t ask. But! I have another question. If magic is all this exact science, then how come intent influences it? Like with the prosthetics I made Rhodey? It was one of the first things you told me about magic!”

Loki blinked at him. “Are you going to ask me how can two magnets move each other when they aren’t touching, then?”

Anthony grimaced. “All right, no, but I mean, I am not a mage, so…”

Loki shook his head. “Not being a mage does not mean you never manipulate magic bosons in any way, just like not being a stingray doesn’t mean you never touch electromagnetism. You created a kind of bridge with your intent, only you can neither sense it nor make use of it. Magic users, on the other hand, can.”

Anthony still didn’t seem entirely satisfied with the explanation, but he nodded. “All right. And what about Stephen here? He definitely has no eel abilities, so…how does he do magic?”

Loki smiled a little at the metaphor in use. “He could have had, actually,” he pointed out. “When I first heard about him, I assumed he had some distant Vanir or Elven ancestry – but you are correct that his magic has a different, less biological basis. I have to admit I do not understand it entirely just yet – it would require studying his spells when I can afford to pay them the attention they deserve, and I would, of course, need his leave for that.” Well, not technically, but there was little to be gained by trying to go around the man.

“Yes, I haven’t decided what to do about your offer yet,” Strange commented. “It might by greatly influenced by whether your little experiment with phones works.”

“Well, then.” Loki smiled, and gestured to the devices. “Are the numbers programmed in, Anthony?”

“No, but they should be written on the stickers on the back.”

They were, and so Loki programmed them in and turned back to Strange: “Would you kindly take it to the Mirror Dimension to test it? You will need to create a pathway for the message for now, since I have yet to come up with a solution to that problem.”

Strange nodded and stepped away through a portal with one of the phones, and in a moment, Loki got a text that simply read “testing.” Strange might not be proficient in magic, but if there was one thing he knew how to do, it was creating wormholes, even if it was miniature ones.

Loki sent back “success”, and in a moment Strange was stepping back into the material dimension with an expression of awe on his face.

“It actually works,” he said. “All right, screw hesitation, I’m studying with you.”

Loki gave him an amused look. “Are you?” He asked archly.

“Well, you did offer,” Strange said just a little bit defensively.

“Of course.” Loki hesitated for a moment. Strange’s magic was certainly interesting, but they had spent many hours in the lab, and he was still thrown by all his recent discoveries about Hela and Odin. He felt tired – no, exhausted. “I would prefer,” he said to the sorcerer, “to contact you in a few days. I have only just arrived, and…”
“And I want him to myself,” Anthoyn finished, stepping to him and putting an arm around his waist, thus rescuing him.

Strange looked a little embarrassed. “Of course,” he said, and without further ado, created a portal and stepped out of the compound. Bruce excused himself right after, and just like that, they were alone.

Anthony looked up at him with something between a smile and a grin. “I wanted to thank you,” he declared with a glint in his eyes, tightening the arm.

“What for?” Loki asked, surprised, for the man sounded sincere.

“For explaining your magic to me,” came the reply.

Loki was amused. “You thank me for that? I like talking about magic, Anthony.”

“Sure, but you don’t always like sharing trade secrets, do you?”

This time, Loki outright snorted. “What I told you today is common knowledge in Asgard.”

Anthony grinned wider at him. “So you’re saying if I asked Thor he’d tell me?”

Loki could only snort harder.

“That’s what I thought. Still, I wish I’d known it wasn’t a secret, I’d have pestered you a lot more about explaining.”

“I promise you you can ask all your questions freely...but like I said, perhaps not now?”

“That won’t be a problem,” Anthony assured him, “because right now I have way different priorities. That whole thing with combining magic and technology was super hot, you know. I propose sex, late lunch, and Star Trek, in that order.”

“Hmm.” Loki smirked down at the man pressed to his side. “Approved.”

Chapter End Notes

So I know “magic boson” is a stupid name but it’s once again a language problem. Like, in an actual Asgardian language it would be called something completely different, and since it’s supposed to be as-yet-undiscovered particle on Earth (responsible for a different kind of interaction from all the bosons we know about or hypothesize), there would be no legit Earth name. If Tony has a bit of time and builds a particle accelerator again, and actually decides to publish his research this time, you can bet it’s gonna be called “Stark boson”, but for now, magic boson it is.

The Pym particles are a nightmare, so I was very glad to use the convenient excuse of respecting Hank’s patent to avoid getting into them. Honestly, it’s much more difficult to invent a plausible explanation for that than for the entirety of Loki’s magic. Oh well.

Oh and just for the record, Carol wasn’t being actually homophobic, obviously, because she is not an asshole. She was uncomfortable because Loki implied he used
sex to get information out of the Grandmaster.
Chapter Summary

Loki has a longer, more proper conversation with the Valkyrie, and finds out that he can still be surprised by the depths of Odin's hypocrisy. Also, some fun chats are had.

Chapter Notes

We passed 1500 kudos since I last posted - thank you all so much, and trust me that I value every single one of them! (Not to mention your comments, those are pure gold. ;))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How is Miss Maximoff?” Loki asked Vision as the android settled on the couch next to him for another consultation on the Mind Stone's powers.

“As well as can be expected,” Vision replied. “She is...upset that she had to move out of the Compound. I understand why it had to happen, as I said,” he assured Loki before any comment could be offered, “but she, I believe, does not fully do so. My attempts to convince her have been in vain, and have in fact led to an earlier return here than I had planned.”

Loki attempted to translate that into a more usual phrasing: “Do I understand it correctly that you have argued?”

Vision considered the proposition. “I suppose that would be the term, though I am sure many of the usual accompanying...signs were missing. I was merely trying to elucidate a point, but Wanda was...distraught.”

Loki smirked a little. “In the history of interpersonal relationships, you might just be the very first to say you were merely elucidating a rational point and be right. Your arguments would be fascinating to watch, I am certain.”

Vision grimaced a little. “I do not enjoy the experience, and so would prefer not to repeat it, even for the purpose of study.”

Loki shook his head. “I wouldn’t ask you to, naturally. But I am happy to hear you stand up to her, however uncomfortable it might be. Now, do you have any questions for me?”

“I do,” Vision confirmed. “I believe I now understand shielding fully, but some of the more subtle forms of control still escape me.”

Loki grimaced a little. “I am not sure how much I can help – you know I am not actually capable of that without the stone – but perhaps I at least know the theory. Ask.”

Vision did, and Loki did his best to answer. They were interrupted about half an hour later by
Danvers coming into the room. “Ooh,” she said when she saw them, “magic lessons?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Loki replied, since from what he knew of Danvers, she would not appreciate a discussion about the exact definition of magic the way Tony had.

“Can I watch?”

“Of course – that is, unless Vision objects?”

“Not at all,” the android assured her, and so she plopped down on the sofa opposite to them and the following thirty minutes were frequently interrupted by her questions. Loki did not mind, though – they were well meaning, honestly interested, and while entirely amateurish, they were not stupid. And he honestly thought that the better the Avengers understood Vision’s powers, the less chance they would fear him, which was always a danger with someone so obviously different.

Don’t project too much, he told himself sarcastically. He was not actually sure if there were any signs of that with the Avengers, he had not seen them interact with Vision enough, so he did his best to draw his mind away from uncomfortable parallels and focus on mind control theory.

The consultation was just wrapping up when a rather exhausted looking Drew appeared in the compound.

“I,” she announced, plopping down next to Danvers, “am completely beat.”

“What, the New York criminals are that much to handle?” Danvers asked her with amusement.

“No,” Drew replied bitterly, “Maximoff is. Sorry Vision, but it’s true.”

Vision merely inclined his head, not commenting, but Loki immediately grew tense. “What happened?” He asked.

Drew shrugged. “Nothing special, I guess. It’s just...really, really hard for me to come to terms with the fact that someone could have worked with HYDRA without feeling guilt about it.”

Danvers scowled. “She doesn’t?”

“I am quite certain she does,” Vision interjected.

Drew shrugged again. “I mean, she’ll admit it wasn’t right, don’t get me wrong. But you just know it’s academic, that she doesn’t feel anything about it. Maybe it’s not so obvious to you, Vision, because you don’t really have emotions the same way we do?”

“I spoke to her about this in detail,” Vision replied somewhat stiffly.

“Yeah, and she will say all the right words,” Drew conceded. “It’s the way she says them, most often, that makes it really obvious what she thinks about it all. I guess she thinks joining HYDRA was an understandable reaction under the circumstances, and no one reasonable can really blame her. Meanwhile, I’ve had therapists tell me that for years, and I still have trouble believing them. And I wouldn’t blame her if her therapy was working better,” she hurried to add, “I’m not that much of a bitch, but it’s the feeling that she never needed any help to be this guilt free that irritates me. Which is probably perfectly irrational.”

“No,” Loki commented, “I do not believe it is.” In fact, it expressed his feelings about Maximoff quite well, and as far as he knew, Anthony’s as well.
Danvers looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Got much experience with guilt?”

“Yes,” Loki said simply, “I do.”

Danvers opened her mouth, but Drew put a hand on her forearm, and the Captain closed it again, which was definitely interesting.

Before that discussion could continue on this somewhat dangerous subject, however, Brunhilde walked in, declaring: “Who needs guilt when there is alcohol!” and marching to the bar.

Drew watched her drain a bottle with some astonishment. “I am...not sure that is the best coping mechanism.”

“Don’t worry, she’s Asgardian. Her liver can apparently take anything,” Danvers commented drily. It seemed she had heard stories on the way here.

Loki did his best not to groan. “Her presence here is a secret from Thor, by the way,” he announced. “Given that you occasionally live with Maximoff and don’t seem to be on the best of terms, perhaps you should get yourself a mental shield before you go back there.”

Drew simply nodded. “I’ll ask you or Vision,” she confirmed.

Her casualness was a little surprising, but Loki didn’t prod. She might simply be too tired.

The Valkyrie, to his significant surprise, plpped down on the sofa on the other side of Danvers. “So,” she said, “who has funny battle stories? Or does someone want to spar?”

“Maybe the Asgardian warning should be attached to that offer, too,” Danvers pointed out. “Just for reference, we were pretty evenly matched.”

Drew gaped, and Vision turned his head in Brunhilde’s direction. “It would be interesting to test myself, then,” he commented.

Brunhilde frowned at him. “You’re not Midgardian, are you? I’ll be the first to admit to not being entirely up to date on this realm, but you don’t seem like it.”

“I’m not human,” Vision amended, “but I have never been on another realm.”

“You’re a weird bunch, aren’t you?” Brunhilde muttered. “The big guy who can turn into that deceptively looking doctor, you, the sunny girl over there who shoots fucking lasers or whatever from her hands...”

“Sunny Girl?” Drew asked, clearly amused.

Brunhilde shrugged. “That’s what the big guy called her, and well. Look at her and tell me it’s not true.”

“No, it’s totally true,” Drew agreed easily.

“The big guy, by the way,” Danvers commented drily, “is the Hulk.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Drew gave Brunhilde a curious look. “I heard you were friends with him? Like, actually with him, not Bruce.”

Brunhilde rolled her eyes. “I’ve never even seen Bruce until those two came to pick me up from Sakaar.”
“How does that work, then?”

Brunhilde frowned. “How does what work? I like the big guy. I like sparring with him, and he’s fun.”

Drew blinked. “Okay then,” she muttered.

It was at this point that Anthony walked in and blinked a little at the gathering. “All right,” he said, “what did I miss?”

“I would like to spar with Miss Brunhilde before I relocate to New York City,” Vision declared.

The Valkyrie snorted. “Miss Brunhilde. Right.” She then grinned at Vision. “You are on.”

They moved to the gym as a group, interested in watching the fight. And it was intriguing. Vision had the advantage of flight, but they weren’t outside, so he couldn’t use that to its full potential, and the Valkyrie was very good at jumping and throwing, as it turned out. She was also nimble, and so adept at avoiding Vision’s shots, and in the end she won the fight.

Vision was on the ground, pinned under her, but when he yielded she extended her hand to him to help him get up. “Good battle,” she commended, and Vision inclined his head.

“I notice you didn’t use any of the more refined Mind Gem powers,” Loki pointed out to him.

“No,” Vision agreed. “It seemed discourteous.”

Loki frowned a little. That stunk of the Asgardian approach to magic to him, and the last thing he wanted was for Vision to feel like that about his powers, but on the other hand, they mind control or mental torture powers, on the offensive side. Even he would have balked at using that in training. “I see your point,” he said at length, “but you should practice them in a fight too, at some point, to be properly ready.”

Vision considered. “At least it would be better with a previous agreement. Miss Brunhilde was not aware I had the potential to control her.”

Brunhilde scowled. “No, and I’m bloody glad you didn’t.”

“As I thought.”

It was ironic, really, that Vision of all people was in love with Maximoff.

“Hey,” Danvers said as they were gathering to leave the gym, “I volunteer. Next time you come here, you can test it out on me. Meanwhile, enjoy New York.”

Vision thanked her and left, and the group dissolved, Loki and Anthony retreating into the man’s rooms.

- -

Loki spent the night considering his situation, and the next day – rather late, in fact, as Brunhilde was apparently not inclined to early rising – Loki took her aside to ask more details about Hela.

“Let us say that I believe you,” he began. “Hela exists and is my adoptive sister. In that case, there are quite a few things missing from the story. Who is her mother? Was she Frigga’s daughter?”

Loki did not think so, but it could not hurt to ask.
“Frigga?” Brunhilde snorted. “No. Frigga’s existence was one of the main reasons Hela turned against Odin in the first place.”

Loki contemplated this new information. “She feared for her birthright, with the possibility of new siblings?”

Brunhilde looked like that thought had never even occurred to her. “I suppose that, too,” she conceded, “but it wasn’t the only reason.”

“I’m listening,” Loki prodded.

“I need a drink for this,” Brunhilde muttered.

“I’ll get something to your door,” FRIDAY replied.

“Thanks.” Brunhilde took a deep breath, tilting her head back on the sofa she was sitting on. “Hela’s mother was Angrboda, a Jotun mage.”

If Loki had been standing, he would have fallen down. “What?”

“Yeah, you have a bit more in common with your adoptive sister than you thought, maybe,” Brunhilde said in an amused tone, misreading the source of his shock.

Because Loki was shocked, quite completely. He had known Odin had misled him about the Jotnar, but he never imagined the level of hypocrisy would go as far as Odin actually having a Jotun lover in the past. “But she was never a Queen of Asgard, was she?” He reassured himself.

“Heh, no,” Brunhilde snorted, and got up to get the alcohol FRIDAY had sent her. “Not Angrboda,” she commented from the door “She wouldn’t marry Odin for the world. I’m pretty sure she came to regret having Hela with him, too.”

Loki blinked. That was not what he had expected. “You mean that she refused him?”

“Oh yes,” Brunhilde confirmed, plopping back down on the sofa and opening the first bottle. “She was very powerful and from what I heard, Odin would have liked binding her to him by marriage, but she was way too smart for that, and knew him too well. She was his official concubine for years, though, and she had the same power as a Queen would have in many ways...until she didn’t.”

“What does that mean?” Loki asked warily.

Brunhilde took a long gulp. “Well, Angrboda was no tame kitten, but at one point – specifically after the conquest of Vanaheim – she felt like Odin was going too far. I don’t know if you know why the war happened?”

“Asgardian history says it was because they tried to rise against Asgard,” Loki said neutrally. He knew enough to doubt everything now.

Brunhilde snorted. “Right. I guess you could say that. They were our best allies, but then their king was reluctant to send his troops in for the occupation of Alheim, arguing that it was unnecessarily brutal. So Odin decided to show him what unnecessarily brutal meant, I guess.” She took another gulp.

“Did you fight in that war?” Loki enquired.
“Of course we did,” Brunhilde replied heavily. “We fought in all the wars. This one sucked.”

“Not enough glory to be gained?” Loki asked sarcastically.

Brunhilde turned her eyes to him, suddenly angry. “Listen, I always did my best no to think about the politics and just do my job, but killing the people I’ve fought alongside only a few months before? Not even I could ignore that. None of us liked it.”

“But you still did it.”

Brunhilde shrugged, the anger fading away again. “We knew what happened to traitors. It wasn’t pretty.”

Loki only nodded. He was sure there were high-minded individuals who would have told her she still should have stood up to the tyranny, but Loki was not that much of a hypocrite. Still, he was amused that this was apparently yet another thing he had in common with the last of the Valkyrie.

“Back to Angrboda,” he said.

Brunhilde nodded. “She didn’t like what happened to Vanaheim.”

“Was the situation so different from the other conquered realms?”

Brunhilde shook her head. “Angrboda hadn’t liked what happened to Alfheim either, I think, but there at least there was a more normal excuse.”

“The histories say that Alfheim was as divided in leadership then as it is now, and one of the fractions openly declared war against Asgard,” Loki probed.

“Yeah,” Brunhilde confirmed. “Conquering the whole planet was obviously an overkill, and the less said about the treatment of prisoners the better, but still, there was at least something.”

“But Angrboda was still upset?”

Brunhilde shrugged. “From what I know, she had friends among the mages there, and in Vanaheim too.”

“Likely, she could also see that this all didn’t bode well for her own realm,” Loki pointed out. “Jotunheim was the last one standing at that point, was it not?”

“It was. And Angrboda usually tried not to make much of her loyalty to them, but Odin was not an idiot.”

Brunhilde trailed off and took another large gulp. It wasn’t hard to figure out the rest. “Odin had her killed,” Loki surmised.

“Yeah.” Brunhilde drunk again. “He spared her the humiliation of public execution at least, I guess, but he sent people after her all right.”

“Was that why Hela turned against him?”

Brunhilde scoffed. “He didn’t tell her, obviously. I only know because my girlfriend was the leader of the Valkyrie, and so was privy to all sorts of secret information. The official story was that Angrboda was killed by the Jotnar for treachery. It was the excuse for that war.”

Loki blinked. That surprised him. “I thought the war was in response to the Jotun occupation of
Midgard?”

Brunhilde smiled bitterly. “Oh no. The occupation was the Jotnar response to the war declaration. Didn’t help them in the end, but they were trying to get into a less desperate position.”

“So...the war started when Hela was still free?” Loki clarified.

The Valkyrie rolled her eyes. “Obviously. She was the general, she led most of the attacks.”

“But...Thor was born in the last year of the war,” Loki objected.

Brunhilde nodded. “I don’t know what happened there exactly,” she said. “I don’t think anyone knows. Just...one day, not long after Angrboda’s...disappearance, when we were still just preparing for war, Frigga was suddenly by Odin’s side, and before he set out to battle he married her. Generally people thought that it was insurance – he got her pregnant pretty early on, so he probably just wanted to have a heir secure in case something happened to him and Hela.”

Loki frowned. That explanation rang false. “Had he done anything like that before?” He asked.

“No,” Brunhilde conceded.

“Then it is strange he would start just then,” Loki pointed out.

Brunhilde shrugged. “Yeah. I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him.”

Loki left that without a comment. “So what made Hela turn, then?” He asked instead.

“After Jotunheim was conquered, Odin declared he’d stop the conquest there. He didn’t even take direct control of Jotunheim. Hela was furious. She saw it as a betrayal of her mother, and as Frigga’s influence. When Odin wouldn’t be swayed, she led an uprising against him, and he locked her away. She tried again two years later, and that time managed to amass...a lot of power.”

“That was the last stand of the Valkyrie,” Loki realized.

“Yeah.” Brunhilde took a very deep swing from the bottle this time. “You don’t really need me to go into detail about that, do you?”

“No,” Loki reassured her. What he needed was more answers than Brunhilde or even Hela could give him, but he had no one to talk to...except, he supposed, Heimdall.

Heimdall.

Loki considered the problem on his way from Brunhilde’s rooms. He had avoided talking to the As until now for a reason. He hated that man as he hated only very few, even more than Odin. Odin’s decision, at least, had been complicated. But Heimdall was a traitor to two kings, and his treason led to all of Loki’s subsequent suffering.

Heimdall, he was aware, hated him just the same. He thought he had a better chance of getting answers out of a rock.

Still, there were no other choices left. The true reason why Odin changed his approach would only have been known by the king, Heimdall the All-Seeing, and perhaps Frigga. But Frigga was dead, and Odin could not be woken at this juncture. There was only one choice left, so Loki simply had to try, as much as he hated – with hot, burning passion – the idea of asking Heimdall for something.
He wished he could hope that saying it was for the good of Asgard and the nine realms would sway the As, but he knew from past experience that when choosing between the good of the realms and a chance to go against Loki, Heimdall would always chose the second.

Loki did his best to get his bitterness under control. Beside the mystery of Odin’s changed attitude, there was one question he desperately needed to find answers to, and that Heimdall would certainly know: was Angrboda actually dead?

Loki retreated to his own room for once, to think through what he needed to do next. Talking to Heimdall when he went to Asgard. Depending on what he found there, going to Nifleheim to find Hela during the night. Visit Anthony for a while during the day, and then perhaps another night away, looking for Angrboda. After that, he would see.

But that was all for later. Now, while on Midgard, he needed to speak to Strange again, and he also needed to see Magneto.

The second was more urgent, so Loki began to construct the lie he would tell the man, or rather his Jotun assistant, about her species. How best to present the Jotnar, he wondered, to pretend he was truly one of them and knew them well? What good could one say about the species to be convincing? He wondered whether Odin had faced such a dilemma when adopting him, and whether that was the reason he gave up in it in the end and just allowed Loki to grow up hating the Jotnar.

As soon as this thought ran through his head, he froze.

He thought of all he had learned from Brunhilde, of Odin’s lies and manipulations, of his treatment of him...and now here he was, plotting along similar lines.

No.

Anthony came to get him from his rooms not long after that, suggesting another date.

Loki considered. “Under one condition,” he said then. “Until now, we have done what you thought I would like – and I did. This time, I would like to go by your preference. I would prefer to think of something myself, but you know I am not as versed in Midgard as all that, in spite of my best efforts.”

Anthony simply nodded, thoughtful. “All right,” he said then, “Some time ago you wondered why I took you to the Met – the opera, I mean – when it wasn’t my preferred kind of music, and I told you I didn’t think you’d appreciate mine. We could test that, I guess. I think there’s gonna be a rock concert somewhere where you could teleport us. FRIDAY?”

“Sending the list to your phone, boss,” came the reply, and Anthony took out the device and studied it for a moment.

“Hm,” he said then. “All right, Sabaton is actually here in the US, so that means no awkward time jumps...I think that makes it an easy winner.” He frowned for a moment. “Do you think you could disguise both of us this time? I’d rather not be mobbed there.”

Loki obligingly did so, wondering how much of the request was kindness on Anthony’s side, so that he did not feel so singled out with having to change his appearance. On the other hand, he himself had often ventured out in disguise as a prince of Asgard for precisely the reason Anthony had just cited, so it might as well have been entirely honest.
“Shall we, then?” Anthony asked.

“I need to see where to teleport,” Loki reminded him, and FRIDAY obligingly displayed the photographic map, making the task easy indeed.

“All right,” Anthony said once they were in place, “fair warning. This is going to be loud. Like, really loud. So if that bothers you and you have a magical way to dampen the sound a bit, maybe do it?”

Surprised, Loki did as was asked. “Do you want me to do that for you, too?”

Anthony shook his head with a grin. “I like being unable to hear anything for two days afterwards, my ears ringing,” he announced.

Loki supposed it was his funeral.

They moved in the direction of the venue, and once they could see it, Loki stared. “This is it?” He asked.

Anthony grinned. “A bit different from the Met, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Loki muttered. “How can such different settings be used for the same activity?”

“The same activity?” Anthony asked incomprehendingly.

“Listening to music,” Loki clarified, as if it was not obvious.

“Ah.” Anthony seemed to consider how to explain. “I guess it’s just that one is consider highbrow and the other lowbrow.”

Loki blinked. “Do you mean to say you are taking me to listen to music for the lower classes?”

Anthony snorted. “What, your majesty is offended?”

“No, more astonished. What are you doing here, then? You’re near enough to aristocracy.”

Anthony hesitated. “Yeah, it’s...a bit more complicated, I guess. Like, mostly rich people go to the opera, but not only, and not that many rich people come to these concerts, but some do. Like, I guess it depends on whether you go because you actually like the music or because you feel you are supposed to.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “As if one could ever separate one’s so-called authentic desires from what your environment forms you into.”

“Fair point, I guess, but way more philosophical than I want to get into. The fact is, being here won’t help me get ahead in business or in politics, most likely, and if someone wanted to be cool in a motorcycle gang, they wouldn’t mention going to the Met. But still, politicians do go to rock concerts and people from motorcycle gangs do go to the Met, so.”

Loki nodded. He could understand the situation, at least, though it was different from what he was used to. On Asgard the art was not so diverse, on Vanaheim the classes wouldn’t mix at all, and on Alfheim there was no social stratification of amusements. He had no idea about dwarven arts – or Jotun, for that matter. Yet another thing he did not know.

To Loki’s shock, Anthony didn’t take him to the seats along the edge of the open space, but to stand in the middle instead. “This is the proper way to attend a rock concert,” he declared.
At that point, Loki thought he could not be any more surprised, but then the music started.

It was unlike anything he had ever heard before – except in brief snippets in Midgard, and he had never paid attention to what he had considered noise – but, come to think of it, it was very much like he imagined dwarven or Jotnar music would sound like. He really should find out.

Once he got used to it, it wasn’t bad, exactly, though the singing was decidedly subpar. By the time the final song was announced, he was honestly finding pleasure in it, and said as much to Anthony over the first tones of the piece, his voice magically amplified.

To his surprise, the man grimaced. “Yeah, actually, this might ruin it for you a bit. I forgot that song was on their repertoire. I suppose it would be too much to hope for that you wouldn’t catch the lyrics?”

It had been too much – there was no chance Loki would not notice someone singing about Thor.

“What?” He said, shocked, when a mention of Asgard followed.

“Yeah...it’s a popular motive in this genre. Just suffer through this one.”

Loki did.

He had not thought he would ever have to deal with humans glorifying Thor, and yet here he was, several Midgardian centuries later. Some things, he supposed, never changed.

All in all, though, with the exception of that song, it was not a bad evening, and it was nice to see Anthony's enjoyment. Loki was looking forward to its continuation when they came back to the compound, and so as soon as the song ended, he teleported them there with some alacrity, but once there, Anthony turned to him with a serious face. “I hate to break up the good mood and all,” he said, “but that song reminded me of something kinda important...If you really mean to go to Nifleheim the next Asgardian night – and god does that sound like some Orientalist cliché – then you need to see Magneto in the next few days, in your Jotun outfit.”

Loki grimaced as he sat down on the bed. There went the pleasant anticipation. “I can’t,” he said.

“Loki...” Anthony began.

Loki put up his hand. “It is not because of my own...mismgivings, though they are not any lesser than they used to be, or not by much. But...the giant wants to meet another of her species because she wishes to learn about them. What can I tell her about the Jotnar but Asgardian fables?”

Anthony exhaled as he sat down next to him. “You have a point. I didn’t realize.”

“I did,” Loki admitted.

“So...what’s your plan, then?”

“Originally, my plan was simply to lie and make something up based on what I have read. But...thinking about it, I realized it is a little too much like what Odin did to me, keeping the truth of by birth and my people from me. And will not be like him. I refuse.”

Anthony took his hand. “All right,” he said. “I can understand that. But...we need to do something about Magneto.”

Loki nodded in agreement. “I will go to Jotunheim,” he explained.
Anthony frowned. “You said you couldn’t.”

“I did,” Loki confirmed. “I am still a little worried, to be truthful, but in contemplating this I realized that my worry that I would immediately be recognized was absurd. The Jotnar do not know who turned the Bifrost on them, and I only ever negotiated with Laufey and those closest to him when I was drawing them to Asgard. If I head to the other side of the planet, I will meet people who have never even heard of me, in all likelihood.”

Anthony considered this. “I guess you are right. Will you go in your Aesir skin, or...?”

Loki grimaced. “Jotun,” he admitted. “I have no choice – known or not, no one would speak to an As there, in all likelihood. For a good reason, too, but still.”

Anthony’s hold on his hand tightened. “I wish I could go with you.”

Loki smiled a little wanly. “I will take the new interplanetary phone with me.”

“You have to make it actually work for us Muggles first,” Anthony pointed out.

“That’s my plan for tomorrow,” Loki confirmed. “I’ll arrange a meeting with Strange. For now, however...we were on a date, were we not? It seems rather depressing to end it on this note.”

Anthony waggled his eyebrows comically. “I can think of a bunch of better notes.”

Loki grinned. “So do I. In fact...do you remember when I asked you if you would like to try something a bit sharper in the bedroom?”

Anthony nodded.

“We did not get very far in that conversation, did we? Do you think you feel more like discussing it now?”

Anthony sighed. “I prefer doing to discussing, but if you insist...”

“I do,” Loki said firmly.

“All right.” Anthony stayed silent for a moment, formulating. “I was never really into anything super hardcore,” he began then. “I guess I’m a switch just as I’m a vers, but I actually do have pretty narrow limits in what I’m willing to do or have done to me.”

“I’m listening.”

“So...the biggest one is probably that I have a massive praise kink, and, you know, all things related to that – though I think the two us should probably stay as far away from daddy kink as possible.”

Loki grimaced at that. “Indeed.”

“Yeah, so that would be a hard no on that. On the receiving side I can’t do any kind of breathplay since Afghanistan, and any kind of restraint is a soft limit too, really.” Anthony trailed off, then added. “And I’m not into any kind of pain for pain’s sake.”

“What do you mean exactly?” Loki asked, tilting his head.

“Well, like a slap or a spanking, it’s more about the whole setup, right?” Anthony explained. “The pain more goes along with it. But with some other stuff...”
Loki nodded. “Yes, I understand. These are all things you do not like, though. Anything to which you have a positive relationship? Except the praise you mentioned?”

Anthony bit his lip, looking away. “Just...when it’s done well, I like the submission in general. The way everything just...fades away.”

Loki nodded in understanding. “And as a dominant, do you have preferences?” He asked, triling his finger over the palm of Anthony’s hand that was still in his.

“Not that many – I refuse to administer pain for pain’s sake, too, but beyond that...Oh and I almost forgot – no scat in any shape or form.”

Loki immediately agreed to that with some fervour. “So you do not truly enjoy being in the dominant position?” He asked, wondering whether Anthony claimed to be a switch only as a concession to his ego. That would be a pity, but it would also surprise him.

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” Anthony said hesitatingly. “But I don’t...I don’t so much like having people obey me. I quite like being the one doing the edging or making people desperate in bed in any way.”

At this point Loki’s mind suddenly started to have much more trouble with concentrating, and he had to firmly wrestle his focus back to the rest of what Anthony was saying. *Later*, he told himself firmly.

Meanwhile, Anthony was finishing his list: “Generally I like the chance to have complete control of a situation, but without direct obedience really entering into it.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. That was an interesting preference, but one he thought he could work with extremely well.

“So, your turn,” Anthony prodded.

Loki thought about what had been covered. “I agree with you wholeheartedly on the praise, and would be delighted to be on the receiving end of your edging,” he said, once more having to drag his mind from the fantasies to the important conversation they had to finish before any of those fantasies could become reality. “I enjoy breathplay and bondage both, but refuse to have ice in bed or any kind of electricity, and I can’t take any kind of mind games.” At least talking about his limits had the effect of cooling his fervour a little.

“Mind games?” Anthony asked, sounding a little confused.

“Having you blindfold me and leave for a time, for example. Sensory deprivation in general is not a good option for me.”

Anthony nodded. “Me neither.”

“Like you, I do not like knifeplay or too much pain,” Loki continued, “and I do not like the entire setup of punishment that’s so popular in bedroom games.”

“So, no on spanking?” Anthony clarified, sounding a little disappointed. Loki did not wonder.

“No a hard no,” he explained, “but you would to come up with a setup that would no be directly framed as a punishment.”

“That might take some doing, but I’ll try. And what do you like?”
“I enjoy the same thing about submission you do, though it is more difficult for me because I do not truly like receiving orders in bed – in this we are well compatible. Contrary to you, though, I very much enjoy giving them.”

Anthony grinned. “I could have guessed, and let me just say I will gladly kneel for you.”

Loki laughed at that. “Yes,” he said, “that might have been the single moment of that disastrous situation – except perhaps for our little chat, until the sceptre’s influence nudged me in a rather more insane direction – that I truly enjoyed.”

Anthony tilted his head to the side. “Sorry to derail the conversation, but...I was right, then? What I saw in the penthouse was one of the instances of direct control?”

Loki sighed. “It was never direct exactly. But the influence grew and waned depending on how in accordance with Thanos’ goals I was perceived as acting. I was fascinated by you, both by your mystifying courage and sharp wit and the reactor in your chest – and would have been distracted from my main goal easily. Thanos sensed that, and increased the push on my emotions, encouraging the low shimmer of irritation I felt at you resisting me into a full-blown rage.” He shrugged. “It was like that at several points.”

There was a short silence between them, as Anthony digested it, and the shrugged and with a grin, asked: “Any other important bedroom preferences?”

Loki shook his head. “No, I do not believe so.”

“All right...I’d have liked to do something tonight, but frankly I think I’m too tired to get into it properly.”

Loki nodded in agreement. “Though perhaps,” he added, his fantasies resurfacing now that the discussion of unpleasant matters was over, “you could be convinced to exert some effort towards making me desperate? It did sound irresistible...”

Anthony could, indeed, be convinced, and it was glorious.

Chapter End Notes

I’d have had them fill in a questionnaire, it would have been less awkward for them, but it’s also less interesting to read, so...it's fortunate neither of them gets embarrassed quickly.

And I spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about what their limits would be. Like, separating what I enjoy reading from what people with their histories and characters would be into was *hard*.

As for what Brunhilde revealed, I’m imagining Asgard and Vanaheim before the war like the US and the UK after WW2...only imagine that Blair had said he would withdraw his troops from Afghanistan, and Bush responded by attacking Britain.

And by the way, are you happy MCU declared Loki ‘under the influence’ during the Avengers? I am, but the articles which frame it as Marvel “retconning” something piss me off. Like, the fandom has known it for years...
Chapter Summary

Loki talks about his teenage years a little, and more science is done.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! We were renovating the bedroom. It was EXHAUSTING.

This one feels a little fillery, but once again, needs to be done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning, as they lounged in bed together, Loki told Anthony about his conversation with Brunhilde.

“Wait,” Anthony stopped him when Loki got to who Hela’s mother was. “Angrboda? That name rings a bell. FRIDAY? Can you do a quick search for me?”

“Sure thing, boss.” There was a tiny pause. “Angrboda is listed in the myths as mother of Hela, as well as the wolf Fenrir and the serpent Jormungandr. Their father is said to be Loki.”

“What?” Loki barked, completely flabbergasted.

“Yeah, so, how come we know about her, but have such a gross misconception about your relationship to her?” Anthony asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted. “I mean, I do know how the myths about me being the father to all of these got started.” He grimaced at the memory.

“I’m all ears,” Anthony encouraged.

Loki sighed, but he supposed he did start the conversation, so he might just as well finish it. “It was a particularly unfortunate trip to Midgard with Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three. I was a young teenager at the time, and somehow the conversation around a campfire came to fatherhood and what a terrible father I’d be. And then someone said ‘can you imagine Loki as a father? What would that be like?’, and the drunk warriors began to speculate about what kind of children I would even have. It didn’t start out actually malicious, I think – it was Fandral who said he could see me as a father to an evil queen or something along those lines. But then Sif insisted that since I was so weird, my children would have to be weird too – and really that anyone willing to have children with me would have to be even weirder, so the weirdness would compound in the children – and Hogun suggested the big bad wolf of Asgardian fairy-tales -”

“Wait, you have a big bad wolf in your fairy-tales too?” Anthony interrupted him.

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “He serves the evil queen.”
“So she’s an established character as well?”

Loki nodded.

“And the connection to Hela…?” Anthony prodded.

Loki considered. “It must have been made by humans. They knew about her from before she was banished, and apparently Odin didn’t bother to erase their memory.”

“Right, so, Hogun said you could be the father of the big bad wolf.”

“And then Volstagg came up with Jormungandr, a fairy-tale monster as well.”

“Right. All brilliant suggestions, I see.” Anthony hesitated. “Is the part about Sleipnir…?”

Loki scoffed. “Oh yes, that was Sif. She insisted that no woman would sleep with me, really, and so if I wanted to have children I’d have to bear them myself, but then what man would sleep with me, and so she came up with the brilliant idea that I could shapeshift into a mare and let a stallion fuck me, and then voila, the idea that I could be a father to Sleipnir, Odin’s mount, was born, even though it made exactly no sense time-wise. But by that point they were too drunk to care about such details.”

Anthony looked absolutely disgusted, and Loki did his best to pretend it didn’t warm his heart. “Right, and you were what, fourteen at the time?”

Loki shrugged. “Thirteen, but then Sif and Fandral were fourteen. It was hardly the heigh of sophistication. And when I found out the drunken theories have spread among the humans, I shaved Sif’s head off in retaliation, so. Also, I spread the idea that she was the embodiment of domesticity and comfort and everything she despises.”

Anthony chuckled. “Good one. So, we know how all these weirdos became your kinds in people’s minds, but how did Angrboda get dragged into this?”

Loki shook his head. “I have no idea. I assume that, as with Hela, she must have been known to Midgard before, and if they knew her to be the mother of Hela, and connected the supposed evil queen I was the father of to her, then it just all fit very nicely together.”

“Didn’t they notice you were thirteen?”

“Oh, we all did our best to look very adult before the humans,” Loki said with a grin. “I can imagine. The terrible and noble gods…and you were a bunch of teenagers. All right, that explains so much.” Anthony chuckled, then paused. “But wait…you said you were pretty young when the disaster of Thor’s coronation happened…wouldn’t that make this teenage story a bit too recent in Earth’s history? I’m no expert, but I thought the Norse myths were older?”

“I told you the time differential with Asgard changes through time. In my childhood, we went very fast – for us -, but then we slowed down for a time. This all happened during your middle-ages, though don’t ask me to calculate it exactly just now. Not long after this trip, Odin banned us from travelling here.”

Anthony rolled his eyes. “Well, at least he was smart in some things. Honestly. But hey, since we’re discussing this, what about the other stories about you? Mouth sewn shut, poison dripping into your eyes…?”
Loki sighed. He was not fond of those stories. “As far as I can tell, they were all revenge fantasies, though I don’t know who came up with them. My personal bet would be Sif, though.”

“Especially after you cut her hair.”

“Precisely.”

“Well, that’s definitely a relief.” Then Anthony frowned. “How come you know these stories and didn’t know about Angrboda?”

Loki shrugged. “Some Midgardian centuries ago, I thought to see what was preserved about me. After I came across a few gems like this, I gave up fairly quickly, and Angrboda was not in the ones I came across.”

“I guess she is obscure? FRIDAY?”

“Yeah, boss, she’s not mentioned in half as many places as Loki is.”

“Hm. Makes sense.”

Loki shrugged again. “Honestly, even if I had come across her, it wouldn’t have meant anything to me without the context I now have from Brunhilde. I would have thought it was simply another attempt to besmirch me, implying that I have slept with a frost giant.” He sighed. “If only that was all.”

Loki did indeed meet with Stephen Strange later that day, to discuss the way he did magic and hopefully to find a method for Anthony to send messages on the magically-adjusted phone.

“So, how do you open portals, with no magic boson-generating ability of your own?” Loki asked him, hoping that would lead him somewhere with potential.

Strange shrugged. “With a sling ring.”

“A sling ring?” Came from three different sources. As before, Anthony and Bruce were sitting in on the meeting, curious about the nature of magic still.

Strange took it off his belt and held it out to Loki, not letting go of it.

Loki focused, then raised his eyebrows. “Oh,” he said. “That is certainly...interesting.”

“What is?” Anthony asked impatiently.

“This is a device that emits magic bosons,” Loki explained. “Not many, but enough that they can be used to open portals, and then recharges from the portals opened in this way.”

“Can you recreate this with the phone?” Anthony wondered.

“Certainly, but while that would give you the ability to produce the bosons, it would be no help when it comes to opening the portal, since you do not have Dr. Strange’s training...it’s a good first step, at any rate.”

Without further ado, Loki began to work. As he did, he commented: “It didn’t occur to me that a workaround against the lack of inborn ability to produce magic bosons could be circumvented in such a simple manner...though I should have guessed it would be by technology, truly.”
“Wait, so you don’t have any magic boson-producing devices on Asgard? Like really? No one ever thought of that?” Anthony looked completely scandalized.

“They exist,” Loki conceded, “as part of the Bifrost, for example, but no one ever thought to adapt them for such pocket use. It has very little power, you understand, just enough to open a portal...but then that is all that is needed. As I said, ingenious. I wonder what gave the founder of your order the idea, though – if it was a traveller from another realm...”

Anthony grimaced. “Yeah, I am not a fan of the theory that all human progress has to actually be owing to the aliens.”

Loki shook his head. “I do not mean that they created this device. But the idea of what magic was and how to use it had to come from somewhere. As I understand it, the only natural magic users you have here are some of the mutants. From what I have seen, their magic is usually limited in some way, so some sphere or such. With limitations like that, it would be extremely difficult to come to understand the theory, especially thousands of years ago, when there was no theoretical physics to build upon. And I cannot imagine creating a device like this without understanding at least some of the theory behind it. You have to admit a visitor from another realm is the most likely explanation.”

“So, you sure you didn’t mention anything on your visits here?” Anthony asked with a grin.

Loki rolled his eyes. “The order is much older than me, from what Dr. Strange said. But someone like me could have certainly been the cause. Now shush, I need to concentrate.”

He did. Recreating the key part of the sling ring on Anthony’s phone was not a mentally difficult task, but it required precision and concentration – and some small assistance on Anthony’s part with the mechanical aspects of it. Finally, though, it was done, and Loki handed it to Strange to test the device.

Once again, it worked.

Satisfied, Loki took it back and turned it in his hands, trying to come up with a way to make this easier from Anthony.

The man, meanwhile, was questioning Strange. “So, I got that you get energy from the other dimensions you open with this handy thing. But I’m confused what you need the energy for. At first I thought it was just a different names for the magic bosons, but it’s not, is it?”

“No precisely, but I have to admit I don’t know how to explain in these scientific terms.” He turned his questioning eyes to Loki.

“When you open the portal, it excites the magic bosons around it – the bigger the portal, the more of them. Excited magic bosons are then in a state more prone to manipulation, meaning a human can, with rigorous training, managed to bend them to their will. I and magic users like me circumvent this requirement by producing magic bosons of our own, enough of them that they can excite others and create greater feats of magic than our own production would be enough for.”

“So you don’t just use your own when casting spells?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Think of the energy requirements. I would have to be eating constantly to have enough for that. No. For some small spells, yes, but for anything bigger I have to use this method. Using portals for it instead is, I admit, an admirable workaround.”
“That implies,” Bruce interrupted, “that the magic bosons are constantly in a state of potential energy, waiting for it to spring free when yours nudge them. Otherwise, the conservation of energy would be shot out of the window.”

Loki inclined his head. “They are,” he agreed. “It’s one of their characteristics that’s not understood very well, but it is true enough.”

“All right,” Anthony interjected, “but I still don’t get how Strange manipulates them after he excites them.”

“Remember how I told you you interacted with them when you created the leg braces for James? This is a more focused version of them same. Every intentional thought of yours interacts with them, so it is only a matter of learning to do it consciously.”

Anthony frowned. “Yeah, this is where it gets a bit handwavy for me. Thoughts manipulating bosons?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I imagine your scientists felt much the same at the idea that looking at a photon could change its behaviour, at one point in time.”

“Yeah, all right, fair point. But still. Thoughts?”

“Tony,” Bruce interjected, “don’t play at Enlightenment Age here. You know thinking can influence physical reality. Think about psychosomatics.”

“Yeah, but that’s my own body! It’s through, you know, hormones and shit!”

Loki frowned for a moment as he parsed the term psychosomatics in all-speak, but then his eyes widened. “So you know about the effect!”

Tony blinked. “What?”

“That’s what it is. The unconscious manipulation of magic bosons that every being in the nine realms does, what you call psychosomatics is one of its effects. It reaches beyond the body too, though you haven’t discovered it yet, it seems.”

“Wait...” Anthony said slowly. “Would things like...someone staring at my back intently and me sensing it be a case of them too?”

“Precisely!” Loki said with a triumphant smile. “The basis of any magic boson-based magic is learning to control and manipulate this power.”

“How does it work without the hormones?” Strange asked curiously. He seemed rather in two minds about the magical theory intersecting with his old specialization.

Loki shrugged. “I am not a healing expert, so forgive me if my answer is not exactly precise, but in the end, how this works is that your brain, without your conscious input, sends electrical signals to your body which communicate that it is supposed to start producing such and such hormones, correct?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Well, it is just such interaction outside of your body, only instead of nerves and then the organs responsible for production of hormones, it interacts with magic bosons around you, and they in turn interact with the object of your attention, in the example Anthony gave.”
A slow grin spread across Tony’s face. “I know how to activate the portals,” he said.

He explained.

Loki stared at him.

“Do I understand you correctly,” he said, “that you mean to activate the portal by intentionally inducing a panic attack in yourself?”

“Just a small one!”

Loki kept staring.

“Look, do you have a better idea?” Anthony asked.

“You could perhaps set the trigger as something less pathological?” Bruce suggested mildly.

“But that’s the thing,” Anthony replied, “it would activate way too often. With every other clearly discernible emotion I can trigger in myself – like, I dunno, horniness – it would be coming online all the time. But I don’t really have panic attacks that often these days, so...”

“That’s only more reason not to trigger them intentionally!” Loki hissed.

“Look, we’re running out of time,” Anthony reminded him. “I don’t want you to go to Nifleheim without a way to contact me. It’s bad enough that...never mind. Just, let’s do it.”

Loki reminded himself to ask about that ‘never mind’ in detail once they were alone, but then he said: “If, and only if, we do not find another way, I will agree to this. And you are to use it only if you can’t get hold of Dr. Strange to open a portal for you.”

Anthony frowned at him. “Listen-” He began.

“Later, Anthony,” Loki said mildly, and reluctantly, Anthony nodded.

Strange looked uncomfortable once again.

The evening of that day brought a distraction from the problem, and thus a postponement of the conversation that clearly loomed on the horizon, as Loki was informed that Danvers was bringing in a new team member.

“I promised her,” Anthony said with a sigh. “Apparently the girl was seventeen yesterday and I said that once she was seventeen she could come train with us so that she was ready to join the roster when she was of age. Carol seems to think it’s a great birthday gift for some reason.”

“Does the girl already fight on her own?” Loki asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Anthony admitted with another sigh. “Carol tried that to convince me to let her in earlier based on that, but you know how that worked out with Spier-Man. I’m not making the same mistake again. Speaking of which, I’ve invited him to come too. I thought maybe she’d feel better if she wasn’t the only teenager here.”

Loki’s own experience with teenage years indicated nothing of the sort, but he supposed it might be like that for some people.
Spider-Man arrived not long after, and stood a little nervously between the sofas, looking from Anthony to Loki in his Shazad form. It made the mage realize how long since he had last used it.

“So, um, do you think I can take off the mask?” The boy asked nervously.

Anthony shrugged. “Like always, it’s up to you. Do you think the girl can betray you, on purpose or accidentally?”

“So I guess I’ll wait until I talk to her then.”

Anthony nodded.

They didn’t have to wait long until the door opened and Danvers walked in, and by her side, there was...a girl in a costume and a mask.

Apparenlty, Spider-Man wasn’t the only one worried about his privacy.

“All right, so you’re Kamala?” Anthony asked, getting up.

“Um, yeah – or, you know, Ms. Marvel.”

Anthony grimaced. “You don’t mind if I call you Kamala, do you? We have too many Marvels around her. I’m Tony.”

The eyes behind the mask widened. “Oh no, Mr. Stark, I couldn’t possibly call you-”

“Right?” Spider-Man interrupted. “That’s what I said!”

The girl turned to him. “Spider-Man!” She exclaimed. “Awesome.” Then she turned her curious eyes to Loki.

“This is Shazad,” Anthony introduced him, “my partner.”

“Oh, cool! Does she have powers too, or...?”

Anthony hesitated a little, and Loki smiled. “I have magic, Ms. Marvel,” he said smoothly, and the girl grinned at him.

“Cool!” She said. “I’ve always loved the fanfics that put Iron Man together with Loki, so-”

“What?” Anthony sputtered. Even Loki had to fight quite hard to keep his face neutral.

The girl blushed. “Oh, sorry! Um. It’s just, you know, you were both so...never mind.”

“So what?” Loki prodded with amusement.

“Well, I saw the old videos with Loki from the attack you know? And he really looked like a showman, and you’re the biggest showman among the superheroes, really, so I thought...I should probably just stop talking now.”

“That might be best,” Danvers said drily.

“No way!” Spider-Man argued. “I love that for once it’s not just me who’s putting his foot in his mouth!”

This, Loki decided, was going to be exhausting.
“What exactly,” he interjected, “are your abilities, Ms. Marvel?”

“So...there’s embigening and disembigening—”

Loki blinked rather rapidly. “I am sorry, what?”

“Um, I mean, I can become really big or really small.”

“Pym particles!” Anthony called excitedly from where he had plopped back down on the sofa after greeting the newcomer.

“Undoubtedly,” Loki commented drily. “But I do not believe Ms. Marvel would appreciate you experimenting on her to figure out your competitor’s secret.”

The girl looked alarmed, while Anthony put up his hands as if to suggest that a thought like that had never even crossed his mind.

“So, you can change sizes,” Loki tried to return the conversation on track. “What else?”

“I can just stretch my arms or legs without becoming huge myself,” she explained. “I’m, um, really bendy. Oh! And I can also change appearance to become someone else! Or even something else, really.”

Loki was impressed. “You have the full range of shapeshifting abilities, then,” he observed.

“I guess? Can you do that too?” She asked curiously.

Loki shook his head. “No – I can imitate anyone, but I cannot change sizes of parts of my body, and I cannot imitate an inanimate object. I do, however, have more conventional magic – contrary to you, I assume?”

“Yeah, no magic here. Except – I have accelerated healing, does that count?”

“I am afraid not – that is an aspect of the shapeshifting.”

She considered. “That makes sense, given I can’t really shapeshift when I’m healing...”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “You cannot? Interesting.”

“Wait, you can?” She seemed offended at the injustice.

“Indeed, but it might be a matter of training, keeping your concentration on both at once.”

“Perhaps that’s something to focus on?” Danvers suggested. “I would feel much better about this whole thing if there were no limits to when Kamala can use her healing, or if she didn’t have to expose her identity while doing so.”

Loki nodded. “That shouldn’t be a problem, though I assumed the training was to focus primarily on group integration?”

“That was before I realized there was someone who could help Kamala with her specific abilities. What do you say?” The captain turned to the girl.

She nodded eagerly. “It’s a bother,” she said. “I mean, I really don’t wanna be recognized – my parents would kill me – so...”
“What, like literally?” Spider-Man asked.

The girl shot him an absolutely poisonous look from under her mask, and Loki could swear he could see the boy blushing even through his.

“Sorry, that sounded better in my head.”

“My parents love me,” she said icily, “but they’re also really protective and would super not be on board with me doing this.”

“That makes me feel so much better about things,” Anthony muttered from his sofa.

Loki ignored him, and gestured for Kamala to precede him towards the training rooms. “Shall we?”

The girl nodded. Over her head, Danvers was giving him a looked he needed no All-Speak to translate: hurt her and you’re dead.

He inclined his head to indicate his understanding, and with the three present superheroes in tow, headed to the training rooms.

- 

The training went well enough for a first attempt. Kamala managed to keep some measure of disguise on as she was healing by the time they were done, though presumably healing the small cuts she made into her fingers to test this would be easier than if it was actually something life-threatening. But they had to start small.

After that was done, she trained side by side with Spider-Man and either Captain Danvers or Anthony for a time, before she was forced to cut it short by her curfew. Anthony’s face did very interesting things when he heard that, and Loki imagined he would have a talk with Danvers later.

But truthfully, they were all quite tired by that time anyway, and so any further experimentation with the more creative approaches to sex Loki and Anthony had discussed the day before would have to be postponed until a time they were a little more fit to enjoy them. Especially as Loki knew he would face a meeting with Magneto the next day, and was not looking forward to that.

That was in the afternoon, though. Before that, he was determined to do some more work on the inter-realm telephone, deeply unwilling to let Anthony torture himself just to contact him. He didn’t have any ideas on how to circumvent the problem, but he had three more days, Something would come to him.

Or so he hoped. The first three hours of sitting in the laboratory with Bruce and Doctor Strange yielded no results, and he was getting frustrated.

At that point, Anthony returned from some Stark Industries meeting that couldn’t be postponed with a wide grin on his face.

“Hey,” he said, “I just had an idea. Why not contact Shuri and ask for her input?”

Loki frowned. He supposed another mind could only help, but… “She doesn’t know about me.”

“Yeah, we’ll present this as Doc Strange’s and my project – if you’re okay with it, Doc – allowing anyone to reach him when he’s not in this dimension. Sounds believable, right?”
Loki had to conceded it did, and so when Strange agreed, they called Wakanda without further ado, to make it before the time difference put the kingdom at too late in the evening to be polite.

Princess Shuri listened to their explanation attentively, and then looked at them like they were completely stupid. “You’ve managed to find a way to skip the need for mental direction from Dr. Strange?” She asked. “You can make it read your specific mental state as a trigger for opening a portal instead?”

Anthony nodded. “I’m pretty sure I can, though it’s all theoretical so far...but from what Doc said...”

She stared at him for a moment. “Then the hard work is already done,” she said empathetically, “and you can tune to it to other electric signal patterns equally easily. So why don’t you just use something else than your mental states as the trigger? Like, anything else?”

The four scientists blinked at each other.

“Because we didn’t think of it?” Bruce said tentatively.

Princess Shuri rolled her eyes, in a very unpricely manner, but one Loki was intimately familiar with from his own use. It was strange having it directed at him. “I’m sure you did your best,” she said.

Anthony snorted. “Hey,” he protested, “save the snark. I exhausted my genius by figuring out how to make the magic translate the patterns on its own.”

“Fair enough – I have no idea how you mean to do that,” Shuri conceded. “But the other supposed geniuses on your team are clearly not pulling their weight.”

“I’m still adjusting to this combination of magic and science,” Strange protested in a rather prickish manner.

Shuri rolled her eyes once more. “If that’s all?” She asked. “I’d love to chat some more, but there’s some stupid state function my brother is dragging me, so...”

Anthony wave her off, and once the connection was interrupted, he burst out laughing. “She was right,” he said, “some geniuses we are.”

“To be fair to us, I think none of us really understand how exactly you mean to convert the signal,” Bruce defended.

“Neither does Princess Shuri, and it didn’t stop her,” Loki pointed out. He was, indeed, very impressed.

But now, they had work to do.

By the time the afternoon meeting with Magneto rolled around, they had the basic schematic completed, and the hope that it would be finished by the time Loki had to leave had a much more concrete basis.

Magneto, of course, was less pleasant to deal with than Princess Shuri, her snark notwithstanding.

“I did not make the deal with you only to listen to your excuses for why you can’t deliver on your end of the bargain,” he said coldly when Loki announced there would be a delay.
“I can bring you a Jotun tomorrow,” Loki retorted, “the one I’d been intending to bring when we made this deal. It would honour the letter of the agreement. But a few days ago, I realized that the Jotun in question did not grow up on Jotunheim, and so the amount of information he could give you would be limited, and likely as mired in disinformation as mine are.” He shrugged. “It’s your choice. I thought I would give you something a bit better than that.”

Magneto opened his mouth, but the frost giantess next to him put a hand on his arm. “I would prefer that,” she said, “but the delay is irritating.” She considered. “As compensation,” she declared then, “I want to visit Jotunheim in person, within the year.”

Loki exhaled. “I cannot promise that will be possible with complete certainty, but it should be.” After all, he would have to go there anyway, and likely more than once if he would have to track down news of Angrboda as he suspected. What difference did this make?

“Then let’s agree on it, and if you cannot deliver, I will as for a different compensation,” the giantess suggested.

“I will agree on the condition that you go alone,” Loki hedged. “Mortals cannot survive there, or not easily.” He could protect Magneto, of course, but he quite simply did not want him there.

Magneto frowned, but she agreed before he could object, and so they shook hands and it was done.

Loki was quite certain he would come to regret it, but in truth, he was becoming quite inured to that feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly WHY did Marvel put the Jotun invasion of Earth to 10th century? It makes literally zero sense – it’s way too late for Loki and Thor to be born, given how old Norse religion is – and makes everything so complicated when you try to explain it away in some sensible manner.

Also excited magic bosons honestly sounds like some cute rainbow puppies or something…

And no kids for Loki in this verse, sorry. Or, you know, at least one from the past.
Chapter Summary

Loki goes to Asgard...and then other places.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for how the chapter was randomly missing parts of the first and second scene when I first posted it! It was caused by a badly closed tag, of all things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As it happened, they did manage to finish the inter-realm phone before Loki had to leave, though it did require an all-nighter and they had time for little else. But Anthony's idea for translating a mage's intention into technology proved sound, and as far as they could test it without someone leaving the planet, it worked.

There was but one thing left for Loki to do before he went back to Asgard, and so he went in search of Brunhilde.

FRIDAY directed him to her rooms, so he went and knocked – and was taken aback when he was let in and saw Drew sitting there, apparently in the middle of a conversation.

“I did not mean to disturb,” he opened with.

The Valkyrie waved her hand. “I told the computer to let you in, didn’t I? It’s fine. Just say what you want to say and leave us alone.”

Loki grimaced a little. “I need an image of Angrboda,” he stated simply. “If I am to try and find information about her by magical means, it is immensely helpful to know more than just a name.”

It took Brunhilde a moment, and then she grimaced. “You want to look inside my head.”

Loki nodded.

“Your not-daddy did that when I came to Asgard,” she muttered. “I hated it, and I have zero wish to repeat the experience.”

“I understand – in truth, I dislike it as well. But there is no way around it.”

“You could just, ya know, not look for info on Angrboda. What do you need it for, anyway?”

“I suspect it might be helpful in finding a way to deal with the danger of Hela.”

She grimaced. “You’d know to say the one thing that might convince me, wouldn’t you.”

Loki shrugged. “Well, it is the truth, in this case.”
Drew was looking a little uncomfortable in her place on the couch. “Do you want me to leave?” She asked Brunhilde.

The warrior shook her head. “Nah,” she said. “I want him to leave,” she added, gesturing to Loki. “But I guess we can’t always get what we want.” She sighed. “Come on, then. Make it quick.”

“Just think of her, and I will try.”

He did, and fortunately he was quite successful, managing to withdraw just as the traumatic memories associated with Angrboda were beginning to emerge.

Brunhilde took a few deep breaths, then collapsed to the sofa next to Drew. “Go away,” she muttered, and Loki obligingly did.

He was done. There was nothing else, no other reason to stay. He was finished here for now, and who knew how soon and with what news he would come back.

Loki gritted his teeth, told himself firmly not to drag his feet, and went to sleep to get enough energy for all the tasks that awaited him in Asgard. Then, in the very early morning, he departed.

He fought the need to take a leaf out of Anthony's book and have a drink to steel himself for his conversation with Heimdall. He knew perfectly well it was not going to be pleasant.

Heimdall's cell was in the deepest parts of Asgard dungeons, and only guards especially vetted by Loki for that purpose were allowed to go in and talk to him. Well, them and his friends every week, but those friends were in turn carefully monitored and bespelled to make sure they could not remember any of Loki's secrets, if Heimdall decided to tell them.

Loki stepped by the guards and let his guise of Odin fall away as soon as he was beyond the last door. There was no need for it here. The rooms were shielded from screening, and Heimdall already knew who he was.

“Came to gloat?” The As asked.

“Came to seek help in a matter that concerns Asgard's security, as futile as I know the appeal is likely to be,” Loki replied calmly.

“If you cared about Asgard's security at all, you would release its rightful king,” Heimdall said in that tone of his of pronouncing a grave judgement.

Loki merely rolled his eyes. “And here we go again,” he muttered. “But speaking of Odin, my question actually did concern him. I hear Thor has a half-sister?”

The look of shock on Heimdall's face was enough to confirm to Loki that that much of Brunhilde's story, at least, was true. “And I hear she has an exceptionally charming personality?” He continued.

Loki merely rolled his eyes. “And here we go again,” he muttered. “But speaking of Odin, my question actually did concern him. I hear Thor has a half-sister?”

The look of shock on Heimdall's face was enough to confirm to Loki that that much of Brunhilde's story, at least, was true. “And I hear she has an exceptionally charming personality?” He continued.

Loki scowled at him. “The atrocities committed by your sister are nothing to make light of, though it does not surprise me a monster such as you would do so.”

Loki sighed. He missed Anthony already. “Suddenly she is my sister, is she?” He asked archly.

Heimdall’s lip curled. “You certainly have much in common.”

Loki leaned on the wall in front of the cell and asked in as casual a tone as he was capable: “Like our Jotun blood?”
Once again, Heimdall's face was answer enough. The watcher was normally quite inscrutable, but that made it all the easier to spot the changes in expression when Loki did manage to surprise him.

“So, Angrboda,” he began. “Tell me, is she actually dead?”

“Why?” Heimdall barked. “So that you could plot treason with her?”

Loki privately smiled. This time it was not the face but the words that betrayed the watcher, but he was betrayed all the same. It seemed it was as he'd suspected, but he only looked irritated as he said: “Never mind then. I should have known I would have no help from you.”

“Yes, you should have,” Heimdall replied. “I do not help traitors.”

Loki scoffed. “Why? You are one yourself, after all.”

He could see Heimdall gritting his teeth. It was beautiful. “Can you at least tell me why Odin turned away from Hela and conquest?” He asked. “It is something I simply cannot comprehend.”

“Of course you can't – you're violent by nature,” Heimdall replied in his tone of judgement once more, drawing exactly the conclusion Loki had intended from his not-lie. “For anyone not as corrupted as you, it is easy to understand. He simply saw the wisdom in peace.”

“Oh really,” Loki drawled. “For decades he wages war upon every world he comes across, and then suddenly he sees the wisdom of peace? That's weak, Heimdall, even for you.”

“It was that cursed Jotun witch that led him astray before,” Heimdall replied in a tone that rather suggested he wanted to spit on the ground.

That was an absolutely ridiculous claim given how Angrboda ended – or didn't, as the case may be – but Loki let it stand. Instead, he tried to see if there could have been a kernel of truth somewhere in that pile of dung. “Was Frigga's presence that helped break that influence?” He asked at length. She was, after all, the only known factor in the equation that he knew of, and if Heimdall actually believed Angrboda had been to blame for Odin’s violent past – which seemed on balance likely, because the watcher was not prone to lying to others, only to himself – then it would make slightly more sense if the woman who came after her was what heralded the change.

Heimdall gave him a stony look. “The Queen was too soft-hearted – you are the best evidence of that – but she did help the King see the light in this.”

“How did she even gain favour with him, if he was so firmly under Angrboda's thumb?” Loki probed, trying to get at some hints of the real story by attacking from different sides.

“The King was never under anyone's thumb,” Heimdall said emphatically. “But the Queen was wise for all her soft-heartedness, and he could see the wisdom, in a way you never could.”

Loki very much wondered about that. He also wondered in Heimdall actually knew what happened – he supposed Odin could have shielded himself if he wanted. Still, he tried: “What sort of wisdom?”

“That a kind word is sometimes mightier than a fist. That peace is its own reward. That…”

Loki stopped listening at that point, already intimately familiar with the lecture. He let it run its course, then bid the As a cheerful goodbye. He had work to do.
The day in Asgard dragged unbearably slowly when Loki knew he had more important matters to deal with than appease his nobles and, yet again, mediate between Alfheim’s warring fractions. At least Freyr was doing his job well, and everything on Vanaheim seemed to be going according to plan. He supposed their love of rules had to come in useful for something.

He ran out of patience in the middle of the day and went to stop by in Midgard

Anthony blinked at him, surprised. “I thought you said you wouldn’t come back for a while?”

“I did,” Loki confirmed. “But my day has been...exhausting.”

“Say no more,” Anthony immediately replied, and taking him by the hand, literally dragged him to his rooms.

“Now,” he said, “sex or Star Trek?”

Loki considered the choice. “I would say sex,” he replied, “but I am honestly too drained to take much initiative.”

“Not a problem, babe. Just lie down and let me do all the work,” Anthony replied with a grin.

Loki did as he was told, but on the way, he grumbled: “This feels disrespectful towards you, just coming here and...”

Anthony waved his hand. “I’d be pissed if you did this all the time, yeah, but once in a while? I told you I was fine with booty calls. Besides, I haven’t seen you for a week, so really, I’d tolerate most things right about now.”

Anthony said it with a grin, but it still made him feel guilty. Fortunately, he was soon distracted by Anthony pushing him firmly to the bed, and then hesitating.

“So,” he said, “I’ve had a week to think about those preferences we discussed, and trust me, I’ve thought a lot.” He reached behind the bed, and pulled out a set of cuffs tied to it. “Do you think you’re in the mood? I made them so that they should be able to take your strength.”

Loki suspected his face had already betrayed him, but just so there was no misunderstanding, he groaned his yes.

Anthony gave a satisfied smirk, and cuffed his hands to the bedpost. Loki sincerely hoped that had been fortified as well, but then Anthony wasn’t stupid.

“Disappear your clothes for me, babe?”

Loki twitched his fingers, and eh was naked.

“Hmm. Good. Very nice,” Anthony muttered, drinking him in and then lightly brushing his fingers across his chest. “How much time do you have, pet?”

“Two hours at most,” Loki admitted.

“Not as much as I would prefer to take with you, but we will make do, won’t we? Don’t worry, darling, I will take care of you.”

And Loki...melted.

He melted under Anthony’s hands, under his soft words of praise and admiration, bucking under
his light touches.

Soon his ankles were cuffed to the bed as well, and then there was Anthony’s mouth on his cock and he was lost.

Afterwards, Anthony cleaned him up, wrapped him in a blanket, and put on that Star Trek he had promised.

“See,” he muttered into his ear. “Sometimes you can have both.”

Loki was too content to reply.

It was difficult - extremely difficult – to force himself to leave after this, but he had to, and he hoped it had at least relaxed him enough that he would be better able to deal with the rest of the day.

It did help, but his agitation returned in the evening. He retired early, secured Odin’s quarters...and set out on his journey.

He was now quite confident Angrboda was alive - Heimdall’s answer had been too telling - and so, first, he returned to the throne room hidden by invisibility, to give himself plenty of time to search for her.

It was difficult, finding someone you have never met in person and only seen in old memories, but it was possible, and at least Loki had more than just a name. He also didn’t have to randomly search all the realms. Both for reasons of safety, and if Brunhilde was right also because of loyalty, there was one place Angrboda was most likely to be hiding - and, indeed, in Jotunheim Loki did find her, alone in a house made of ice, immersed in a book.

So now the question was, would he go there first, or would he start with Nifleheim?

After some hesitation, he decided that he simply needed to know if Hela’s prison actually existed first. There was a part of him that still found the whole thing entirely preposterous, and he needed to put any doubts to rest before he went to talk to Angrboda. If she managed to escape Odin for this long, she had to be good, and Loki had to be prepared.

Come to think of it- Loki froze. How was it possible that he could see her with the throne at all? He never even thought of it until now, clearly he was too preoccupied, but if Angrboda had managed to escape Odin that long, it was certain neither he nor Heimdall could see her. And Loki, having crafted the spell himself, knew perfectly well that the easiest way to ensure that was block against the magic of the throne. If she had blocked Odin in person instead...well, that was much more complicated. Why? Why would she choose such a way? Another mystery to add to the pile, he supposed.

He returned to his search. As expected, looking for Hela yielded no results, but Loki changed his focus and began sweeping Nifleheim instead. There was, indeed, quite a wide section of it that was hidden even from the sight of the throne. Loki wondered about that – surely Odin would have wanted to keep an eye on his banished daughter? But perhaps the spell Hela was hidden under was penetrable only by Odinforce. After all, if Brunhilde was right and that was what was keeping the prison working at all, it made sense.

At any rate, he now knew where to go.

Nifleheim...was not a pleasant place.
Jotunheim could be cold and dark as well, but Loki had gone there on his own before those disastrous machinations around Thor’s coronation started, and he knew it could also be full of light and beautiful, when the sun shone off the glaciers and was reflected in the snow. In fact, on a good day, it could be the brightest world he knew, and he remembered thinking how it was a pity it was inhabited by such monsters.

Niflheim was something else, though. It was perpetually dark, and perpetually cold.

And it wasn’t even only that, either. Loki minded neither darkness nor cold, but this was truly a dead world. The darkness wasn’t full of potential, of secrets to reveal, as it otherwise was for him. It was just emptiness without light or colour. The star that lighted this world wasn’t on its other side. It was dead, had been dead for centuries. There was no end to this darkness, and there was nothing to be revealed in it.

The cold, too, wasn’t the fresh kind that kept you awake and could sober you after indulging too much. There was no wind to it that would bite your face, as in Jotunheim. This was just endless lack of heat that numbed you as it seeped deep into your bones and made you want to sleep and never wake up again.

There was no landscape to speak of, and no life left. There was nothing.

It was soul-crushing, and Loki thought long and hard about Odin banishing his firstborn here, of all places.

Not for the first time, he wondered what would have happened to him had he not fallen off the Bifrost when he did, and had Frigga not interceded for him. Would he have gained a prison next to Odin’s daughter? Or would they have shared?

No, not that, Loki was sure. Odin would have been too worried about their possible collaboration.

He arrived to the edge of the prison, and what he found was simply a wall of somehow deeper darkness. Or, well, not a wall exactly. It wasn’t a solid surface, but it was thick like porridge and suddenly there was wind blowing against him and, even when using magic to help him, after a time he found he could not pass through.

“Hello?” He called into the darkness, loudly to be heard over the wind. “Is anyone there?”

There was only the howling, for a time, and then the wind quieted somewhat and a disembodied female voice spoke over it. “A visitor! Haven’t had one of these for too long to count. What, are you here to bring more threats or offers from Odin?”

Loki chuckled a little, without mirth, looking around himself to try and see if there was a source of the voice. “No,” he said simply.

An image began to form in the darkness, as if out of it: a large face of a woman, first only contours made out of the black that was everywhere, but then, gradually, colour began to appear, and soon there was a pale face with long black hair and green eyes some way before him, searching.

Loki froze, looking into something that could have been a female version of himself.

Fortunately, the darkness of the prison borders hid him and so gave him some grace period, and as soon as he came to his senses he made himself invisible. His head was spinning, and he was too dazed to say anything at all as the face continued: “Where are you, little messenger? Come closer...step over into my realm...don’t worry, I will let you through...” And she laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh by any means.
Get a grip of yourself, Loki told himself firmly. He could have a breakdown about this later – he would, if he knew anything at all about himself. Right now, he had to focus. “What would happen to me if I came in, I wonder?” He asked from the darkness, keeping the shock and anxiety hidden and only projecting bored sarcasm. “A gruesome death, perhaps?”

She laughed that disquieting laugh again. “Why, you would simply keep me company...with all of the others I have gathered to myself over the years. We would have such a good time...or I would, anyway.”

“Thank you, I’ll pass,” Loki replied drily.

The face clicked its tongue. “You’re more interesting than the ones he usually sends,” she said. “But still, whatever he offers, I don’t care. I will wait until he dies, and then I will take what is mine by right.”

Loki frowned. “I told you I am not from Odin.”

The face scoffed. “Please. Who else would come here but a messenger with one of his pathetic attempts to make peace?”

“I am merely an...interested party,” Loki explained. “I heard about you and was curious, and so I came to see for myself.”

“Hmm...Odin would hardly grant you the use of Bifrost for that, so...a skywalker, are you?” She sounded curious. “Prove it.”

Loki had no intention of proving anything at all. “Do you mean to talk to me or not?” He asked, keeping to his bored tone.

“Not until I see you are who you say you are. A girl has to be careful, you understand.”

Loki snorted. “Of course,” he said. “But in that case, I am afraid this is a waste of my time, so I will be leaving now. I might come back, so think about whether you have something a bit more interesting to discuss. It must be pretty boring in there, after all.”

“Trust me, I keep myself entertained,” the voice replied, but the end was swallowed by the rising wind as Loki turned and headed back to the rest of Nifleheim, which now seemed almost pleasant in comparison.

He did not linger there, though – as soon as he was clear of the prison walls, he teleported to the passage between the realms and stepped back to Asgard.

He had originally hoped to go directly to Jotunheim to Angrboda, but he knew he needed to collect himself. Because this, this he had not expected.

He had wondered before where his Aesir form came from, whether it was inspired by how a young Odin had looked. But now he knew, and it was uncanny in the similarity.

He was a replacement child.

He wondered whether Odin even realized what he was doing when he cast the spell.

Loki retreated to his chambers – actually his, not Odin’s – and stared at himself in the mirror. He had known this was not actually his face for some time, but to know it was a borrowed face...
Gritting his teeth, he let the glamour fade and stared at the frost giant in the mirror. At least that monstrous visage he could trust. At least that was actually him.

**Look at this,** he told himself viciously. **This is you, the real you, the only real you.**

Anthony’s voice floated in his head, his reaction to first seeing Loki like this, and suddenly Loki felt a fierce desire to be with the man.

He squashed it ruthlessly. He was already too dependent, and he couldn’t afford to deepen that dependence. He would deal with this himself, however he had to.

He stared at himself some more, then when he could bear it no more, switched to the face he was more used to, and which now had Hela staring at him pointedly.

He could, he realized, no longer think of it as his.

He picked up a paperweight that was sitting at a desk near the mirror and threw it with all force against the wall, scowling at the dent it left in the marble. Was he not allowed anything that was truly his? His Jotun identity stolen, his Aesir one borrowed from a woman who was hated through all the realms that remembered her.

What was his? Was he to wear a mask form now on, to avoid seeing Hela every time he caught his reflection? Should he craft a new appearance for himself, blonde and blue-eyed perhaps, to finally shed the burden of his sister’s appearance he had been carrying around his whole life without knowing it?

Suddenly he wondered, a little desperately, why Odin did not make him look like a girl.

The Jotnar were intersex – he was intersex, he supposed – so it could have gone either way, and it was a daughter he was replacing, after all. A daughter, too, Odin could have conveniently married to Thor when the time came, though he couldn’t have raised them as siblings if that had been the plan. But cousins would have done perfectly well, he was sure.

Was it because Odin did not want to make it so obvious to Frigga that he was replacing a child of another woman? Or was it because of the populace? Loki still didn’t know what exactly was done to make everyone forget Hela so conveniently, but perhaps having another black-haired, green-eyed daughter would have been too much so soon after the war.

It was a strange thought, that if it wasn’t for reasons of politics, he could have been raised as a Princess of Asgard. He would have been freer to practice magic then, and to sleep with men, but still the thought sat ill with him. He wondered whether he would have minded. There seemed no reason to – biologically he wasn’t either, it would have been all he would have known, and he didn’t even mind posing as a woman from time to time as he was now...but still, the idea made him uncomfortable.

He thought of some of his one-night stands in Alfheim, and how they would probably laugh at him for such misgivings. Perhaps he clung to the Asgardian notion of gender too closely, and yet…

Again, he got an urge to discuss it with Anthony, which was frankly absurd – it wasn’t as if the man knew anything about it. As far as Loki knew, he was a man through and through, and always had been.

He shook his head at himself. He was getting distracted by ridiculous concerns, when he should be focusing on what truly mattered here: Hela was real, she was imprisoned in Niflheim but very much aware of the situation around her and biding her time, and she was quite undoubtedly Odin’s
daughter.

What did that mean for his plans?

He tried to focus on strategy, but his mind turned kept getting stuck on personal things.

Because, Odin’s daughter. It just explained so much, didn’t it? Better than the adoption itself, it explained everything about Odin’s relationship to Loki. If he had just been a monster taken in for political purposes, Odin would have found it easy to detest him and keep his distance. But because he was also a replacement for Hela, Odin was always drawn to him only to be perpetually disappointed because Loki wasn’t enough like her.

It wasn’t Thor Loki spent his life unsuccessfully measuring up to – unbeknownst to him, it had been Hela the whole time.

He picked up the paperweight and threw it again, breathing hard, then let it explode for a good measure.

That broke a barrier in him, though, and he only just managed to force himself to teleport out of the palace before his magic exploded out of him in a ball of fire, burning the surrounding trees to a crisp.

Loki knelt in the middle of the destruction, feeling a little calmer for it. Hoping the benefit would last, he tried to think about things strategically again. Perhaps he would have more success

Instead, his mind landed on wondering what this all meant for Odin’s relationship to Thor. When he first heard the truth from Brunhilde, he had only found it amusing – the golden Thor was not firstborn after all! But now, now he truly thought about it. It should have changed everything, but instead, it changed nothing at all, didn’t it?

Loki didn’t measure up to the daughter he had been a replacement for. But Thor...in spite of looking completely different, he must have reminded Odin of her at least in some ways. Before his banishment he had been just as war-hungry and violent as she seemed to be. So Thor had been constantly compared as well, but the difference was – he measured up in Odin’s mind.

Loki frowned. What had been Odin’s intention when he had decided to crown Thor, then? Surely he should have been wary of repeating the mistake he had made with Hela? Or was it the other way round – by giving Thor the power, the throne, he had hoped to prevent Thor’s possible rebellion?

Loki came back to the same stumbling block as before: he didn’t know why Odin had changed his approach and stopped his conquest. If he understood that, he would get much closer to understanding what had Odin’s plans with Thor been, he was sure.

He thought back to what Heimdall had said. Odin had appreciated Frigga’s wisdom? What could have his mother told the king to change him so drastically?

It was a mystery wrapped in an enigma, and still, all Loki could truly concentrate on was his own childhood, and the face he now saw in the mirror.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Loki, he just can’t catch a fucking break.
The closest parallel to Loki’s gender/orientation situation from our world would be a gay man who likes to dress in drag from time to time, in case this was unclear.

And please, if you feel I haven’t handled that scene sensitively enough, let me know! I’m rather decisively cis, so as much as I try to educate myself, I’ll always be rather unsure when writing anyone who isn’t.

I intend to try and post a bit more often in the period leading up to the Endgame and shorty after, so we’ll see how it goes.
Loki ended up going to Midgard late at night or perhaps rather very early in the morning – because whatever his good resolutions, he’d realized, as he had knelt in that burned bit of forest, that he could not deal with this himself well enough to spend a day functioning as Odin.

When he arrived at the compound, however, Anthony was not there. Apparently, there was a Star Industries meeting.

“Will you tell him I am here?” He asked FRIDAY. “I wish to speak to him.” He gritted his teeth. “I need to speak to him.”

“I’ll let him know,” FRIDAY confirmed, “but it’ll take him some time to get back.”

“How much time?”

“Half an hour at least.”

Loki nodded, and collapsed on the nearest sofa, closing his eyes. He could afford to wait for thirty minutes.

He had only been sitting there for about five, however, when he heard Vision’s voice not far from him: “I didn’t expect to see you so soon,” he remarked. “Tony said you would not be coming for another week or two.”

Loki only tiredly nodded, opening his eyes to slits. “Plans changed,” he muttered.

Vision visibly hesitated. “Forgive me, but are you all right? You seem a little...disturbed.”

Loki laughed bitterly. “Good observational skills,” he confirmed.

“What happened, if I may ask?”

Loki shook his head, but then he peered up at Vision. “I suppose something you would have quite some experience with,” he commented, only just realizing that. “I found out that my visage was
not, in fact, mine, but had been stolen from another.”

Vision drifted down to the couch next to him. “My visage,” he said carefully, “is the only thing that is truly mine. It is my mind that is an amalgamation of two that existed before me.”

Loki shuddered at the mere thought. “Well, I grant you, that is worse.”

“T did not mean it as a competition,” Vision protested. “Merely...I am not certain I will be able to fully understand your concerns, given this, but I may certainly try.”

Loki was just about to say he would need father issues to understand at all, but then he thought of Anthony and the way he missed his old AI and saw it in Vision constantly, and refrained. “I have known I wasn’t actually of Aesir blood for some time,” he began instead, simply, “but yesterday I realized that my adoptive father, when he created my Aesir disguise, created it based on his imprisoned daughter.”

“Intentionally?” Vision asked.

Loki shrugged. “I do not know whether he realized he was doing it when he was doing it, but I am quite certain he must have at least realized later. At any rate, it does not much matter to me.”

Vision tilted his head. “Does it not? For me, it is very important that Tony does not see JARVIS in me intentionally, that he simply cannot help it.”

“That’s different,” Loki pointed out. “It is more as if I just happened to look like Hela. It wouldn't still be the greatest feeling, I grant you that, but this...this is as if Anthony had lost JARVIS and then created you based off his personality, intentionally or not.”

It was Vision’s turn to shudder at a mere idea. It looked strange on him. “I see your point. That is...yes.” He hesitated. “But from what I understand,” he then said tentatively, “your relationship with Odin was destroyed beyond hope anyway, even before now?”

“Yes, that’s not the issue,” Loki confirmed. “The problem is that when I look into a mirror now, all I see is her.”

“Ah.” Vision paused. “Then I do know how you feel, in a way. I must admit that when I felt similarly shortly after I was created, what helped me was some literature James Rhodes recommended. It was of the science-fiction genre, and it all dealt with the idea that somehow, your personality or even the whole person was at one point split into two. It started with the smallest things, like one of you wanting to buy oranges and the other apples. But even that meant you were two completely separate people. It made me realize...if even that was true, then my far vaguer similarities to JARVIS were immaterial. Not for Tony, of course – he mourns the loss of someone he loved dearly – but for me, they are. Based on that, I could accept my identity as my own and regard our similarities as an unfortunate incident – or try to, anyway.”

Loki nodded. He understood the idea behidn this, and he was, he had to admit, intrigued. “Will you lend me these books?”

“Gladly. I will send you to your tablet, if that is acceptable.”

Loki had, in his exhaustion, forgotten that was an option, and obviously one Vision would prefer. “Of course. Thank you.”

At that point, FRIDAY interrupted them, announcing Anthony was approaching, and Vision withdrew.
Loki sat there for a while, his eyes closed again, when Anthony entered. “Loki?” He asked, sounding unsure. “FRIDAY sounded kinda urgent, did something happen?” “You could say that, yes,” Loki replied with a bitter laugh. “All right, come on, let’s get you to my room.” Anthony took his hand, and Loki led himself be pulled up and dragged away without resistance. Anthony sat him on the bed, took off his jeans and plopped down next to him, prodding him until they were both leaning against the headboard, curled against each other. “So,” he said, “talk to me.” “I went to see Hela,” Loki began. Anthony nodded against him. “Did you find her?” “Oh, I found her all right. Her prison is disgusting – Odin took Nifleheim, the bleakest planet in the realms, and made it even worse for her.” Anthony frowned – Loki could feel it against his face. “You were actually inside?” “No, but I was deep enough inside the borders to know that much.” “Do you think he couldn’t have made the prison both secure and comfortable?” Anthony asked a little tentatively, and perhaps even hopefully. Well, Loki was here to shatter that hope. “Oh, he absolutely could have. But that’s not Odin’s style, you know. I mean, even regular prisoners in Asgard we lock up in cages with see-through walls, so that they are afforded zero privacy.” Anthony shifted uncomfortably. “Well, Asgard’s not the only one who does that.” Loki had honestly effectively forgotten about his time aboard the helicarrier, given that he had been there voluntarily and that compared to his time with Thanos, it had been a most pleasant royal room. “Perhaps it is a tendency of those who only have one eye?” He suggested. Anthony snorted. “Was this what disturbed you, or did Hela say something?” He asked then. “She said something – she wants to take over Asgard, take her revenge on Odin, about what you would expect – but that wasn’t what disturbed me.” Loki took a deep breath. “She looks like me.” Tom pulled away a little to look at him and blinked. “What? But...you aren’t related by blood at all, are you?” Loki gave a bitter bark of laughter. “No,” he confirmed. “Odin created my Aesir glamour. Apparently, he created it in the likeness of his imprisoned daughter.” That made Anthony sit up fully. “What?” Loki only nodded. “Oh my God,” Anthony exploded. “Just when I think you can’t come up with another thing that old bastard did that would make me pissed at him any more, boom, there’s something new. Just...what, didn’t he have enough imagination? He couldn’t have made you, I dunno, in his image?
If, you know, he had to be playing god at all.”

Loki snorted a little at that. “Well, you did worship us,” he pointed out.

“Not me!” Anthony defended himself, though he added. “But I’ll worship you any time you ask.”

Loki smiled a little, but it fell of his face again the moment he thought of Hela.

“So,” he muttered, “I thought you should know that the body you take into your bed is not only not my real one, but is in fact one that belongs to someone who committed several mass slaughters of innocent.” The he grimaced. “Not that that makes that much of a difference compared to me.”

Anthony took his hands and gave him a very stern look. “First, we talked about this, and neither case were you in your right mind and you regret both of them. And second, I wouldn’t care if you were actually a clone of Hela, you are your own person.”

“You sound like Vision,” Loki muttered.

“Oh? You discussed this with him?” Anthony asked with the usual mix of emotions he felt whenever Vision came up.

“Yes. Some of his experience is...relatable,” he said delicately, but still saw the grimace of pain in Anthony’s eyes. “He recommended some science fiction books.”

“Ha! Blame Rhodey.”

“He did,” Loki confirmed with a small smile.

Anthony exhaled. “Well, at any rate he stole my thunder...I’d like to have something else smart to say, but I’m afraid I’m all out. Just...Odin is a dick, and I absolutely do not care who you look like.”

“Thank you,” Loki replied. “It is enough. That and...your company, if I may ask for it, for the few hours I have left here. I will have to sleep some of them, if I can, but...”

“Of course. You got it, babe.” And Anthony snuggled closer to him once more.

Loki was very thankful he had scheduled only easy internal Asgardian affairs for that day, because he did not feel up to anything more strenuous than listening to the boring and immaterial complaints of his subjects.

That night, he set out for Jotunheim.

After the unpleasant surprise with Hela, he was rather wary of what he would find when he reached Angrboda, but he had to try. He had considered postponing the trip until he felt more like himself, but he did not know how much time he had to sort this all out, or how much time it would take. He couldn’t afford to waste time. Plus, there was his promise to Magneto.

So he masked himself with every spell he knew against magical detection and identifications of all kinds, teleported to the place where he’d last seen her – still the same house of ice – and, gritting his teeth, let his Aesir visage fall and the Jotun one take its place.

Then, he prepared a number of defensive spells, turned invisible and knocked.
He decided he would rather not risk life and limb trying to sneak directly into the house of a sorceress who had managed to escape Odin for two decades.

It took a while, but then the door opened, and Loki... blinked.

Somewhere, he thought, his Alfheim acquaintances were truly laughing at him very loudly.

Because in spite of everything he knew about the frost giants, he had been thinking about Angrboda as a woman, simply because Brunhilde had referred to her that way, she was Hela’s mother and Odin’s consort.

But she, or rather they, simply looked like a frost giant.

Not quite like Laufey’s thugs, or even the dead king himself. Angrboda had long black hair streaked with grey tied into a long braid that laid on their shoulder, and there was no armour on them. Instead, they wore a kilt, and as was the custom on Jotunheim, nothing on the upper part of the body, which showed quite clearly that their biology was not overtly female-specific.

They peered out into the darkness. “Who is there?” They asked. “Show yourself.”

So Loki did.

They stared at him for a moment, then asked incredulously. “Prince Loki?”

Well, that had not been part of the plan.

Loki stood there frozen for a moment, like a deer in the headlights, completely caught off guard.

When his mind returned to its full function, he considered immediate escape or attack. But then, Angrboda didn’t look murderous, simply astonished, and he did rather need answers only they could give him. So Loki prepared a number of escape plans, and then did them the courtesy of not denying what they clearly knew. “May I come in?” He asked instead.

They hesitated, but then stepped aside. Loki entered, allowing them to shut the door behind him before he cast a privacy spell, not even bothering to disguise it – again, they were a powerful mage – and asked: “How did you know?”

They scoffed. “I have seen your image hundreds of times, I could hardly not recognize you. Why are you here?”

“I need information not many can give me, and you are one of the few,” Loki admitted plainly, restraining his curiosity as to where they had seen him for now. “I came to ask you about the past.”

“And what interest is the past of a solitary frost giant to a Prince of Asgard?”

Loki scoffed and swept a hand over himself. “Do I look like a prince of Asgard to you?”

“No, but then that is but another reason to mistrust your visit. As far as I know, you never wear your Jotun face.”

So they must know more than simply images. “They have a saying on Midgard: when in Rome, do as the Romans do,” he replied simply.

They gave him an intent look. “Why do you want to know about my past?” They asked again.
Loki sighed. “I gave you the courtesy of not pretending not to know what you were talking about. Would you not grant me the same?”

“As far as I know – and I do happen to know a lot – I was not of any interest to you, or known to you at all, until very recently. So I do believe I have the right to ask what brought on the sudden change before I let you further into this house.”

Truly, where did this mage get their information? He supposed he would have to admit some measure of the true circumstances, and after considering the best angle for a moment, he said: “I have recently discovered...” well, he supposed there was no gentle way to put this, “your daughter.”

They winced, and all the fight seemed to go out of them suddenly. “Ah,” they said. “I see. Well then...Come in, I suppose. This will take some time.”

They turned and led him inside the house. On the way, Loki, who no longer saw a need to contain his curiosity, remarked: “I still do not understand where you ever saw my image, or how you know so much about me.”

Angrboda gave him a contemplative look over their shoulder, but stayed silent until they actually entered a room with a table and benches carved out of ice into elaborate shapes, with some preparation and storage space beyond it.

Then, they sat down on one of the benches and said: “Your mother, of course.”

Loki frowned, sitting opposite to her. “You mean the Jotun who-?”

Angrboda scoffed. “No. I mean Queen Frigga.”

It seemed today was the day for Loki to be thrown off guard, because once more, he could only stare at them for a moment. “You knew my mother?” He asked then, astonished.

Angrboda gave a soft, sad smile that was still strange for Loki to see on a Jotun’s face. “My dear boy,” they said, “your mother was one of my best friends.”

Loki more fell than leaned back in the bench, conceding at least in the privacy of his own mind that not only was he missing some crucial information, but that he clearly knew nothing at all.

“Perhaps,” he muttered, “it would be better to start from the beginning.”

They seemed amused. “The beginning of which? My friendship with Frigga? That began about fifty Asgardian years or so ago, so that will be quite a long story.”

“Were you...rivals for Odin?” Loki tried to guess.

That actually made them laugh out loud. “Ancestors, no! Frigga didn’t care a fig about Odin back then – just as I didn’t towards the end, to be honest. In fact, we were often amused how we were rather like polar opposites. I fell in love with him – in my defence, I was quite young – and then the longer I was with him, the less I liked him. Frigga married him because it was expedient, and then, somehow, managed to come to care for him to some degree. Well, she’d always been too soft-hearted for her own good.”

Loki briefly thought of Heimdall saying the same thing, and how he would have detested the context Angrboda used it in. But there were more important things to focus on. “She married him because it was expedient?” He asked, shocked once again. “What does that mean?”
Angrboda shrugged. “We wanted to stop Odin committing mass slaughter. Having a way to be always by his side was convenient for that.”

“Wait. *You* wanted…?”

“Yes. The whole plan, you see, was in fact concocted in this little kitchen of mine not long after I’ve managed to escape his assassins.”

As if mentioning the kitchen reminded them, they got up and took out two glasses, waving their hand to fill them with water and handing one over to him. Loki used this moment to arrange his thoughts a little, and digest the idea that Frigga’s marriage to Odin was apparently some sort of plan, a plan concocted together with this Jotun.

“But if you both wanted to stop him,” he said after taking a slow drink from his glass, “why... I mean, you’ve already tried to do so as his consort, from what I understand, and it ended in disaster. Why did you think she had a better chance?”

“Because she had something I didn’t: her gift to see the future.”

*Oh.*

Frigga’s wisdom.

Yes, it rather made sense now, and Loki was upset with himself for not realizing it sooner. He supposed he had some excuse in how emotionally compromised he had been, but still. He couldn’t afford to miss things like that.

“Did she make up some prophecy that told Odin he simply had to marry her?” He asked.

“Oh no, Odin would have seen through that,” Angrboda replied immediately. “The prophecy was real enough, and it predicted a rather dire end for him if he stayed on the road he was on back then. She might have left out all the parts about glory and defeated enemies – she didn’t want to sway him the other way, after all – but the gist of it was perfectly true.”

“So she prophesied him doom, and he decided marrying her was the perfect way to prevent it?” Loki asked a little dubiously.

Angrboda smiled fondly. “We crafted it a little better than that. She came to him all worried about him and the future awaiting him, counselling him to mend his ways. As luck would have it, there were some very favourable prophecies about a powerful son he could get from a Vanir woman. She pulled them out too, as a sort of incentive to turn his life around – look, there is something bright and glorious for you if you choose love and life! And all the while, she was pretending that the thought of him marrying her never even entered her mind. That way, he got to think it was his own idea, and there was the lure of a powerful son. I knew him very well, after all, so it was not difficult for me to craft something that would be irresistible to him. Besides, men like him always like the idea of a strong son.”

Loki couldn’t but agree. “Still, I am surprised he trusted her.”

“Your mother had something of a reputation before she married Odin. She was the most respected Seer in the realms.” They hesitated, but then added: “She is the one who prophesied Ragnarok.”

Loki stared. “My mother…?”

The prophecy of Ragnarok was the most famous one in the realms, though no one knew it in its
entirety. Or so he had thought. He was a little hurt Frigga had never told him, though rationally he knew perfectly well it made sense. Knowledge of the future was dangerous to dispense.

Angrboda nodded. “Another reason why she would be a desirable bride for Odin – having a source of knowledge like that at his disposal...And no one doubted the prophecy of the doom of the realms, so when she came to Odin foretelling his own doom, he was only too glad to avoid it.”

That made sense, Loki supposed. Odin was short a consort at the time, and here was one ready-made that would give him a powerful son and potentially provide him with very useful knowledge, or at the very least could make sure she didn’t provide his enemies with it. Odin would have been a fool not to take this option. Loki was curious about the convenient timing of it all, though. “Did Frigga have the vision as a response to your banishment and attempted murder?”

Angrboda shook their head. “Oh no. It was old by the time she went to him – it came to her after the conquest of Vanaheim. But I still had a place by Odin then, and so I took it upon myself to sway him from that path with warnings. Needless to say, he didn’t take it well, especially as I couldn’t tell him their source.”

“Why didn’t you tell him the exact wording and that it was from her?” Loki asked. He did not want to blame someone else for Odin’s mistakes, but...the thought that perhaps the conquest of Jotunheim could have been prevented did come to his mind. He was torn about the idea of never being stolen from here, but he could wish, at least, that some of Odin’s atrocities were never commuted.

“You do not tell prophecies to just anyone,” Angrboda replied, “and you especially do not tell them to one as cunning as Odin. It was only when it seemed on the cusp of being fulfilled and when she was desperate that Frigga chose to do it.”

“What exactly does it say that is so terrible?” Loki wondered.

Angrboda gave him a look. “Didn’t I just say you don’t tell it to just anyone? But I can tell you that the triggering event of the prophecy was meant to be when Odin’s conquest reached beyond the realms of Yggdrassil. When Jotunheim seemed about to fall, there was no other realm left for the king except the worthless ones he already had indirect control over anyway. That is when she decided to trust him with parts of the truth.”

“Didn’t he notice they were only parts?” Loki had to wonder. There were few things Odin did not notice – except for the enormous, glaring ones directly in his blind spots, but this did not sound like it would be one of them.

“He did, but he also knew they were true, and that was enough to terrify him,” Angrboda replied simply.

Loki wondered once more what the fate in the prophecy was, to terrify even the All-Father, but he knew better than to voice the question again. To tell Angrboda, Frigga must have had absolute faith that it would go no further. “Did Frigga tell you the Ragnarok prophecy?” He asked, suddenly struck by this possibility.

Angrboda simply nodded.

Loki, he had to admit, was a little awed.

“So,” he said then, slowly trying to understand the close friendship that must have existed there, “did you meet my mother when you were Odin’s consort already?”
“Oh no. We met years before that – we shared one of our magical masters.”

*Oh.* Somehow, Loki felt like he should not be surprised they turned out to be old schoolmates.

“So...you studied together for a few years, and then you went and landed yourself a lover in the most powerful man in the realms, and you went to live by his side, but you stayed in touch?”

“It wasn’t difficult. I can skywalk.”

“You can skywalk?” Loki remembered Brunhilde saying she had known only one or two other realm-hoppers and then wondering whether the talent was common among the Jotnar. Now he knew where she got the impression. He rolled his eyes, because the similarities were ridiculous.

“Are you sure you are not actually my long lost biological mother?” He asked Angrboda archly.

Something flickered in their face, and Loki froze. “Wait- you are?!”

“No, no,” they hastened to reassure him. “But I...know one of your biological parents.” Loki waited in horror until she finished with: “Well, both of them, but I knew Laufey only very slightly.” Seeing the look of mixed relief and anxiety on his face, she added: “I know you killed them. You did it for the wrong reasons, most likely, but to be honest, them off the throne was a thing this realm had sorely needed. I frequently wish I had the courage to kill Odin back when I was was with him, instead of my futile attempts at changing his mind. Though Laufey’s chief problems were very different, for all they had much in common with Odin in character.”

“They...did?” Loki asked almost despite himself.

“Well, some things. Laufey doesn’t have Odin’s mind, not half of it, but their personality is similar. Towards the end, however, Layufey was too bitter to be of any help, preferring to wallow in their resentments of the past to improving the situation we live in.”

Loki exhaled. “I know I asked, but I believe I would...prefer not to speak of that,” he said carefully. “Can we go back to your friendship with Frigga?”

“Well, some things. Laufey doesn’t have Odin’s mind, not half of it, but their personality is similar. Towards the end, however, Layufey was too bitter to be of any help, preferring to wallow in their resentments of the past to improving the situation we live in.”

Loki wanted to hear the stories, desperately so, to add to his memories of Frigga, to know her before she was Odin’s wife. But his time was limited. *Perhaps I will come here again when all this is over,* he told himself, and then asked: “And your relationship with Odin?”

Angrboda gave a small sigh, and got up to get them more water. Once she sat back down, she began: “Directly after I finished working with the master I shared with Frigga, I went to Asgard in Aesir disguise to study some of its magics, the secrets of which they were loath to share. Odin sensed me – sensed my power – and came to find me.” They took a sip of their water. “I suspect his initial intentions were rather violent, but being the sexist pig he was, he changed them to seduction when he saw me. I was flattered, immensely so, and it didn’t take more than one afternoon and night for an infatuation to begin to form. But when I went to see Frigga the next day, she warned me about him. She had premonitions even then when he was freshly king. I wasn’t entirely dissuaded – he was young and charming then, and powerful both magically and politically, and smart...there was little not to like, or so it seemed to me, and I was much less compassionate than Frigga was. Her deal-breakers and, what I see with hindsight, absolute red flags, were simply things to keep in mind for me. But still, it did mean I was careful because of her advice, and knowing the power seers had, and being used to keeping her secret because of that, I particularly
didn't tell him about her. She was always just ‘a friend’ in my stories, and he assumed I was talking about a Jotun. That came in very useful later.”

Yes, Loki could imagine Odin would have been rather suspicious about Frigga if he knew his new partner was the best friend of his old one. “You say he though your friend was Jotun – does that mean you shed your Asgardian disguise?”

They shook their head. “Not really. But Odin knew I was a Jotun from the start, of course – back then there was nothing controversial about that at all, his Jotun parent was still alive-”

Loki choked. “What?”

“Oh, of course, you wouldn’t know. Yes, he is half-Jotun – well, quarter, to be precise, since Bestla was of mixed blood as well.”

Loki shook his head, refusing to be that gullible. “The entirety of Asgard can't have forgotten so much.”

Angrboda gave him a look that was almost pitying. “They didn't. It was specifically you and Prince Thor he kept it from.”

It didn’t take Loki long to realize what she meant. “You mean to say,” he began in a voice that was a mix of furious and shocked, “that being raised in the hatred of my own race was not just an accidental effect of everyone in Asgard hating the Jotnar, that it was done intentionally by Odin?”

He was shouting by the end, or nearly so, and had to take a deep breath to regain a modicum of calm.

“I am afraid so,” Angrboda said when he had some control of himself back.

Loki tilted his head back, staring up at the ceiling of ice, blinking quickly. “Why?” He asked at length.

He saw Angrboda shrug at the periphery of his vision. “He was afraid of your betrayal should you find out the truth.”

Loki laughed bitterly. “Well, he wasn’t wrong,” he said then. “But why take me at all, if not to use me as a political pawn?”

“Oh, he used you as a pawn – to force Laufey into good behaviour.”

Loki blinked again, this time in confusion. “Laufey didn’t know about me.”

“Not who you were, but they did know Odin had their child. They never dreamed you would be raised as a prince. They thought you to be locked somewhere in a dungeon.”

Loki gave a deep sigh. “Then I was right, then – Odin actually steal me, not taken me as an abandoned child.”

Angrboda scoffed. “Is that what he told you? Ridiculous. How would he know you were a son of Laufey if he simply found you somewhere? He stole you from a sacred place where you were to be kept safe.”

Loki rubbed his hands over his face. It was probably a sign of how disturbed he was that he was hardly bothered by their blueness at all. “I've suspected as much for a while, but...I am not sure I actually wanted the confirmation,” he muttered. “But why raise me as a prince? Why not put me in
Angrboda shrugged. “I do not know everything about his plans, and neither did Frigga. Our best theory was that he intended to perhaps put you on Jotunheim’s throne if it became necessary, and raising you in hatred of us was a way to make you loyal to him even in a situation where loyalty to your own people would have been more beneficial to you, being their king and all. But there are rather obvious flaws in this, and we quite simply do not know.”

Of course not all mysteries could conveniently be answered here. “Did Frigga even try to prevent him doing this to me?” He asked bitterly.

Angrboda sighed. “She did, but...you have to understand, when Odin brought you to Asgard, she was but freshly married to him, and her position was weak. By the time she was a little more secure...it was difficult to undo the damage, and he never listened to her too much, unless she had a prophecy to support her argument.”

Loki knew that was true, unfortunately. Forcefully, he shoved all this to the back of his mind to deal with later, and tried to get back on track. “So Bestla was the queen of Asgard before Frigga – does that mean that your species was actually an advantage to you back then, that you could have presented yourself as continuing the Queen’s tradition?”

Angrboda sighed. “Not quite. Bestla was forced into the marriage and resented it and Asgard both, hated their husband, and had a bad relationship with Odin, as much as he inherited all of his intelligence from them. They were not well-liked. And while me being Jotun was not a problem for Odin as such, he was not attracted to my true form. Now, of course, I would know never to start a relationship with anyone like that, but as I have said, I was young and stupid. So I kept to the Aesir form for as long as I was with Odin.” They shifted and suddenly there was an Aesir woman that looked very much like Hela – and therefore also like himself – in front of Loki, with the same bright green eyes, but aged, clearly Frigga’s peer.

“My mother was half-elven, and so like all half-Jotnar, she kept the sexual dimorphism of her other species,” they explained, unwittingly answering Loki’s question about Magneto’s right hand. “She was also raised by her elven mother in elven notions of gender, and found one she identified with. I didn’t inherit the biological aspects – I do not have enough non-Jotnar blood for that – but I had the same education from her, and so I am something of an oddity here, in that I actually sort of have a gender,” they elaborated, adding a word in Elvish that the All-Speak couldn’t deal with, but that Loki knew indicated one of the many genders of Alfheim.

“So...the Asgardians are actually right, when they talk about you as a woman?” He asked, wondering if he had been too hasty in his assumptions simply based on seeing Angrboda.

“Eh,” was the response. “Not exactly. I mean, my identity certainly has nothing in common with how the Aesir understand women – except for the magic, I suppose. So I would prefer if they didn’t see me that way. But at the same time, it was near enough that I didn’t mind living like an Asgardian woman for love...to begin with, anyway,” they added, then shrugged. “Later, it was mostly for political convenience. The Aesir, as I am sure you know, are hardly tolerant of difference. The Jotnar don’t really understand my particular situation either, to be honest – gender is an entirely foreign notion here and they see it as a peculiarity, but oh well. I’m a mage, I’m entitled to my peculiarities.”

Loki frowned at that offhand phrase. “Is that the general view of mages is Jotunheim?”

“Oh yes,” they confirmed with a smile. “We’re rare here, but perhaps because of the Jotnar inborn shape-shifting, it is not seen as so foreign, so we’re not as feared or mistrusted.
 Mostly we're treated as a precious resource. “

Loki did his best not to feel bitter. Going by the look in their face, he didn't succeed.

“How did you manage to deal with the discovery of your origin?” They asked.

“How aren't you heard that from Frigga?” Loki asked a little mockingly. After all, they had hinted something like that when he first arrived, and he was in no mood to discuss it in detail.

“I did… And yet you're here in your Jotun form. I assume something has changed.”

He shook his head. “It is not by choice, believe me. I simply thought I would stand out less like this.”

They tilted their head. “If you wish, you can change into an As.”

He was about to do it, but then he thought of a face emerging from the darkness of Nifleheim and hesitated for a moment. Angrboda noticed, and he mentally cursed. “After meeting your daughter, it makes me just a little uncomfortable,” he began to explain.

Angrboda’s eyes widened, and they half rose from their bench. “You actually met my daughter?” They asked, almost shouting in their shock and excitement. “You managed to go to Nifleheim and see her? You...did you speak to her? Tell me everything!”

Chapter End Notes

The closest we have to Angrboda’s understanding of herself is the term demigirl, only you’d have to substitute “girl” with one of the many woman-like genders Alfheim has. (I have them mapped out in my head, but words are a problem. I guess you could call her “demibaroness”? I’d say “demiqueen” but that has entirely different connotations in the context of gender.)

Also imagine Angrboda being the equivalent of “just out of high school” when she met Odin.

Oh and the books Vision talks about. I was specifically thinking of some of Greg Egan’s short stories.
Angrboda’s eyes widened, and they half rose from their bench. “You actually met my daughter?” They asked, almost shouting in their shock and excitement. “You managed to go to Nifleheim and see her? You...did you speak to her? Tell me everything!”

Loki was a little taken aback at Angrboda’s reaction. “Well, an image of Hela,” he amended. “But I did speak to her.”

Angrboda was sitting back down, but their eyes on Loki were so intent he was a little worried they were going to burn a hole in him. “How?” They asked.

Loki was rather unsure where the mystery laid. “As you said, I went to Nifleheim—”

“Well... Yes. I mean, I assume it's understood that I can skywalk as well?”

“How?” they said impatiently, “but I assumed... Oh, damn him! But how?”

Loki was quickly losing track of the conversation. “How what?”

They were scowling. “Apparently, Odin has barred Nifleheim particularly from me. I didn't know that was possible.”

Loki hadn't either, but then, Odinforce had always been a bit of a mystery to him, as much as he'd never admit that out loud.

“And you knew barring it from all skywalkers was possible?” He asked instead. That seemed like even more of an incredible feat, to be honest.

They shrugged. “He'd just create a shield. It would require a lot of power, but he does have Odinforce, so...”

Loki contemplated the problem. “You created a barrier against him personally looking for you from the throne of Asgard, didn't you?” He asked then.

“Yes, and I suppose that would be applicable, though I didn't think he knew that magic- But wait.”
Their eyes narrowed. “How do you know about that?”

Loki froze.

Shit.

“I would… Prefer not to say at this point,” he replied carefully.

Angrboda rose from her place, and suddenly they looked much more dangerous than before - which, given they were Jotun, was saying something. “Are you here as Odin's lackey?” They asked.

Loki immediately put up his hands. “No! No, I swear I'm not. You must know from Frigga how unlikely that is.”

They scoffed. “It would be child’s play for him to manipulate you again.”

“No,” Loki said with emphasis. “I'm done with him.”

“Then this is some trick of yours? I know you were prone to lying even to Frigga, for all that you seemed to love her well enough. Why would you not lie to me?”

They were looming over Loki now, and he knew he had to talk very, very fast. “The reason I know about it is part of a trick I am playing,” he confirmed, “but it is not one I am playing on you. Rather, Odin and some others are the target.”

They were still scowling at him. “And you expect me to believe that, just like that?”

“Does it not sound believable?”

“It does, but it also sounds like a plausible lie.”

Loki gave a long exhale. They didn’t seem prone to killing him immediately – not any more, at least – and so he had time to actually consider what he said. “Look, I... The answer to this question is dangerous to me. There is literally only one person in the whole universe who knows. I will consider telling you, because there'd be definite advantages, but I need more time to decide. I need to consider all the repercussions. This is not something I can do lightly.”

“And in the meanwhile, I am supposed to simply trust you?”

Loki looked up at their face, much less friendly now than it had been since they’d opened the door, and said: “Until now, you have done so because of Frigga, have you not?”

“Yes,” they admitted. “I knew nothing else of you but her love for you, and the stories she told me.”

Loki swallowed at that, but in a reasonably even voice, pointed out: “Nothing's changed.”

“It did,” they argued. “You showed you're still in contact with Asgard in some way. Until now, I'd believed you were completely cut away, what with pretending you were dead. I have taken precautions, checked your identity through your spells,” and Loki was very disturbed by that, since he hadn’t even felt anything, “checked for spying spells and everything. But a knowing conscious cooperation with them was something I didn't think possible. Now it appears it is.”

Loki sighed and considered his options. “I came to ask you about your daughter,” he said then. “All else you have told me was a surprise. I can simply conclude that business and leave here.
After all, everything about Hela should be information Odin already has. There is no harm in telling me even if you do not trust me.” He paused as he realized something, then continued: “Even what you told me about Frigga… She's dead. Even if I worked for him, it can't hurt her any more.”

Angrboda gave him a pitying look. “Do you think I'd have risked telling you anything at all if there was ever any chance of her being hurt by it?”

Loki inclined his head in acceptance of that chastisement. “I understand. That does make it easier, though, does it not? We can make it simple. If I ask anything you wouldn't want Odin to know, just refuse to answer until – unless – I tell you how I know about the throne.”

They looked at him for a long time, scrutinizing him, examining his face for traces of falsehood and, for all he knew, looking through his spells again. “I suppose that is acceptable,” they said at length, sitting back down.

Loki did his best not to show his relief. “So tell me about Hela,” he invited instead. “As much as you are willing.”

They seemed to consider for a moment, and though their face was more guarded now than before, Loki could still see the flickers of pain shining through. Then they took a deep breath and began.

“Hela was the sun of my life,” they said simply, “particularly because she was little at the time when I was slowly beginning to realize that Frigga had, in fact, been right in all of her warnings. Hela was just a few years old at the time, and an amazing, smart, talented and curious child. I know every parent believes that about their child, but truly, I could see she had incredible potential, and raising her to be her best self slowly became the chief reason I stayed with Odin, when I started to realize that even the influence it gave me over him and Asgard was very limited.” They paused for a moment, frowning. “Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only one to see the potential. Very soon, Odin realized Hela’s power, and from the occasional amusement she was to him – as most monarchs with their children, he had been essentially content to inspect her once a week – he turned to more personal interest in her.”

They paused again, then sighed. “I am probably not being fair. I think he did love her, and the more the older she was, because she became more interesting to him, not simply because of her power but just because, generally, there are more things you can do with an older child. I understand this attitude is not uncommon with men in Asgard.”

“How old was she at this time?” Loki interrupted.

“About five or six. He trusted her magical education to me, but when he saw what she could do, he began to train her in arms as well.”

Loki frowned. “I don’t see the logic in that.” He did get martial training in spite of his magical prowess, but that was because he was a son. With a daughter, this made no sense.

“He did not intend to make her his heir to begin with,” Angrboda explained. “After all, we were not married. For years, he dangled that before me – if I married him, Hela would be his official heir at least until a son was born – but I knew it wasn’t worth the loss of freedom that would have meant for me. But once Odin realized Hela’s power, he saw that she was invaluable to him as an heir, regardless of being born outside of marriage and being a girl. However, he did try to make her as acceptable to Asgard as possible, and martial training was part of it.” They gave him a look. “I am certain you can imagine the rest.”

“Less reading and thinking, more brash acts of daring to prove herself to the populace?” Loki
Angrboda hesitated. “Not...exactly. He did encourage her to think, but only in certain ways. Strategy, tactics, politics, tried and tested magical techniques. Those were the only subjects allowed. I was not supposed to ‘confuse’ her with anything experimental, with non-Asgardian art and literature or, later on, philosophy. He didn’t want her questioning and finding new ways, he wanted her ambitious and goal-oriented. I tried to undermine that, and that worsened my relationship with Odin even further.”

“And with your daughter as well?” Loki ventured.

Angrboda, however, shook her head. “No. I didn’t allow it to – and neither did she. She disagreed with me, often loudly and angrily towards the end, but she kept coming to me to try and convince me of the world-view her father engendered in her. For a long time, I hoped I could still change the trajectory she was on, but...her father’s approval was rare to her, and therefore more precious than mine. Then he began to restrict my access to her with the argument that I was not, after all, the queen, and these factors combined meant it did not take him long to turn her to his way of thinking.”

Especially if Odin invented some convenient reason why Hela could not see Angrboda. He would have hardly told her the truth, but claiming, for example, that Angrboda did not have time for her because of their preoccupation with their studies? That was something Loki could imagine only too easily. “Did you consider marrying him then?” He asked.

“I did,” they confirmed. “But...it was what he wanted, and in the end that was what made me decide not to. Not out of pettiness, you understand, but because if he wanted me to do it, he must have prepared a quite foolproof way of keeping Hela from my influence even after I was queen. There was a good chance I would give up everything and gain nothing if I agreed.”

There was a short silence, Angrboda’s previous anger and distrust forgotten in contemplation of the past, and then Loki tentatively asked: “You still talk only about a narrow world-view and inflexible opinions. But it went further. What happened?”

Angrboda looked away, and now the pain in their eyes was unmasked. “The natural conclusion to what Odin was leading her to, I suppose. She was fifteen when he first told her – as if it was a great reward – that she was old enough to lead his army in some skirmish. She proved talented at that beyond even his expectations. A year later...” Angrboda closed their eyes. “A year later, she led the conquering army on Alfheim by Odin’s side.”

“At sixteen?” Loki asked incredulously. Not even Thor had been granted that honour – had been put at the head of an army at such an early age. He had absolutely fought, and killed, just as Loki had, but not commanded a whole army.

“From what I understand now,” Angrboda replied, “Odin began to plan his conquest of the realms the moment he realized Hela’s power, and always meant to start as soon as he deemed her ready. It came earlier than he imagined it would, so he simply began earlier.” They sighed. “You probably know that children usually have little compassion. It is learned mostly in later adolescence and adulthood. I admit it was never something I focused on when I raised her, and Odin never taught her any. She was...brutal. More brutal than Odin himself would have been, I believe. I do not know what he thought then, but I know I was horrified when I heard the stories.”

“Was that when your relationship soured, then?” Loki probed, wondering when the breaking point came.
“No,” they said resolutely. “We always loved each other, until the end. This monster that she became was what Odin made her into, by putting her in such a position of power at an age when she was not ready for it, by letting her do what she wished. I will always hate him for that, more than for anything else, but I will never hate my daughter.”

Loki was rather taken aback. “So you kept up your philosophical arguments while she massacred worlds?”

Angrboda looked at him. “Frigga visited you in prison, did she not?”

“Yes,” Loki confirmed, “but that was when I was in prison, after, presumably, my world-conquering ways were put to an end.”

“And did she ever stop loving Thor, with all his violence?”

“No,” Loki admitted.

“We did not talk about politics or philosophy any more at this point,” Angrboda explained. “We kept to lighter topics, topics that were not prone to provoke conflict. I did try to tell her stories from war meant to inspire compassion, but it had limited success. She was a firm believer in the right of the strong to live and take what they want. It hurt to listen to – I am no healer by nature, but what she was spewing was stupid and short-sighted – but it did not make me love her any less.” She sighed. “Frigga did blame me for not doing more. But Odin was the source of the problem, not Hela, and I had no wish to poison my relationship with my only child.”

The mention of Frigga made Loki realize something. “Hela led the conquest of Vanaheim as well, did she not?”

“Yes,” Angrboda confirmed, the pain in their eyes even more pronounced now, “and she was the one to kill King Njord, who was like a father to Frigga.”

“And your friendship survived that?” Loki asked incredulously.

Angrboda hesitated, and as she did, Loki put the timeline together in his mind and realized what must have happened. “She pressed you, and you tried to press Odin, and that led to his attempt to kill you,” he deduced.

“Yes,” Angrboda admitted. “I had been trying the whole time I was with Odin, of course – or at least most of the time, after my youthful infatuation receded. But after the conquest of Vanaheim, there was a huge row with Frigga. She accused me of sticking my head in the sand, of growing too fond of the luxuries of Asgard, of any number of things. It might have been the first time in my life I have seen her truly angry, let alone angry with me. I suppose it woke me up in a way. It made me act, made me try and give Odin ultimatums, to threaten him.” They exhaled. “Well. It did not go well for me. Fortunately, I was at least ready for the consequences.”

Loki considered what kind of threats they might have tried. “Did you tell him you would turn Hela against him?”

“That, and other things as well. I am a powerful mage, as I am certain you know. There was no shortage of what I could threaten with, but it hadn’t been enough.”

Nothing would have been, Loki imagined. Odin would not take well to being threatened. With him, you simply had to act. “I assume it was enough to appease Frigga at least, given that you clearly remained friends afterwards,” he observed.
“She was my closest and dearest friend,” Angrboda answered simply. “When I ran, she helped me and hid me, and we put any disagreements aside as we planned what to do next about Odin. She was...distraught, when she found out how narrowly I have escaped.”

Loki analysed that phrasing, and the expression Angrboda wore while saying it. “She felt guilty, did she not?” He asked then.

Angrboda confirmed his theory once again, nodding heavily. “Yes. She knew it was because of her that I pressed Odin so hard, and she decided that since I failed, she had to do something herself. She was always too self-sacrificing. I tried to dissuade her at first, but it was impossible, and as I’ve said, the prophecy was on the cusp of being fulfilled. So in the end I agreed to help her, and we put together a plan to try and prevent further bloodshed.” They sighed. “We didn’t save Jotunheim, but hopefully, we saved something at least.”

Loki mused about that. “I can easily imagine her making the sacrifice,” he said then, “but...she meant to have a child with Odin from the start, did she not? She promised him a strong son...was she not worried he would meet the same fate as Hela?”

Angrboda smiled a little bitterly. “We did discuss it, and of course she was a little worried, but she also thought she could prevent it better than I did. She thought herself stronger than me in this, thought I did not try hard enough. We are none of us perfect, after all, not even her. Later, when she watched Thor turn towards more and more violence, she apologized to me for that, and for her harsh judgement of me when I could not stop Hela. She, after all, was just as powerless to stop her son killing indiscriminately. And you, as well, when you turned the Bifrost on us.”

Loki flinched. He had hoped they did not know that, at least.

“Do not worry,” Angrboda said. “As with Hela, I blame Odin for that.”

Loki gratefully took the distraction, pushing any thoughts related to that incident to the back of his mind, since he could not afford another breakdown right now. “How did Hela react to Frigga suddenly appearing by Odin’s side?”

“From what I heard, not well. I was afraid of that when we were planning the whole thing – afraid that Hela, not knowing she was my friend, would try to attack Frigga. She never did, but she did take her anger out on Jotunheim.” They sighed heavily. “I know little enough about what came after I had to run, though. Frigga never liked talking about it.”

“I have heard...some things,” Loki admitted, and tentatively, recounted what Brunhilde had told him about the lies told to Hela regarding Angrboda’s death. “It was not just her anger over Frigga that Hela took out on Jotunheim,” he finished.

Angrboda was clearly furious. “Frigga must have known this, at least later,” she said. “She must have kept it away from me, to prevent me doing something rash in anger. It has been decades, and I still want to...” She rose from her place at the table and began to pace. “To use me against my own daughter and my own people like that, and then to never explain the deception,” she muttered. “Likely, telling some of the truth could have stopped Hela’s rebellion...but no...Odin preferred to lock her up to admitting he had lied to her.” She scoffed. “And to think I believed he loved her, once.”

“Well, if he told her he tried to have you killed, it would have hardly stopped the rebellion,” Loki pointed out.

Angrboda turned to him. “No, but he could have said I’ve disappeared and he didn’t know where I
was. It would have even been the truth. Then Hela would have gone in search of me, instead of raising a rebellion.”

Loki had to concede that was probably true. He then evaluated everything he had heard today and considered simply going and killing Odin in his sleep. But what with Odinforce being the only thing keeping Hela in her place, it was probably better to refrain for now.

Still, the thought was more attractive than ever. Was there anything the old man was not behind?

“I know this question makes me sound like a child,” he said, unable to resist, “but was he actually just...simply evil? He did all of this in his right mind and free will, did he not?”

Angrboda gave him another bitter smile. “How do you define evil? He and his father always believed that because of the unique power Odinforce gives them in the realms of Yggdrassil, they were meant to be its rulers. Bor was not powerful enough to enact it, so he tried to exert control indirectly, and then exhausted himself by destroying Svartalfheim. That made Odin see that that approach was untenable, and he was looking for a different one when I gave him Hela with all her power. He saw his chance to exert his Norns-given right. He also believed the realms would be more peaceful and prosperous under his rule. He always said it was ultimately spreading peace – after all, if the realms were united under his rule and Asgardian values, what conflict could there be? I think he believed it, too. That in the long term, it will be better for the realms, even though now they have to make necessary sacrifices. I do not know exactly what was going through his head later, when he began to plan conquering realms outside of Yggdrasil. Perhaps he was simply power-hungry by then.”

It was nauseating, and while the thought that it was a good thing he was not actually related to Odin had crossed Loki many times before, this might have been the first time he truly felt it. “Do you think there was something just...essentially wrong in him, something that Hela inherited?” He couldn’t help but ask.

“No,” Angrboda said with emphasis. “There is no such thing as inborn evil.” Then they looked at him attentively, tilting their head. “As I’ve indicated, Frigga told me how you struggled with your discovery that you were Jotun – unsurprisingly, given the lies Odin fed you. And you said that you were not as comfortable in your Aesir disguise as before, after you saw my daughter’s face?” They enquired.

Loki inclined his head, gritting his teeth as he did so.

“I know I will not convince you she is not all bad,” they began, “but perhaps it will help to keep in mind that it wasn’t just Hela’s face he made you in the form of. It was mine as well.”

Loki blinked. It was obvious, yet somehow it did not occur to him when he’d seen Angrboda’s Aesir disguise.

“Doing so was a direct offense to Frigga,” they continued. “She told me it was then that she firmly determined she would love you with all her heart – when he brought her a child to raise without consulting her, a child that had her supposed rival’s face. But of course, to her it was her best friend’s face, and she determined to love you dearly to honour me and spite him.” They paused, that added: “Naturally, that was just to begin with. It didn’t take long at all for her to grow to love you quite on your own merits, though she did frequently tell me how much you reminded her of me.”

Loki was hit by a strange feeling of vertigo at those words. He remembered how, when he was younger, people used to tell Frigga he was so much like her. He also remembered how Frigga
always used to tell Thor when she saw something of Odin in him. Was it like that for her with him and Angrboda? Did she see herself in him in the mannerism she taught him, and her best friend in his face?

It was as if, in some strange way, Frigga and Angrboda were his actual parents, regardless of who birthed him or took him from Jotunheim. Had things gone a little differently, Loki realized, Angrboda might have been his adoptive mother. He felt as if he suddenly glimpsed a world where he had no ties to Odin, but instead these two figures who raised him in magic and cunning-

He forcefully tried to stop his thoughts when his hands began to shake.

“I will have to leave soon,” he announced abruptly, “but I will come back, and perhaps we could find a way to get you to at least talk to your daughter, if I could do as much.”

Their eyes widened. “I would be...deeply grateful.”

Loki only nodded curtly, in a rush to leave. “I have a favour to ask, however,” he added. “I have a half-Jotun ally in Midgard, and her greatest wish is to meet another Jotun – she doesn’t know I am one. She also wishes to go to Jotunheim. Could I bring her here?”

Angrboda frowned. “Not here,” they said then, “I don’t trust the secrecy of this place to anyone. But I can show you a meeting place. I would do a lot to see Hela again.” Then she gave him an intent look. “You know I cannot let you leave here without a geas.”

Loki sighed. “I do know, but I am afraid I need to ask for at least one exception to this. Perhaps two – I need to say something to the half-Jotun ally, but I could lie to get her here, I suppose. The other, however, is non-negotiable.”

They seemed surprised by his demand. “Why? Who are they?”

“My partner,” Loki said carefully.

“Partner? As in an ally, or...?”

Loki grit his teeth. “My boyfriend,” he elaborated.

Angrboda’s eyes widened.

“Oh,” they said. “Frigga did tell me you preferred men,” of course his mother had known. They had never discussed it openly, but he had known she was aware. It wasn’t that well kept a secret. And he supposed he couldn’t really blame her for telling someone who truly could not care less about such things.

“-but she also believed you were unlikely to ever have a long-term partner.”

Angrboda said it with compassion, and Loki felt the tremor in his hands worsen.

“I truly should go,” he reiterated through his teeth. “I will return in exactly one Asgardian day cycle, with the half-Jotun. What about the geas?”

“I do not need to swear you to secrecy regrading what I told you,” they explained. “As you have said, it is not something that can harm anyone any more. But I do need your secrecy regarding the place where I live. Surely your boyfriend doesn’t need to know that much?”

“No,” Loki admitted. “He does not.”
And so the geas was made, and then Angrboda teleported him to the place where he was supposed to take Magneto’s right hand, leaving him there to find his own way home.

He kept as calm as he could until they were gone, but once they disappeared, he hid himself again and sunk into the snow.

The tremor was worse now, and as he reached into his pocket dimension for his inter-realm phone, it slipped out of his hand and felt into the snow, making him distantly thankful he had spelled it against all kinds of damage.

*Just a little longer,* he told himself as he unlocked the screen, *you have to last just a little bit longer.*

He pressed the message icon and, with his shaking fingers, it took his frustratingly long to type a message to Anthony: “Are you at the compound?”

And then he sat in the snow and waited.

And waited.

The tremor was getting progressively worse as there were thoughts pressing on his mind that he simply could not allow into his consciousness just yet, not while he was on Jotunheim. But with no distraction, he was losing his fight with them.

He clenched one hand into a fist and pressed the ‘call’ icon under Anthony’s name with the other.

It rung for a long time, and when it was finally answered, Anthony’s voice sounded groggy. “Loki? Wassup?”

“I woke you, did I not?” Loki realized. In his distress, it had not even occurred to him to check the time on Midgard. “I am sorry.”

“No, no, ‘s fine,” Anthony reassured. “What’s going on?”

“I am...on Jotunheim,” Loki provided a non-explanation.

“Are you okay?” There was clear worry in Anthony’s voice.

“Not….really,” Loki admitted.

“Can you come over?”

“I...am unsure,” he confessed. “I do not know how well my skywalking would work at this point. I am rather...distraught.” His voice broke on the last word. He didn’t even have the capacity to hate that any more.

“What happened?” Anthony asked, now sounding more alert and also like he got up from the bed.

“I do not want to discuss it over the phone,” Loki said stiltedly.

“All right, so what can I do?”

Loki hesitated. Honestly, he hadn’t had any kind of plan when he’d called Anthony, he just knew he needed to hear his voice immediately. “Could you just...talk to me?” He suggested tentatively, then tried to frame it in a slightly more rational manner: “Just... Distract me with something, so that I have something to focus on and calm down a little, if you could?”
Without further prodding, Anthony began to chat about the training they had with the West Coast Avengers that day, and how Juarez worked so well in tandem with Danvers it was incredible, and that Danvers also had some theory that Rand’s powers were related to hers but that he wouldn’t hear of it, and-

And then Loki teleported right in front of him, having collected himself enough to deem it safe, and being so grateful he could cry just for that, let alone all the other reasons.

Anthony immediately stopped talking and went to gather him into his arms. They stood like that for a moment before Anthony gently brought them to sit on the ground, leaning on the wall.

Loki realized tears actually were finding their way down his cheeks, and swiped a them impatiently.

Anthony held him closer.

“All right,” he said after some minutes have passed and Loki felt just a little bit calmer, “what has Odin done now?”

Loki laughed. It had a strong edge of hysteria. “Would you believe that this time, it was more Frigga?” Anthony made an inquiring sound, and Loki elaborated: “Angrboda was her best friend.”

Anthony blinked. “Okay, that’s...unexpected.”

“Indeed.”

“So...were you received well?” Anthony asked tentatively.

Loki shrugged. “Mostly, yes. They talked very openly. I didn’t truly learn anything particularly strategically useful about Hela, I suppose, but...I found my mother’s best friend, Anthony. Someone who knew her before Odin.”

Anthony blinked at him. “You never knew anyone like that before?”

Loki leaned his head back on Anthony’s shoulder, closing his eyes. “I did,” he replied, “her Vanir relations and friends, but...they were always too afraid of Odin or too beholden to him to be of any use in this. Uncle Frey – not my mother’s actual brother, but close enough in practice – was always the one who told me the most, but he is king. He has to be careful. Angrboda, on the other hand, is not beholden to anyone. If I can get them to trust me, they can tell me whatever they want. And...Frigga told them about me.” Loki struggled to express why he was so overwhelmed, and in the end, said completely inadequately: “They...they seem to like me, mostly. It is...not what I expected.”

Anthony was silent for a moment, then observed: “That one eyed asshole really fucked you over, didn’t he?”

Loki gave a teary – he’d never even noticed he’d started crying again – laugh. “Yes...I suppose he did.”

They kept sitting like that for a time, Anthony caressing his back and Loki’s thoughts chasing each other in his head. Then at some point – Loki honestly had no idea how long it was – Anthony rose and pulled him up with him, and relocated them to the sofa, where he sat behind Loki and wrapped him in his arms.

“So, if you don’t mind talking about it, what exactly did this Angrboda say?” He asked then.
Loki burrowed in Anthony’s arms and retold the conversation as best as he could. It was not hard to convey the facts, but he found it difficult to relay why exactly he was so disturbed. Nothing particularly shocking was discovered, after all, except for Angrboda’s friendship with Frigga, which had no reason to be especially shocking in the first place.

But in some ways, the conversation had still been more unnerving that the one with Hela.

Anthony, of course, was caught up on entirely different things. “Odin made you hate your species on purpose? That’s just...that’s just needlessly evil!”

Loki shrugged and shook his head, “Don’t get me wrong, I am angry – but it gets lost in the sea of all the other reasons I am furious with him. In the grand scheme of things, it makes no difference to what I feel about him. He wanted to be completely certain I never went digging into the Frost Giants or tried to go to Jotunheim. What better way to ensure that than convince me they were entirely repulsive?”

Anthony scoffed. “It didn’t work anyway.”

“It did,” Loki argued, glad to have something more concrete for his mind to focus on. “I did go to the planet, but not to speak with any locals. In fact, I did my best to avoid them, up until I went there to ruin Thor’s coronation. I never tried reading any of their histories – there were none easily available to me, and I felt no desire to look for them. It was, as much as I hate to admit it, a good plan. There had probably been no need to involve Thor so much, but then we had to have the same information, otherwise I’d have immediately discovered something was wrong.”

Anthony mused about that for a moment. “All right, it might have worked with you two, but how did he get all of Asgard to go along? Was it more magical skullduggery, like with Hela?”

“I do not believe so, and frankly, I am not certain how much magic was involved in the Hela business either.” Loki had been thinking about this since he discovered his sister’s existence, and he had some theories. “Maybe there was some subtle encouraging, but it was a brutal, violent war with one of their own, and those who joined her. It is not something one wishes to think of. And the war with Jotunheim had been recent. I believe it was a combination of wishful thinking and skilful propaganda that convinced people that their suffering and losses were actually tied to Jotunheim, not Hela.”

Anthony frowned. “People aren’t that stupid. Not even in Asgard.”

“Oh, certainly you cannot tell them ‘your brother didn’t die fighting my daughter, he died fighting the Jotnar’. But you can imply Hela was a traitor, that her Jotnar blood was somehow to blame, that she first tried to make us weaker against them and then when that didn’t work out, she attacked...you can make the war with Hela simply an extension of the war with Jotunheim, and you can make the Jotnar the instigators. I do not know if this is what happened, you understand, but...well. This is what I would do, in Odin’s place.”

Anthony considered this. “But wouldn’t that make people mistrust Odin, if he was half-Jotun as well?”

“Not necessarily...Angrboda said he had a bad relationship with his mother, who was unpopular. If this was widely known, that could have been seen as the difference. Bor had raised Odin in Asgardians ideals, whereas Hela was close to her mother and so was infected by Jotun poison. And now the king has a new wife, half Vanir half Asgardian, the best possible stock, and everything is going to be peaceful and perfect from now on, when all the Jotun influence has been banished form the realm,” he finished with a grimace.
“Hey, back up,” Anthony protested. “Didn’t you say your mom was Vanir? And now you’re saying she was half and half?”

Loki waved his hand. “You know how it is with nobility – I am aware it is the same on Midgard. We are all intermarried with each other. There is no noble who would not have marriage ties to the Vanir, and very few who have none to Alfheim. Or Jotunheim, apparently. It is just not easy to tell, because usually, Aesir genes are stronger, so people end up looking Aesir whatever race they are mixed up with. As is the case with Frigga.” Loki rolled his eyes. “The worst people on Asgard consider this the proof of the superiority of the Aesir, and evidence their position as the rulers of the realms is just. Fortunately, Odin at least never subscribed to that particular bullshit. Maybe he was aware that it was too dangerous to base his superiority on something that could be proven wrong the moment we encountered a new species.” He sighed. “At any rate, Frigga is the daughter of an important Vanir noble and a rather minor Aesir lady."

“Your grandparents,” Anthony pointed out.

Loki shrugged. “Well, yes, but...I never had much of a relationship with them. They were both too in awe of Odin to be of any interest to me. My mother would have been much more boring if she wasn’t half-raised by King Njord.”

Anthony smiled a little. “It seems you had family not tied to you by blood even before the disaster of Thor’s coronation.”

Loki nodded, and thought of Angrboda again.

Something must have shown in his face, because Anthony asked him: “What is it?”

Loki exhaled, and steeled himself for attempting an explanation. “Angrboda pointed out to me that I did not just look like Hela – I also look like her. With her being my mother’s best friend, it is just….it feels...” and once again, he could not put it in words.

Anthony, however, seemed to understand. He squeezed Loki in his arms and just held him for a moment, and then muttered: “It would have been so much better, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” Loki admitted softly, “it would have.”

“I remember thinking like that about Jarvis,” Anthony confessed in a soft voice right by his ear. “Our old butler I mean, not the AI. How my life would be so much better if he was my dad.” He sighed. “But at least he effectively raised me, I guess. You only met Angrboda now.”

Loki shook his head. “I had Frigga,” he said. “She was the best mother, truly. Having one good parents at least, it is more than many can say.”

“Yeah, but on the other hand, not that many have one as extremely bad as Odin.”

“You know, I don’t even think that’s true,” Loki pointed out. “He was just rare in how much power he had, and how extraordinary things he could do to me.” He shook himself. “I do not wish to think about him.”

“Do you wish to think about what it would have been like if Angrboda had been there for you instead?”

“I don’t,” Loki said with emphasis, “but my mind will not stop doing it anyway.”

Anthony was silent for a moment, then asked: “Do you think there is potential for the future?”
“I turned the Bifrost on their home world!” Loki cried, one of the thoughts he was not allowing into his consciousness bursting out of his mouth uninvited. “Whatever chance there might have been for- for anything, I’ve destroyed!”

“Did they say that?” Anthony asked.

“No,” Loki admitted. “They claimed they didn’t blame me, but-”

“When try, okay?” Anthony interrupted urgently. “Please don’t give it up as impossible right away. Try.”

Loki wanted to protest, wanted to talk about how painful it would be if he was rejected, but he remembered that all of Anthony’s parental figures were dead, and did not say anything at all. He just curled deeper into Anthony’s arms and gradually drifted off to sleep with thoughts of the Jotnar on his mind.

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Chapter End Notes

Phew, so that info dump should be over for now!

I started out imagining the view of the Jotnar in Asgard as the view of Germas in Europe ater wwww, but now I feel it’s more like the view of Jewish people in Europe in the 30s: the paranoia about conspiracies and belief there is a connection to a malevolent foreign power (USSR). Nasty stuff. Makes Loki’s attempted genocide and the way he recalled it when speaking to Magneto even more...well. Let me just say I never planned to write such heavy stuff when I originally wrote that little Valentine one-shot!

Which reminds me, remember how I said this was probably gonna be 20-30 chapters? Yeah, so, about 38 are roughly planned at the moment, and it has definite potential to be longer. It should be under fifty, though…?
When Loki slipped away from Anthony with just a quick kiss to go back to Asgard, it was an hour or so earlier than he truly needed to, and he spent the hour in a deserted bit of forest somewhere to the north of the Avengers compound.

Because as he had been waking up from his short doze in Anthony's arms, feeling soft and comfortable, he came to a realization, a realization further confirmed when the first thing he’d seen was Anthony’s face, and he needed some time to process the epiphany.

He was in love with the man.

Probably had been for a while, too.

Not when Anthony had confessed his love, no, but some time after he had fallen in love. It showed indisputably in the way he found comfort in his embrace, in the way he had longed to hear his voice in Jotunheim, in the way the sight of his face made him feel deeply, viscerally happy.

He didn’t have that much experience with the emotion, except in the familial sense, but it seemed undeniable.

He was in love.

He wasn't entirely sure what to do with the information.

Mostly, he was panicked that he was not panicking more.

If he had come to the realization before the discoveries of Hela and Angrboda, he would have likely been much more preoccupied. As it was, though, he simply… Noted it.

Which he was sure signified some problems he would have to deal with later on, some kind of numbness, but at the moment it was useful.

In fact, insofar as he managed to react at all, he was even grateful for the discovery in a way, because it made him feel their relationship was less unequal. Loki knew he owed Anthony a debt of affection, and now it seemed he could slowly begin to pay him back.

Though there was, of course, the question of whether or when to tell Anthony, but that could wait.

For now, he needed to be functional enough to survive another day in Asgard, and it seemed that would not be a problem.

Or it would not be a problem because of this particular realization, at least. What he’d discovered
with Angrboda still had him more disturbed, but he should be stable enough to get through one day, especially if he took certain precautions.

And so, having taken stock, and having made sure he wasn't unduly disturbed, he returned to Asgard.

Once there, Loki postponed what business he could and instead retreated, quite openly, to Frigga’s rooms. If the court believed Odin to be hit by grief particularly strongly that day, they were less likely to bother him.

And Loki was hit by grief when he entered his mother’s rooms. He hadn’t done it since her death, for a good reason, and for a moment he could not do anything but stand in the middle of the room, dropping his Odin disguise, struck by too many memories, his eyes growing wet.

He had clearly overestimated his readiness for this particular task.

But whatever his feelings, it could not wait, and so he wiped his eyes impatiently and told himself firmly to focus on his actual task here: a confirmation, any confirmation, of Angrboda’s words.

He did not know what he was looking for exactly, but he did know that Frigga liked her tokens, and it was extremely likely she would have kept something, at least, to remember her friend by.

Given that the friendship was a secret from Odin, it would not be easy to find anything, but he did have the advantage of any concealing spells likely having died with Frigga. Unless she had anchored them into artefacts, which he supposed was possible. Still. He had bigger chance now than when his mother had still been alive.

Of course, had Frigga been still alive, he could have simply asked her. He could have discussed this friendship with her, listen to her reminiscence about her youth-

Loki firmly cut off that line of thought and began searching.

He did not think it would be anywhere as obvious as his mother’s desk, so he began with her sewing and weaving supplies. They carried many memories of his early childhood, sitting at her feet as she worked before it was deemed inappropriate for him, listening to her stories. He wondered if some of them had been a reflection of something she had experienced with Angrboda. He had always assumed they were all made up, but perhaps...perhaps he could ask the Jotun…

At any rate, there was nothing pointing to the friendship in the basket, or not anything Loki could identify, so he turned to the bathroom.

There were memories there too, because among the bottles of hair product and skin care there was also medicine, and Loki thought of getting into scrapes with Thor – always losing – and Frigga putting healing salve on his bruises as she chided him softly.

But there was nothing of Angrboda there either. He tried the bedside table.

It was only when his eyes fell on a particular section of the wardrobe that Loki paused in curiosity.

Would she…?

Well, it was specifically Odin she was hiding this from, so she absolutely would.

It felt wrong, going through his mother’s feminine supplies, but well. She was dead, he needed to know, and this was certainly one place she could have been perfectly certain Odin would never as
much as look at.

And sure enough, there, at the bottom of that particular basket, hidden under a concealing rune that drew Loki’s attention as it was exactly what he’d been trying to notice somewhere, it was.

It was just a drawing on a folded piece of paper, but there was no denying what it was: a picture of Frigga and Angrboda laughing together, both looking much younger than Loki ever knew them, likely when they were still studying together.

Loki examined the picture, studied the look of perfect happiness on both of their faces, and felt sadness and longing wash over him.

He wondered at his mother keeping the picture, and if it was not too dangerous. Most Asgardians would not recognize the other person in the picture – from what Angrboda said, they only knew them in their Aesir disguise – but Odin definitely would.

He ran his thumb over the image – and the picture of Angrboda moved.

It looked directly at him, scowling, and asked: “Who is this?”

Loki was taken aback for a moment, then caution took over. It did sound like Angrboda, but it didn’t have to mean anything. “Who is that?” He asked in turn.

“...Loki?” Angrboda’s voice asked.

“Is that actually you, Angrboda?” He requested a confirmation.

“Of course, who else would it be?” They sounded faintly irritated.

“More of a confirmation would be nice,” he muttered.

“You are holding the image Frigga used to communicate with me after Odin banished me,” the drawing replied. “How much more of a confirmation do you want?”

“That is enough for now, I suppose,” Loki admitted, and looked down at the drawing with new consideration. “Shouldn’t you have picked something a little less...obvious?” He asked then.

The image laughed. “I told Frigga that, but she said she liked having a visual approximation of the faces I was making, at least, when we talked.”

Loki frowned. “Does this actually mirror your expression?”

Angrboda scoffed and the image rolled its eyes. “If that would be possible at all, it would be needlessly complicated magic. Not, it is a simple charm in which I’ve tied certain tones of my voice to certain expressions – or well, Frigga did. The drawing is hers, of course. At any rate, the magic only transfers the voice.”

It was an ingenious piece of spell-work all the same, and entirely in the spirit of Frigga, Loki had to admit that much. “So weren’t you worried about the secrecy?” He asked again.

Angrboda grinned. “It used to be disguised as a cotton pad,” she told him. “I suppose the magic wore off after Frigga’s passing.”

Loki couldn’t help but grin a little in response. Yes, that made much more sense. “It was only concealed with a rune when I found it,” he explained.
Angrboda’s smile softened at that. “Well, Frigga did like layers.”

There was a silence, then Angrboda said in a more businesslike tone: “I suppose you were looking for confirmation of my story?”

“Yes,” Loki admitted easily.

“Well, now you have it.”

There was another silence.

“Can I…keep the drawing?” Loki asked then. “It could be useful to have a way to communicate with you.”

“I suppose I cannot stop you, can I?” They asked, but then conceded: “I don’t mind, exactly – if someone should have it after her, it’s definitely you – but you need to keep it secret. Odin cannot find it.”

Loki smiled a little. “I can swear to you,” he said, “he won’t.”

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It was just one last negotiation with Nidavellir, one last insistence that yes, they really wanted the weapons to be according to those specifications even though it was different from what Asgard usually wanted, and Loki would finally be done with this day and able to go back to Midgard for longer than just the few hours he’d been getting lately.

He was impatient, and had to force himself not to rush through his masking and concealing spells on Odin’s chambers to get to what, he realized with a jolt, he was beginning to see as his home.

It was absurd, it hadn’t even been full two months for him, and yet… He’d spent the majority of those months there. And there was nothing of home in Asgard these days, not in Odin's skin. Perhaps it was not so strange after all.

Especially given his new realization about Anthony.

At any rate, he had no patience for examining it in any great detail at the moment. Instead, he teleported himself and stepped over to Midgard.

When he appeared in the Avengers Compound, he just collapsed onto the sofa in the communal space, letting relief flood him. Finally, he was here for the full week. Finally, he would not have to disappear again after a five or six hours, barely fit enough to be functioning.

Finally, he could breathe.

Given this flood of relief, it took him a while to register the sounds coming from somewhere near him. When he finally did, he dragged his eyes open and turned around.

Then he blinked, as his surprise warred with his amusement.

There was Brunhilde standing behind the bar. She apparently hadn’t noticed him, which was not exactly surprising, considering she had Drews wrapped around her with arms and legs both, their lips were firmly locked together, and their eyes were closed.

He considered leaving quietly, but he was honestly too exhausted for that. He thought about the times he’d had sex with Anthony in these rooms. He wouldn’t have appreciated interruptions like
this, but on the other hand, he’d done that before the Compound was this crowded. So really, on their own head be it.

He cleared his throat.

Drews jerked away and Brunhilde had to squeeze her tighter to keep her from falling. Then she scowled at him over Drews’ shoulder, making him realize she knew he was there the whole time.

He smirked at her, and she rolled her eyes and put up her middle finger – she seemed to be doing extremely well at assimilating into Midgardian culture – as Drews disentangled from her.

“Yes, yes, we should have kept this to our rooms,” the woman muttered, sounding frustrated.

Loki waved his hand. “I spent my adolescence with Thor. Trust me, I’ve seen worse. But still, I thought I would interrupt you before I saw anything truly explicit, since that might bother you.”

Brunhilde took Drews by the hand to drag her away before she could reply, but over her shoulder she called to him: “I’m going to want stories!”

“About Thor’s embarrassing teenage encounters?” Loki wondered.

“Hey, anything to take the Crown Prince of Asgard down a peg!” She returned, and Loki immediately liked her another bit more.

He also wondered if she’d met Thor during Avengers training. If she had, she would have needed to pretend she was human, and he honestly wasn’t sure she was up to that. He’d have to ask Anthony.

At some point.

For now, once they’ve left, Loki closed his eyes again and allowed himself to relax, emptying his mind of all the worries of the last days. He even used some of the Vanir exercises his mother had taught him and he normally despised: breathe out worries, breathe in calm.

Usually, they seemed idiotic and useless to him, but here, knowing he had a week away from the issues of Asgard and his family, it seemed to work so much better. He imagined he was breathing out the air of Asgard, Jotunheim and Nifleheim, tainted with secrets and Odin’s intrigue, and breathing in the less complicated Midgardian air.

Not that Midgard didn’t have its own problems, plenty of them in fact, but they were much less personal for Loki, and therefore less distressing.

And so he continued the exercise, and he could feel his mental state improving. It was fascinating.

He didn't know how long he had been there for when he heard Anthony's laughter and opened his eyes just in time to see him entering the room with Potts.

The man's eyes brightened when he saw him. “Loki!” He cried, plopping down on the sofa next to him to give him a sideways hug and a brief kiss. “Here for the week?”

“Yes, finally,” Loki confirmed.

“Should I leave you alone?” Potts asked.

Anthony hesitated. “I know I dragged you here and promised you dinner, but I never know when exactly Loki will come, and…”
“It’s fine, Tony,” she interrupted him with a smile. “You two have a nice evening.”

Loki thanked her sincerely. The moment she was gone, Anthony pulled at his hand. “Come on, let’s go to my rooms.”

“I don’t want to move,” Loki complained, and in the next moment, he teleported them directly to Anthony’s bed, leaving the man spluttering.

“Asshole,” Anthony muttered, but nevertheless, curled around him in the bed. “I’m glad you are here,” he said then, so quietly that Loki was unsure he meant to be heard.

“I am glad to be here as well,” he replied nevertheless. “How have you been? With all the dramatic events happening in my life, I’ve hardly asked you the last two times I have visited.”

Anthony gave an awkward shrug from his position. “You know, same old. I was in action like, twice, because there was some wannabe supervillain in Canada and they asked for our help, but honestly he’s barely worth a mention. It was just us from the Compound, because it was plenty to get rid of him.”

“And yet you say you were deployed against him twice?” Loki asked sceptically. “That doesn’t seem like you managed to quite defeat him.”

Anthony poked him in the side for his lack of faith. “Yes, well you know how it is,” he said then. “We’re not supposed to kill anyone if we can avoid it at all, so we delivered him to Canadian authorities like the good guys we are, and he escaped before they could process him and lock him up in a proper high security prison.” He sighed. “I’m not too sure it didn’t happen again after this arrest, in fact. The Canadians are suspiciously cagey about how they’re doing with him. I’m beginning to worry that next time Canada will just ask us to put him on the Raft, which I’m feeling rather torn about.”

Loki frowned, remembering the lackeys of Thanos were put there without much protest from Anthony. “Why?”

“Well, it’s not exactly a humane prison,” Anthony explained. “You know, solitary confinement, glass walls – I’m sure you’re familiar. It works as a temporary holding facility, I guess – barely – but keeping anyone there long-term is just plain disgusting.”

“So what about the people I’ve helped put you there?” Loki couldn’t help but ask. “They’ve been there for months now, by your count.”

“Yeah,” Anthony admitted. “And I’m not super comfortable with it, but they are in league with a guy who wants to basically destroy the universe. If there are some people whose security I am not willing to compromise on to ensure their comfort, it’s them. I figure we will move them to some more humane facility once we deal with Thanos. But the regular bad guys...there’s really no call for that.”

“Don’t you have enough authority to change something about the conditions they are in?” Loki wondered.

Anthony gave a sigh. “I suppose,” he muttered. “But it’s just...another on a list of a million things I should be arranging, and they are all an absolute priority.”

“You’re tired,” Loki realized.

“Exhausted,” Anthony admitted. “And...well.”
“What is it?”

“It’s harder for me to rest when you’re not here.”

Loki closed his eyes and pressed the man closer to himself. “I swear I would come more often if I could-”

“I know, Loki. I’m not blaming you, trust me. It just...sucks.” Anthony took a deep breath. “But look at my whining, when you went through so much shit since the last time you were properly here. We shouldn’t be talking about me.”

Loki shook his head sharply, even though lying down rather lessened the effect. “My problems don’t mean you don’t have any right to complain, especially as you have, in fact, already offered me support for what I ‘went through’.”

“Yeah, I don’t think they’re the kind of stuff where one hug does it.”

Loki had to concede that was true.

“How are you doing?” Anthony asked.

“Better now that I am here,” Loki replied, and when Anthony rose on his elbow to give him a look, he elaborated: “I am...holding myself together.”

“Comfortably, or in a way that feels like you’re going to burst any time soon?” Anthony enquired shrewdly.

Loki sighed. “Honestly, I have mostly been repressing everything for the last two days, so I am not even sure myself.”

“Is there anything you want to talk about?”

Loki considered. Mostly he dreaded pulling out the family dirty laundry once again, so at length, he said: “Nothing of the sort you mean comes to mind right now, but...I do need your advice.”

Anthony seemed surprised. “What with?”

“It is about Angrboda,” Loki began, staring up at the ceiling but not truly seeing it. “They know I'm alive, obviously, but they don't know what I'm doing on Asgard. So my question is... Should I tell them?”

Anthony blinked. “I'm surprised you're even considering it, given how secret you keep it.”

“This is the first time it can bring me some advantages,” Loki replied simply. “They'd trust me more, obviously, and they'd perhaps be willing to work with Asgard, and maybe even convince some others to do so. It would also be easier to explain how I could take them to Hela without having to worry about Odin. They're a powerful mage and their cooperation against Thanos would be invaluable, but I know I won't get it without telling them.”

“Okay…” Anthony said slowly. “What are the cons then?”

Loki gave him a look. “The danger to me, obviously. They won't slip and tell anyone accidentally, but they could betray me intentionally, to any mage in the realms able to remove my spells forcibly – there are not that many, but there are some, unfortunately – or to Asgard at large.”

Anthony frowned. “Why would they do that?”
“To take revenge on the realm that ruined their life by plunging it into chaos?” Loki asked with a raised eyebrow.

Anthony groaned. “Good point. I don’t know how I managed to forget your father’s assholery for the slightest moment. Can you put them under a geas?”

Loki shook his head. “They’re too powerful for me to have any faith in it.”

“Hmm. Okay, putting that on the back burner for now, is that all of your worries?”

Loki shrugged. “Well, there's also the fact that I can't shake the feeling that this is all going to be one long con.”

Anthony gave him an incredulous look. “To what end?”

Loki exhaled. “I don't know. There's just been so much life-changing news lately, I tend to distrust at least some of it. “

“Well, the discovery of Hela was part of a plot,” Anthony pointed out. “So you can kinda count that out. And everything else followed from that-”

“Yes, and what if it was meant to?” Loki interrupted, giving voice to that particular fear for the first time, even allowing himself to think it fully for the first time. “We thought we had destroyed Thanos’ plan, but what if we haven’t, or what if he had a backup?”

Anthony withdrew from him a little to sit up and look down on him. “Care to elaborate?”

“He meant to release Hela, did he not?” Loki obliged. “I promised Angrboda I would take them to their daughter. What if the moment I do that, they undo the spell that is keeping her imprisoned?”

Anthony considered the possibility. “Well, not that I would exactly blame them, but…do you think it’s possible? That Odin would have created a spell so easy to break for them, the person he would have suspected the most from trying to free Hela?”

“Well, he would have obviously not intended to. But they are powerful.”

“They couldn’t even get to the planet, Loki,” Anthony pointed out, sounding a little exasperated.

“That could be more difficult,” Loki began, then admitted: “I don’t know! I agree, on balance, that it is not likely. But it remains a possibility, and can I take the chance? That is my question.”

Anthony thought about it, shifting into a more comfortable position. “All right,” he said, “but this has really nothing to do with you revealing being Odin. I mean, this problem will arise regardless of that.”

“Yes, but it makes it even more concerning – I hardly want Thanos to know what I am doing!”

Anthony hummed. “Would it matter?” He asked then.

Loki blinked. “Are you joking?”

“No, listen,” Anthony insisted, gesticulating wildly. “You’re preparing the realms for him, right? But you’ve already started. The realms know what they’re getting ready for, he can’t undo that. So what would he actually gain? He wants to kill you anyway, I assume, for failing to win him Earth and losing him the mind stone?”
“Yes,” Loki admitted easily.

Anthony nodded. “So if Angrboda is his agent and they already know you’re alive, it doesn’t matter if they know you’re Odin or not,” he pointed out. “The whole point of that trick with Brunhilde was that Thanos can’t easily get into Asgard, so you’re actually most at risk when you’re not him. Besides, I assume you found the confirmation of Angrboda’s friendship with your mom like you said you’d try? Otherwise we wouldn’t even be having this conversation?”

“I did,” Loki affirmed.

“Well, that was in Asgard, and once again, we’re assuming Thanos can’t get there, because if he could, we’d be in a world of shit. So the proof should be genuine, which means the whole thing with Angrboda should be genuine.”

“He could conceivably have agents there,” Loki suggested. It was unlikely, but little was impossible for Thanos.

“Agents capable of getting to that proof?” Anthony asked pointedly.

Loki had to concede that that was nigh impossible – if only because if that had been the case, they could have got to the sleeping Odin just as easily. Loki had covered his mother’s rooms in a lot of wards.

“So,” Anthony summarized. “There is the risk of Angrboda freeing Hela when you bring her there, but that is unrelated to any possible conspiracy. They have enough personal reasons to want that in any case. The only people for whom it would truly matter to discover you were Odin are Asgardians, and as long as you trust Brunhilde’s story, Angrboda will not be working with them in any kind of plot. So the only real problem you have regarding this decision is whether you think they would try to take revenge in this way. Additionally, there is the separate problem of them wanting to free Hela.”

Loki examined that reasoning from all sides. “There are also the other realms,” he pointed out.

“What do you mean?”

“It would matter to them that I was impersonating Odin,” Loki explained.

“Would it?”

Loki laughed, but when he realized the question was serious, forced himself to actually think about it, as absurd as it sounded. “Uncle Frey wouldn’t, but many of the conservative nobility of Vanaheim would, just as a matter of principle,” he said slowly, thinking. “On Alfheim, it would depend on the fraction. They pretty universally despise Odin, but some would take this chance for chaos, as I suggested Angrboda might. Nidavellir...most likely not. They don’t particularly like me, but their relationship with Asgard is very business-like, so as long as I stayed professional...”

“So is there a chance Angrboda is working on a plot for someone from Alfheim or Vanaheim?” Anthony probed, moving on the bed so that he was leaning on the headboard. “That they aren’t who they say they are at all, but just some agent put in your path for some mysterious reason, and some people working for the same fraction planted the proof of Angrboda’s friendship with your mother on Asgard?”

Loki hummed his assent, twisting to keep looking at him, but at the same time, hearing it spelled out like this, he realized one thing: “Not the conservative fractions from Vanaheim, I don’t think. This is far from their style. But Alfheim...yes. Yes, that could happen.”
“All right,” Anthony said, pulling the blanket over his legs, “then the next question is: what would be the point of directing you to Angrboda? Do you suppose that Hela wasn’t real, and that it was their plot from the start, including with Brunhilde?”

“No, that was definitely Thanos,” Loki reassured.

“Okay, so then where would the elf conspirators come in, and why?”

Loki mused about that for a moment, moving to sit beside Anthony. “You’re right,” he admitted then. “There’s little enough reason to do something so extremely elaborate – if they suspected about Odin, they could have simply unmasked me, they certainly have powerful enough mages for that. All the rest would just be shooting in the dark for them. It makes no sense.”

“So we come back to Angrboda, and their possible attempt to cause chaos,” Anthony summarized. “Did you tell them about Thanos?”

“No.” There had been enough other things to discuss, and Loki was in no frame of mind to think strategically then.

“Maybe you should,” Anthony suggested. “If they are not a complete asshole or insane, it will sway them even if they intended to move against Asgard before.”

Loki exhaled. “You are right. But are they not a complete asshole or insane? They don’t seem to be, but their daughter was, and…” he shook his head. “This is frustrating.”

“You should talk to Brunhilde again,” Anthony recommended.

“Yes,” Loki said slowly, “yes, that might actually work. I could take her with me to see Angrboda even, to verify some things. I have seen inside her mind, I know she is not an agent of Angrboda, and I could always have Vision verify it again just to be sure...yes…” Loki turned to the man next to him and kissed him. “Thank you, Anthony.”

Anthony merely smiled, and deepened the kiss, rolling so that he was on top of Loki and slipping his hands under his tunic.

It was slow and languid, relaxed and even – dare he say it? - gentle. Loki could see Anthony putting all of his feelings into it, the feelings he was not quite comfortable expressing because he believed they were not reciprocated. Loki was not quite ready to reveal his own yet, but he did allow some of it to show in his kisses and caresses, and in the soft sigh of Anthony’s name as he came.

Anthony embraced him, barely giving him room enough to clean them with a wave of his hand, and Loki glimpsed a certain wetness to his eyes.

“Anthony…?” He asked softly.

Anthony merely shook his head and burrowed deeper into his embrace, so Loki respected the refusal and caressed the man’s hair, but his stomach felt heavy.

In the morning, Loki contacted Strange to let him know he was available for magical tutoring if the man was interested – taking care to phrase it that way, and smirking when he saw Strange’s irritated face when he fought with himself not to say anything because, after all, he did want the lessons, and the term was not inaccurate.
When he ended the call, he noticed Bruce lurking in the doorway of the communal space, and raised his eyebrows at him.

“Hey, Loki,” the man greeted him, shuffling closer and, a little hesitantly, sitting on the sofa opposite to him. “It’s been a while since we saw you there. Everything all right?”

Loki blinked at him. “Did Anthony not inform you of the reason for my absence?”

Bruce shrugged. “He said you had some Asgard business to take care of, but no details. Not that I doubt your abilities, but any business that takes almost three months makes me just a little nervous in the sense that it sounds like it could spill over to Earth.”

Loki was even more taken aback. “Anthony did not tell you about the time dilation either?”

It was Bruce’s turn to be surprised. “He did, ages ago, but— was that true in this case, too? Were you only gone a day?”

“This time, it was three for me,” Loki explained.

“That’s...wow. Okay.” Loki could see the gleam of scientific fascination in Bruce’s eyes. “Tony refused to go into details and never mentioned it again, so I just kinda assumed it was a temporary thing or something...” The man hesitated. “Would you. Um. Would you mind telling me more about this?”

Loki smiled at him. “Not at all – but perhaps elsewhere? I don’t mind you knowing, but there are some in this Compound I don’t trust as much.”

Bruce seemed surprised by the statement, but in a pleasant way. He did not need to be – Loki chiefly trusted him because he knew how much Anthony trusted him – but he did not say that out loud. “Sure,” the man agreed immediately, and eagerly led the way to his rooms.

“What do you wish to know?” Loki asked once they were settled.

“Is Asgard – or wherever it is you go – fast or heavy?” Bruce began as if he’d been holding the words in until now. “If it’s heavy, how come you can walk on Earth without any trouble, without, you know, jumping into the air with every step? Also, you should be extra dense, so-”

Loki put up his hand, grinning. “Slow down, will you?” He said.

Bruce looked embarrassed, and took off his glasses to clean them. “Sorry,” he muttered. “It’s just, Tony told me about this and then refused to elaborate and I’ve been dying with curiosity ever since.”

Loki nodded. “I can understand that. To take your questions in order, Asgard is both very heavy and very fast, but even more importantly, it is orbiting a black hole.”

Bruce blinked at him for a moment. “Wow,” he said then, in complete and utter fascination. “Does Jane know?” He asked, then immediately answered himself: “Who am I kidding, she must know, she knows Bifrost is an Einstein-Rosen bridge. Also she was actually there – how was she there? Shouldn’t it have torn her to pieces?”

“She had one of the Infinity Stones inside of her at the time, so no, she was in no danger of that,” Loki replied drily.

Bruce frowned. “Infinity Stones?” He asked.
Loki blinked, and thought back, and then groaned. Was it truly possible he never…?

“FRIDAY, call Anthony here,” he said resignedly. “We have a lot to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

oops...
Anthony arrived to the room Loki and Bruce waited in, looking a little worried. “Something happen?” He asked immediately.

“No, no, nothing alarming,” Loki reassured immediately, gesturing to the space next to him on the sofa. “I merely realized that I’ve neglected to inform you of some crucial things when it comes to our planning for the Mad Titan.”

Anthony sighed, a fleeting expression of bitterness in his face, as he walked over. “I should call Carol here then.”

Loki frowned, distracted. “Why Captain Danvers especially?”

Anthony gave another sigh as he plopped down next to Loki. “Oh, right. Guess I leave you out of the loop a bit, too. Me and Carol are co-leading the Avengers – have been since the new year. Honestly it’s mostly a transition period, an intermediate solution because I’ve been here longer. She’s infinitely more suited to it, and she’s scheduled to take over completely at he beginning of July.”

Loki looked at Anthony very carefully. He seemed completely fine with the situation, no traces of the bitterness from before, but Loki still reminded himself to check later in private.

“Very well,” he said, “call her here. We will certainly need to inform Vision later as well, once he comes here. As for the rest, I leave that up to your discretion.”

“Should I leave?” Bruce asked.

Loki hesitated. “Personally, I am in favour of you knowing,” he said. “But I would prefer if not all of the Avengers did, at least not yet, and the decision of who will or will not is obviously not up to me.”

Anthony grimaced a little. “I prefer full disclosure, but I guess I’ll have to decide after you tell us what you know.”
“It’s fine,” Bruce reassured them. “I’ll go. Just call me if you need to talk to me.”

“Brucie, we’re in your rooms,” Anthony pointed out.

Bruce, however, just waved his hand. “I’m sure I can manage to spend some time in the communal space without Brunhilde and Jessica scarring me for life.

Loki and Anthony both snorted. Bruce left, and not long after him Danvers appeared, looking a little harried. “What’s up?”

“Important strategy meeting, apparently,” Anthony explained.

She exhaled, but settled down on one of Bruce’s sofas.

When she was seated comfortably, Loki began, looking at the man sitting next to him: “How much did I tell you about the Mind Stone and the Tesseract, Anthony?”

Anthony seemed surprised by the question. “Um...I mean, not so much about them? Unless you count the lessons you gave Vision...you just said you found the Mind Stone beyond the event horizon,” and Loki could see that in spite of everything, Anthony was still fascinated by that, “and that Thanos contacted you through it...and then that you could pull yourself through to the Tesseract because you knew it from before...and that Thanos wanted you to bring him both of these, and that since you failed at that, he’s now mad at you. No pun intended,” Anthony added with a weak grin.

Loki rolled is eyes. “And did I ever say anything about the Aether?”

“Only that it allowed Jane to survive on Asgard,” Anthony replied, now looking even more confused.

Loki nodded. “Yes. Well, all these three have something in common. Namely, they are all called Infinity Gems, and come from a time before the origin of the universe.”

“From before the Big Bang?” Anthony asked, sounding a little incredulous.

“Precisely,” Loki confirmed. “There are six of them in total, and they each embody an aspect of the universe: Mind, Space, Reality, Power, Time, and Soul.”

Danvers nodded in understanding, but Anthony was looking at him strangely.

“That...doesn’t sound very scientific,” Anthony muttered at length. “I mean, souls?”

Loki sighed. “We don’t have time and I don’t have the inclination to get into it now, so just trust me that souls are a separate aspect, as least as much as time is separate from space.”

Anthony frowned. “Yeah, that was gonna be my other objection, actually. I mean—”

“Yes, Anthony, I know,” Loki interrupted. “The gems are, in fact, in pairs which are closely related to each other: Time and Space, Mild and Soul, and Power and Reality.”

“What is the soul one supposed to do, then?” Anthony probed.

“I did say I did not wish to go into details now, did I not?” Loki asked a little tiredly. “For now, let me simply tell you that it is what allows you to relate to other people, to communicate in any meaningful way.”
“That’s mind,” Anthony argued.

“Anthony,” Loki was exasperated now. “Please believe me that mind alone would not be enough. We can discuss it later, but right now, can I please proceed?”

The man reluctantly nodded.

“Now, it should be clear where the Mind Stone is,” Loki continued with his overview. “Tesseract is-”

“The space stone, right?” Anthony interrupted.

“Yes, the space stone, and the Aether is the reality stone. Both were secured by Asgard. Now, why is this relevant for our plans regarding Thanos? Simple. Thanos wishes to collect them all, because that would give him unparalleled power – the power to simply eliminate half of all life in the universe with a snap of his fingers. Which is exactly what he means to do.”

Anthony was staring at him incredulously once again. “In the universe?” He then repeated n disbelief.

“Yes. We are talking about a slaughter on a scale unknown until this day, and believe me, the universe has seen quite a number of large scale killings. Some of them done by Thanos himself.”

Anthony nodded. “Yeah, Carol told us about how he used to massacre half of every planet he conquered.”

Loki inclined his head. “This time, he would be doing the same on a larger scale. So I am sure you can see it is imperative we keep the stones from him.”

“Can we destroy them?” Anthony asked immediately.

Loki grimaced. “It is possible, but difficult and unfortunately also not recommended. As they embody aspects of the universe, it is speculated that destroying them could begin to unravel the universe itself in the long term. It is not certain, merely speculation, so as a last resort it might certainly be tried, but I would much prefer not to risk it.”

“All right,” Danvers, who had been mostly silent until now, said. “So protecting them it is. How are we doing on at least knowing where they are, since that should probably be the first step?”

“We are currently aware of half the stones,” Loki replied. “Vision has the Mind Gem, Tesseract is in the vaults of Asgard – thus the whole trick with Hela,” he added as an aside to Anthony, “and I put Aether with the Collector.”

“You what?” Danvers asked incredulously.

Loki put up his hands. “It is meant as an alert mechanism,” he explained. “The reality stone is the least dangerous of them all, so I put it in a place that is the most accessible to Thanos, hoping it would make him come for it first and thus alert me that he is on the move.” He shrugged. “Of course, he alerted me with the Hela trap instead, but it would be rather difficult to take it from Tivan now.”

“He knows it’s the weakest,” Danvers pointed out. “He wants what you have on Asgard before he will do anything more large-scale.”

“Could you two maybe explain?” Anthony asked, sounding frustrated. “What Collector?”
“Apologies,” Loki said immediately. “He is a man that lives in Knowhere – centre of the universe kind of thing. Not literally, really, but it is the sort of place where all roads lead. He has a collection of unique and often powerful objects. He couldn’t resist an Infinity stone, of course, and at the same time his vaults are secured from any less powerful conqueror than Thanos.”

“All right,” Anthony nodded in understanding. “So where are the other three?”

“I know where the power stone is,” Danvers said, and Loki whipped his head around, staring at her incredulously.

“You what?” It was his turn to ask, in incredulity that easily equalled Danvers’.

She shrugged. “Do you remember when Ronan attacked Xandar a few years ago?”

“Yes, of course,” Loki said impatiently. It was true he focused mostly on the realms of Yggdrasil, but he did keep some feelers out in the rest of the universe, precisely because of Thanos.

“Well, what he attacked with was the power stone,” Danvers explained succulently.

Loki arched his eyebrows. “And Xandar survived that how exactly?”

Danvers waved her hand. “Eh, there was a half-celestial guy there at the time-”

“I’m sorry, but once more, what?” Loki interrupted.

She gave a world-weary sigh. “Yeah, I know. It stretches the imagination. But it’s true, I actually spoke to him.”

Loki’s eyebrows climbed even higher. “And survived intact? My respect for your grows by the day, Captain.”

She shook his head. “He’s all right. Told his celestial dad to piss off, actually. He’s how I know about the power stone – I contacted him and his friends to thank them for ridding me of Ronan, since that guy has been a pain in my side for years, and he told me all about how it happened.”

Loki frowned at that. “How many other people do you think he told?”

Danvers thought for a moment, then sighed once more. “Honestly, I am not sure. He knows how dangerous it is, but he’s not the most careful of people, or the most discreet.”

“Then the stone must leave Xandar,” Loki said immediately. “It’s much more of a prize for Thanos than the reality stone, and if he manages to surprise them and not give them the time to mobilize, they might not be able to hold against him. And with the power stone, all other conquest would be much, much easier for him.”

“Okay, what exactly does it do?” Anthony interjected. “The name is kinda vague.”

Loki gave him a look. “Let me simply say that if Thanos wanted to kill everyone, not just half of the universe, it would be the only stone he’d need.”

There was a loaded silence after that.

“Why doesn’t he want to kill everyone, anyway?” Anthony asked then. “I thought he was bringing sacrifices to Death or some shit like that?”

Loki shrugged. “Yes, but if he kills everyone at once, there won’t be any new deaths for her, will
there? That’s why he chooses to go for ‘only’ half.”

“That...actually makes a twisted kind of sense, which is disquieting,” Anthony muttered.

“I can reach the half-celestial guy with a message,” Danvers put them back on track. “We can alert Xandar.”

“Can he be trusted with such a delicate task?” Loki wondered. “He’s certainly powerful enough, I grant you that—”

“Actually, he lost his powers when he told his ad to piss off,” Danvers corrected.

Loki threw up his hands. “Then not even that! Wouldn’t it be better to contact Xandar directly?”

“I’m afraid I’m too strongly associated with the Kree for them to trust me,” the Captain said, apologetic. “Perhaps if Odin tried?”

Loki, however, shook his head. “Odin keeps very firmly to the Nine Realms. Intervening beyond them would attract all sorts of attention, and he might not be willing to do it at all.” The real Odin wouldn’t have been, in any case.

Danvers shrugged. “Then I’m afraid it’s the guardians or nothing.”

Loki blinked. “Guardians?”


Loki snorted, then shrugged. “As leader of a group that calls itself Avengers,” he said, “I don’t think you have any right to talk.”

Everyone laughed.

“All right, so we are agreed?” Anthony checked then.

“Yes,” Danvers confirmed.

“We also need to agree on whom to tell about the stones,” Loki reminded them. “I said I would leave it up to your discretion, and I will, but I would prefer it if the number of people was...limited.”

“Well, you already said we have to tell Vision,” Anthony began, and Loki nodded.

“We also need to tell Strange,” Danvers interjected. “It is his job to protect against magical threats, Loki is not always here, and this has the potential to be very magical.”

Loki agreed immediately. “Thanos certainly has enough mages at his disposal. Yes, I agree, and will tell Strange when he comes for the tutoring I promised him.”

Danvers nodded. “Then personally,” she continued, “I would like to tell Jessica and Jim, but I do not have strategic reasons for that, so I will understand if you veto it.”

Loki considered. “I am in favour of Jim – he works with a lot of outsiders in the army, so perhaps it would be better to put him under a geas and improve his mental shields, because accidents do happen and we never know who all can mind-read, but otherwise, yes.” Then he frowned. “With your friend though...it is not that I do not trust her, but she spends a lot of time with Maximoff, and Maximoff is most certainly the Avengers’ weak link. I would prefer she did not have access to this
information.”

Danvers sighed. “That’s fair, really.”

“Bruce?” Anthony returned to the original question-

“By all means. Like I said, I am in favour, and I do not believe there is any kind of danger,” Loki replied.

“Danvers nodded her assent. “That’s probably it,” she observed then.

“Yes, I can’t think of anyone else crucial either,” Anthony agreed. “Except...we will have to tell the Council.”

Loki sighed. “We tell Sikorski,” he said, “if he agrees to mental protection. He is much more exposed and liable to have someone try and read his mind than James, and even James is prominent, being an Avenger and all. So we tell Sikorski, and discuss the best way to proceed with him.”

Anthony gave a deep sigh. “All right,” he said, and Loki thought about the previous night again – about the exhaustion, and the suspiciously wet eyes.

They joined Bruce in the communal space, having lunch together and watching some Star Trek to take their minds off things, but afterwards Loki retreated with Anthony to the man’s room.

Loki took his hand and guided him to the sofa, where he settled them close to each other before he asked: “Tell me, Anthony, are you truly comfortable handing the reins to Danvers?” He asked without preamble. He’d been turning the question over in his mind for the last hour.

Anthony looked surprised by the question. “Sure. I’m terrible at leadership.”

Loki frowned. “You have guided this group from three members, one of whom was unable to walk at the time, to a fully functional team covering both sides of this country,” he pointed out.

Anthony shrugged. “With your help, but yeah. Strategy and acquisition I can do. I was CEO of Stark Enterprises long enough for that. I can plan and network with the best of them, when I think it’s worth my while. I usually hate doing it, but I couldn’t have been my dad’s son without learning something about this stuff. What I genuinely suck at is the actual leadership. You know, motivating people, making them hold together as a team. Carol is made for that. I see her and even I am inspired.”

Loki grimaced a little. “Sh does have a little in common with Thor,” he conceded.

Anthony laughed. “I suppose, the same thing she has in common with Rogers, but she’s different in all the other ways, and that’s what matters.”

“Hmm.” Loki considered it. “Do you believe it is because she is a woman?”

Anthony blinked at him. “What? That’s she’s caring and nurturing or some shit?”

Loki snorted. “Clearly you haven’t met Sif. No. What I meant is, she couldn’t become arrogant the way Rogers and Thor have, because being a woman, there were always enough people telling her that she was not good enough. So her determination never became self-righteousness or
overconfidence.”

Anthony seemed to muse about that. “I guess it’s possible,” he said. “But I don’t really know. I don’t have the experience, you know? I’ll ask Pepper what she thinks. If someone would understand this, it’d be her.”

Loki nodded, and there was a short silence. “Are you upset that I didn’t tell you about the Stones sooner?” Loki asked then, deciding to simply grit his teeth and get his other worry over with before his mind obsessed too much. He had enough other things to worry about.

Anthony sighed. “Did you keep it from me on purpose?”

Loki considered how to phrase it, then said: “Not recently.”


“At the beginning, I was unsure to what degree I could trust you,” Loki explained. “So I did not wish to inform you of the stones you didn’t know about, that was why I only mentioned the Tesseract, the Mind Stone and the Aether. But that’s hasn’t been an issue for some time, of course.”

“For how long?” Anthony asked, still in the same sharp tone.

“Truthfully, probably not since you realized what I was doing in Asgard and I let you live, and certainly not since I told you of my Jotun origin. It was...difficult for me – as you’ve probably gathered,” he added drily, “and then the Valkyrie appeared and all that nonsense started. I was too preoccupied by this to think about bringing you up to date properly. I am sorry for that.”

Anthony sighed, sitting back again. “I am a little angry with you,” he said. “But it’s not rational and I realize that. I left you out of the loop about the Avengers leadership for the same amount of time, because we really have been extremely busy for that long, so just...let me deal with my issues and I’ll be fine in awhile.”

Loki hesitated. It sounded honest enough, and Loki was too familiar with being irrationally upset to wish to poke Anthony further, but he was still troubled, so in the end he plowed ahead: “You were upset about something yesterday, too, even before you knew about this.”

“It’s nothing,” Anthony said firmly, and how his tone was turning cold.

Loki looked away for a moment to hide his expression. “I understand you are not comfortable telling me, but have you talked to someone else at least?”

“I told you it was nothing!”

“Fine, then.” There was a pause. “Do you want me to go to my own room?”

“What? No!” Anthony said loudly, then swallowed and when Loki turned to him, looked away as well. “Do what you want, obviously, but like, I’m not making you leave.”

Loki put a hand on his cheek and turned his head. “Anthony,” he said, his tone softer, “do you want me to stay here or not?”

“Yeah. Yes, I do,” Anthony said with an exhale, closing his eyes.

“Then I will stay,” Loki replied simply. “I just wish you would talk to someone about what is
troubling you, but I swear it does not have to be me.”

Anthony shook his head. “It’s just me being pathetic. Like I said, nothing.”

“You are not pathetic.”

Anthony snorted. “If you think that it means I managed to pretend well enough, which is a mystery to be honest, given the state I was in when you found me in Siberia.”

“Someone betraying you does not make you pathetic,” Loki insisted. If it did, where would he be? Anthony smiled bitterly. “No, but my reaction? The way I can’t pick myself up? That sure does.”

“Anthony, in your circumstances I turned to mass slaughter,” Loki pointed out.

“Yeah, well, that was a bit bigger than just a colleague turning on you, wasn’t it?” Anthony argued.

Loki scowled at him. “You’ve fought alongside Rogers for years, that’s not-”

“But I didn’t!” Anthony almost shouted. “Yeah, we worked together on some small stuff a few times after your invasion, but we only really started to work together after SHIELD fell, to go after Hydra, and I left the team after Ultron. It was like...a year and a half? Not even. And Siberia was a year after I stopped being part of the team. I should have been able to deal with that, but no, I just-”

“Anthony, everyone reacts differently,” Loki interrupted. “It wasn’t your first betrayal, I know. Of course it was doing to cut you deep, even if Rogers wasn’t that close to you.”

“It’s just that I’m so fucking desperate for attention that that I fucking attach onto anyone who as much as smiles at me, like a leech,” Anthony said self-deprecatingly. “You said it yourself, that we were together just out of convenience, you got near me and so I got you entangled in my shit and-”

“Anthony,” Loki said sharply, recognizing an approaching spiral. “You have helped me, many times and many ways, over the time we have been together. If it wasn’t for your measurements, it is possible Odin would have died and Hela would have become free already. And on a personal level, I...care for you. Significantly. I value and appreciate your company. Our relationship might have started that way, but it doesn’t mean it is the reason it continues.”

“It continues because I can’t let you go,” Anthony muttered.

“Yes – and I am very grateful for that,” Loki replied promptly.

Anthony blinked at him, seeming confused.

“I have my own issues, as you well know,” Loki said. “I am often extremely good at self-sabotage. Your hard-headedness was the only thing that prevented it in this case.” Loki gave Anthony a kiss on the forehead. “Now, was there a particular reason why you were upset yesterday?” He asked.

Anthony sighed and closed his eyes. “Just...it’s hard for me when you’re away,” he said quietly. “And I know you can’t do anything about it, I do, but every time I wonder if you’ll come back-”

Loki turned fully to the side and pressed Anthony to himself, holding him firmly. “You should have said,” he muttered after a moment of simply holding the man. “We can arrange something. I can come over every few days for an hour or so, if it will make it easier for you.”

“That’d be too exhausting for you-” Anthony started to protest.
“It won’t be anything insurmountable,” Loki overrode the objection. “I can manage a day that has twenty hours, if it makes you feel better, Anthony.”

“I don’t want to be a fucking burden-”

“Stop that!” Loki insisted. “You are not, and never have been, a burden. I first came to talk to you because you were an asset, and that remains true until today.”

“Right.” Anthony rolled his eyes. “I could really feel that when you were talking with Carol about space, because I had so much to contribute to that conversation-”

“Anthony,” Loki said firmly. “Danvers has that knowledge because she was kidnapped from Earth by power-hungry Kree. And you know she couldn’t do some of the things you do. She could never handle the council as well, for example.”

Anthony scoffed. “Yeah, because that’s such a great job.”

“But it is necessary,” Loki pointed out. “I do not enjoy my job as Odin either, as you know.”

Anthony closed his eyes again, exhaling. “Yeah, sorry, I am whining again-”

“That is not what I meant. Sometimes we have talents for things that are a little unsavoury. It means we will never be celebrated the way Thor or Danvers are. But I, at least, certainly appreciate your kind of ingenuity more.”

Anthony smiled at him weakly, and Loki kissed him. “Would you prefer it if I was more like Thor?” He asked pointedly, trying to silence the voice in his head that said of course he would, who wouldn’t?

“Hell no,” Anthony said immediately. “Thor’s a decent drinking buddy, but apart from that, the best thing about him is his girlfriend.”

Loki laughed at that, and Anthony cuddled closer to him. “I’m gonna be fine, you know,” he said. “Sometimes this just...comes over me.”

“I understand,” Loki said softly. “Do you wish to watch something to take your mind off things?”

Anthony hesitated, then asked so quietly Loki could hardly hear him: “Could we just...be together?”

“Of course,” Loki replied, and they were.

The next morning, Loki carefully asked FRIDAY to verify if Brunhilde was available for a visit. Interrupting them in the communal space was one thing, but if he barged in on them in their rooms, the Valkyrie would probably kill him.

“So,” he said after he’d been given confirmation that he could enter, and stepped in carrying a large mug of coffee as a bribe of sorts. “I am sorry about this, but I have more questions about the past.”

“Of course you do,” Brunhilde muttered, taking the mug from him and taking a large gulp. “Well, fortunately it’s never too early in the day for me to drink, so ask away.”

“You must have known Angrboda in their Aesir form,” he began without preamble, “but I actually
saw a Jotun image of them in your head. How?"

“I never saw her like this in person,” Brunhilde replied, selecting a bottle and settling on the sofa. “But I do know what she looked like. When Odin sent people after her, he gave them illusions of her. My girlfriend received one.” A large gulp from the bottle followed this statement. “She showed it to me, musing about how different and yet still the same she looked, and how much like Hela.”

Loki did his best to ignore the bitterness he felt at that as he settled on the sofa next to Brunhilde.

“Given that you were trying to find out something about her fate, much like Odin had been, I suppose that was the first form that jumped to my mind,” Brunhilde finished.

Loki obligingly conjured an illusion of Angrboda that corresponded exactly to what Brunhilde had showed him, Angrboda looking younger in it than they did now. “So this is them?” He verified.

“Yes,” Brunhilde said, exasperated. “I already showed you the image.”

“I simply want to be certain.” He hesitated. “Do you believe you could possibly know answers to some questions you could ask them to verify their identity if you met them?”

Brunhilde gave him a blank look. “She’s dead.”

Loki smirked a little. “Well, that is what I am trying to confirm or deny.”

She stared at him. “What?”

“See, my investigation led me to Jotunheim, and well...do you have those answers?”

“Yeah...yeah, I’m sure I have some,” Brunhilde said dazedly, and Loki pulled out the picture of Angrboda and touched her face.

“What do you want?” Came a sharp answer a moment later.

“My lady?” Brunhilde asked in a tone of complete incredulity.

There was a short silence, then: “Hilde?” Angrboda’s tone was no less amazed, and there was wonder in it, too: “You are alive?”

Brunhilde laughed. “I should be asking you that! I was sure Odin found you!”

“I am not so easy to find...and I had help.” Angrboda paused. “But how come you live?” They asked with a hint of desperation in their voice. “I’ve heard you were all killed by Hela!”

“Wait,” Loki interrupted firmly. “You two are friends?”

“No,” Brunhilde said at the same moment that Angrboda said “yes.”

“We are not friends,” Brunhilde emphasized. “I was nowhere near noble enough for that – or old enough. But Lady Angrboda was as good as a queen when I started in the Valkyries as a young girl. I was Hela’s age, and so I was assigned to her detail. It was regarded as appropriate. As a result, I was often in Lady Angrboda’s company as well.”

“You are right that friends was perhaps not the right word,” Angrboda conceded, “but...it was in too late a stage for Hela to have actual friends, but Hilde would be one of those that came closest, and contrary to most of the others, I actually liked her. And her parents...well.” There was a pause.
“I apologize, dear,” the painting said then, “I do not mean to say anything you are uncomfortable with.”

Brunhilde shrugged. “It’s fine,” she said, though she took a long swing from her bottle once more. “My family was disappointed in my choice of career, since it wasn’t properly feminine and all,” she said then.

“You were one of the Valkyrie!” Loki said incredulously.

“Yes, because Odin has always been so proud of you for being a powerful sorcerer, I am sure,” she retorted, and Loki closed his mouth, because yes, she had a point. If her family had been looking forward to an early marriage and many grandchildren from her, they would have been disappointed, just as Odin had been that Loki was not a great warrior.

“I didn’t get any support from them,” Brunhilde finished. “That’s one of the reasons why I never wanted to come back after...everything.”

“I am so sorry, Hilde,” Angrboda said softly, regret infusing their voice.

“I don’t blame you,” Brunhilde replied, “I blame Odin.”

The image of Angrboda smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the stones: because if there was no problem with destroying them, why the hell did Nova Prime not try to eliminate the power stone, the one that had the shittiest and most dangerous direct use? I mean, sure, empires like weapons of mass destruction, but it was painted as a good choice. And Loki never tried to destroy the Aether too, even though he gave it away so it was no use to him and even though he knew about Thanos. So there must be a reason why it’s not that simple.

I have a Jessica/Brunhilde story in the works that also explains Carol’s background and is basically my attempt to make this story align with Captain Marvel canon. I was waiting for Endgame to find out more details about Carol, so it should be out in a few days. As ever, it wasn’t a few days but it is already posted.

Also, 50k hits! Thanks guys!
Directly after lunch, which Loki had spent curled up with Anthony discussing Angrboda’s and Brunhilde’s unexpected close acquaintance, Strange came over for his magical tutoring.

Loki had already decided the previous day it would be better to get the uncomfortable conversation about the Stones out of the way first, and so Anthony and Danvers were waiting in the communal space with him.

Strange looked a little surprised when he saw them, but inclined his head in greeting and settled himself on the empty spot next to Danvers on one of the sofas.

“Before we begin,” Loki started, “there is an important matter to discuss with you regarding our preparation for Thanos’ arrival. There is one weapon in particular that he searches for and that we have to ensure he never gets: Infinity Stones.”

Strange sat up straight, or rather even straighter. “How do you know about the Infinity Stones?” He asked sharply.

Loki blinked, as did the two Avengers present.

“How do you know about them?” He wondered.

Strange arched an eyebrow, in a clear indication of ‘I asked first’.

“Asgard has a large library,” Loki said simply. “I knew about them long before I became personally acquainted with the Mind Stone, and I have, in fact, had a chance to study the Tesseract when it was still in Asgard.” The he gave Strange a look that implied very clearly it was his turn now.

Strange shrugged. “Khamar-Taj has a large library as well, and for all you think it outdated, it does contain this information. What does Thanos mean to do with the Infinity Stones?”

“Do your libraries contain information about the Infinity Gauntlet?” Loki enquired.
“No,” Strange admitted.

Loki wasn’t surprised – honestly, it was a wonder they knew about the Stones at all. They must have gathered some truly impressive information over the years. “It’s a hypothesized device – but the theory is sound – that could connect the power of the Stones and give one person ability to use their combined potential. It would kill a human, but there are several species in the universe – including Thanos’, unfortunately – that would be able to harness the power and survive. He means to use the power to eradicate half the life in the universe.”

“What?” Strange barked.

“Yes, I am afraid so. At present we are trying to ascertain where the Stones are. We know the location of four: Mind Stone, clearly, the Tesseract, Aether, and the Reality Stone. Soul Stone and Time Stone are still missing. We have to find them and, unless they are well secured, protect them.”

“Do we have any proof of this beyond your word?”

Loki frowned at him. He should be used to being mistrusted, but from Strange it surprised him, on this level at least. The man agreed to learn from him, for Norns’ sake. He should trust him this far.

“If that isn’t good enough for you,” Anthony said sharply, “then there is the fact that it was Thanos who sent Loki here in 2012 to collect the Tesseract. Unless you think Loki just pulled the army out of his ass.”

Strange abruptly rose. “Forgive me,” he said quickly, “I must discuss this with the other masters.”

And he opened a portal, and he was gone.

The rest was left behind blinking in confusion.

“Well,” Loki said at length, “this is not the way I expected it would go.”

“No,” Anthony agreed, “neither did I.”

“Well, call me if he comes back,” Danvers muttered, getting up to leave the communal space. “I have some super babies to check in on.”

When she was gone, Anthony turned to Loki. “So,” he said, “it seems we have the whole afternoon free.”

Loki merely inclined his head, sensing Anthony had something particular in mind.

“I’m not sure how how much you keep track of our calendar,” the man continued, “but do you remember when you first came here?”

“Not exactly, but I do know it was some time during the summer,” Loki replied, thinking back. “It was warm outside.”

Anthony smiled a little. “Yeah...it’s pretty much been a year, so.” He paused. “Do you do anniversaries in Asgard?”

“Of course,” Loki replied, taken aback. Has it truly been a whole year for Anthony? A year in Loki’s company? Well, no, barely two months in Loki’s company taken all together, but still, spread out over a year? And still Anthony not only tolerated him, but actively sought him and was,
in fact, upset when Loki was not present? It was bewildering.

“Awesome,” Anthony said, oblivious to Loki’s musings. “So my idea was, I promised you the Museum of Modern Art, right? So phase one, we take in MoMA, maybe start with Guggenheim if we feel really full of energy given that Strange left unexpectedly early. Thoughts?”

Loki frowned a little. “I would enjoy that, Anthony, but would you?”

The man grinned at him. “Oh, totally. Contrary to the opera, which I don’t hate but don’t exactly like all that much, I actually like modern art. So yeah. Phase one is a go. Then after that I have a table booked for us in The Modern, which is a place right in the museum, so, you know, I thought it would be in style, even though I also wanted something really special and The Modern only has two Michelin stars, not three, so-”

Loki gently put his hand on Anthony’s mouth. “I am sure it will be lovely,” he said. “I like phase two. Are there any more phases?”

“Um.” Anthony leaned into Loki’s hand a little. “There’s phase three, potentially, which is coming back here and fucking like bunnies?” He muttered, phrasing it as a question. “If we feel like it, I mean?”

Loki smiled at that. “Oh yes, I like all of your phases immensely. When do we set out?”

“Now?”

By way of a response, Loki took his hand away and shifted into Shazad. Anthony grimaced a little. “I really wish that wasn’t necessary,” he muttered.

“I know, Anthony,” Loki replied, “and trust me, so do I. Shall we?”

He held out his arm, but Anthony put up his hands. “I need to get changed,” he said. “Give me five minutes? Ten, tops?”

“I will wait,” Loki replied simply, and leaned back into the back of the sofa. “FRIDAY, show me the location?”

It obligingly popped up in hologram form before him, and Loki studied it for a moment to make sure he knew where he was going before waving it off with a thank you.

It was a good thing he was in his Shazad form – though he supposed FRIDAY would have warned him if he hadn’t been – because Spider-Man and the girl Kamala walked around the corner not long after.

“That thing you did with your arm was so cool!” Spider-Man was saying. “I can’t believe-” he stopped himself when he spotted Loki. “Um, hey, Ms. Shazad,” he said. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“And I didn’t know you were here,” Loki replied with a smile. “’How are you two?”

“Good,” they both said in unison.

“And how is your training coming along, Kamala?”

“Oh, it’s awesome!” She enthused. “Being actually able to work with Cap-, I mean, Carol, and all the other cool people, and I saw actual magic a week ago and- hey, why don’t you ever train with
“I’m not part of the Avengers,” Loki pointed out.

“But why not? It would be awesome!” Spider-Man insisted.

“I have...somewhat of a contentious relationship with the powers that be,” Loki explained delicately.

Spider-Man frowned so hard it was visible even through he mask. “Like those people we fought at the airport?”

“No,” Loki said sharply. “Definitely not like that.”

“That’s all right then,” Spider-Man relaxed.

Kamala, on the other hand, was preoccupied by something else: “Wait, if it’s not like that...I know! It’s like in all those Loki and Mr. Stark fanfics!”

At both present men giving her a look, she flushed a little. “Um, so I guess mentioning that makes you uncomfortable?” She said to Loki.

“Not at all, actually,” Loki said with a grin.

“Really?” Spider-Man was looking at him strangely. “It’s not weird that people write stories about your boyfriend sha- um, dating someone else?”

Loki was saved from answering that question by Anthony appeared to rescue him like a knight in shining armour. “Kids, stop pestering my date,” he said. “Ready to be off, babe?”

Loki simply stood and offered his arm once more. This time, Anthony took it and let himself be teleported to the location FRIDAY had projected.

“Straight to MoMA it is,” Anthony muttered. “I guess FRIDAY had a point, better leave Guggenheim for a separate visit.”

Loki had very little idea what Anthony was talking about, but when he asked his lover simply waved him off, dragging him inside the large building they stood by. And he was soon distracted from thinking about it because they came in, the paintings were actually in front of him, and Loki was in love.

He knew immediately that he could spend hours, days, even weeks, probably, here, just looking. One of the first piece of art he came across was called simply “water”, yet Loki stood and stared at it for so long that Anthony had to pull him away, muttering promises that they could come back later, but that they really should take in more than one painting. The Red Sea painting reminded him of an Asgardian funeral so intensely that he almost cries right there, thinking of his mother. The Rorschach painting made him disbelieve that the man who painted it had never seen Yggdrasil in his life, and something called simply ‘A Modern Painting With Bolt’ had to be a mockery of Thor. It just had to.

And then, of course, there was that artist named Pollock, the one whose art Loki had admired already in the other gallery Anthony had taken him to.

Once again, Loki had to be dragged away, so that they made it to the restaurant on time.
“So, I take it you enjoyed yourself?” Anthony asked him with a grin once they were seated.

Loki gave him a reproachful look. “You know full well I have,” he said, focusing on the menu. “Thank you,” he added then, quietly.

“You’re welcome,” Anthony replied. “Now, for how it works here: we get a seven course menu, and mostly it’s predetermined, but for some courses you can choose, like if you want meat or vegetarian or stuff like that.”

Loki raised his eyebrows at this interesting concept, but nevertheless, he focused on the choices offered to him and was ready for his order when the waiter came. Anthony also selected some wine, a field in which Loki fully trusted him.

When they were alone again, Anthony said thoughtfully: “You’re really taken with Pollock, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I am,” Loki admitted.

“You know, I have quite a few of his pieces somewhere.”

Loki stared at him. “You what?”

“Yeah...I really liked buying that some years ago. They’re in storage.”

Loki’s incredulity only grew. “Why would you buy such beautiful pieces of art only to put them in storage? Surely their purpose is to be seen?”

Anthony exhaled heavily. “Yeah...like I said, it was years ago. I was a jerk back then.”

Loki frowned at that. “That does not seem like an adequate motivation to buy art.”

Anthony shrugged. “It’s a sign of prestige, you know? Having stuff like that.”

Loki was a little astonished to hear the sort of things he liked would be considered a sign of prestige, but nevertheless, said: “It can hardly be a sign of anything if you keep it hidden.”

“I knew I had it, didn’t I?” Anthony pointed out.

“Did you need to prove your own prestige to yourself, then?”

“I dunno.” Anthony seemed to be considering his own motives. “I guess I just liked having them...I collected a bunch of painters, but yeah, Pollock was one of my faves as well.”

Loki’s frown deepened. He contemplated this while the waiter took their order, and then commented: “I remember you telling me, when we first went to a gallery together, that you knew nothing about art.”

Anthony immediately gave a decisive nod. “It’s true. I don’t. It was always Pepper who understood these things. I just liked looking at them.”

Loki blinked, confused. “What else should be done with art?”

“Well, you know.” Anthony waved his hand in an attempt to somehow clarify his point. “You can know the names of the styles and how the artists relate to each other and what their different periods mean...”
“But surely all that is secondary?” Loki hesitated. “Of all the realms, this art would be closest to the Alfheim approach, and certainly there art is supposed to be primarily enjoyed, not studied.”

Anthony shrugged. “Maybe we’re different? Humans, I mean? I dunno. I was always happy with enjoying too, but like I said, I am no expert.”

“How much enjoying did you do if you put them in storage?” Loki couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, I couldn’t fit all of them on my walls, could I!” Anthony protested.

Loki gave him an incredulous look. “Anthony...there is no art on your walls.”

Anthony seemed taken aback at that observation. “I suppose you are right,” he said after a moment, as if he had to actually recall the look of his rooms to realise Loki was right. “After the house in Malibu was destroyed and then Pepper broke up with me and I sold the Tower, I just...I came here, and I didn’t really feel like putting up any of the art I still had. It feels like it was more Pepper’s thing. Like I said, she understood it better. It was time I stopped faking it.”

Loki frowned at him. “Did you mean it when you said that you enjoy looking at it?” He asked.

“Yeah,” Anthony confirmed.

Their conversation was interrupted as the wine was brought over, and Anthony busied himself with tasting it and thanking the sommelier.

They took their first sip, and after a short silence to enjoy the taste to the full, Loki asked: “Why did you stop buying art?”

Anthony shrugged. “After I became Iron Man, it just felt like another frivolous billionaire habit I should get rid of.”

Loki sighed. “Anthony...you are allowed beautiful things.”

Anthony only grimaced, taking another sip of his wine. “You know what?” He said then, perking up. “I should let you pick something! I’ll take you to my storage and you’ll pick the paintings you like and I’ll put them up in my rooms at the compound. What do you think?”

Loki gave him a look. “Anthony, they are your rooms. I should not be picking your decoration.”

“But you stay with me there whenever you come!” Anthony defended himself.

“Yes, but they are still yours three quarters of the time,” Loki explained patiently.

“Maybe, but one hundred percent of the time you’re here, they’re yours.” Anthony paused. “Oh my God, not just a hundred percent of the time you’re here! For you, it’s hundred percent of the time, period! Oh my god Loki I am so sorry!”

Loki blinked at him. “For what?”

“I should have let you make changes there ages ago! I’ve been forcing you to live in my space without even once thinking about—”

“Anthony, it is fine,” Loki reassured him. “Like I said, they are your rooms.”

“But I want you to be comfortable there!” Anthony insisted, clearly retroactively panicking over what he seemed to consider an enormous mistake. “I want you to like it there! I...well.”
Anthony looked away, taking another sip of wine, and Loki reached for his hand. “What is it?” He asked.

“It’s stupid, really.”

“I very much doubt it,” Loki said just a little pointedly.

“It’s just that I kinda like the idea of them being our rooms,” Anthony muttered, avoiding his eyes.

Loki looked at him, completely astonished by this little titbit of information, and slowly, a smile began to spread over his face.

He raised Anthony’s hand to his lips and kissed it, thinking of home again and feeling touched.

“Very well,” he said. “I will pick some paintings from your storage.”

The next morning, Dr. Strange came back to the Compound with a grim set to his face, and FRIDAY woke Loki and Anthony up by announcing he requested their presence.

Anthony groaned. “Send him and Carol to my rooms,” he muttered. “I bet it’s gonna be a private conversation anyway, and it’s better than blocking the communal space for everyone...though who’d be awake at this ungodly hour, I don’t know.”

“It’s eight AM, boss,” FRIDAY told him.

“Like I said, ungodly hour.”

Loki was normally awake at this time, but they had spent quite a long time last night enthusiastically celebrating their anniversary, and so it cost him some effort to drag himself out of bad, clean himself with a wave of his hand and conjure clothing.

“I’m so jealous right now,” Anthony muttered. “Can you do me as well?”

Instead of answering, Loki waved his hand again, and Anthony kissed him in thanks. By the time Strange reached the sitting room part of the suite, they were at the table there and Anthony was sipping coffee, courtesy of Loki’s conjuration once more.

Danvers was only moments behind Strange, and once they were all settled, Strange looked at Loki and asked: “Can you secure us against magical eavesdropping?”

Loki inclined his head and did so.

“I know the location of the Time Stone,” Strange said once he felt the magic settle.

Three pairs of eyes stared at him in mute astonishment.

“It has been kept by the Masters of the Mystic Arts for centuries,” he explained. “We call it the Eye of Agamotto, and it is the most powerful artefact in our keep. The most sacred oath we swear is to protect it. We cannot allow Thanos to get it.”

“Yeah, buddy, there are more important reasons to stop Thanos from getting it that your oath,” Anthony muttered.

“Yes,” Strange agreed grimly. “It would give him great power, even on its own, and combined
with the other stones, if what you say is possible...But I came to tell you that you need not search for it, and that the Masters will protect it at the cost of their lives.”

“Will that be enough?” Danvers, ever practical, asked.

Loki gave Strange a measuring look. “If they are prepared and Thanos is fighting on many fronts...how many of you are there?”

“About a hundred?” Strange ventured. “At least. I do not have exact numbers.”

“Then yes, it should be enough,” Loki confirmed. “Especially if I teach Doctor Strange a trick or two, and he passes it on.”

Strange indicated his agreement to the plan, and Anthony asked: “So the only Stone we don’t know about is Soul?”

Danvers nodded. “The next step,” she said, “is ascertaining what Thanos knows. We have already established that he probably learned about Power Stone and Xandar, and presumably he will find out about Reality and knows about Space?”

She directed the question to Loki, who inclined his head. “And Mind. Or rather, he will know that Mind is either on Earth or in Asgard. He might not know more than that, but that is likely enough.”

“So, in other words,” Danvers turned to Strange again, “is there a way he could know about Time?”

Strange hesitated. “It is a well kept secret,” he said, “but we did have our occasional rebels and renegades. Some of them could have spread the news, and it could have reached Thanos. And if he has someone who can enter other dimensions at his disposal, then possibly...Dormamu knows we have the stone as well.”

Loki whipped his head around to stare at Strange. “Dormamu?” he asked incredulously.

Strange smiled in that particularly bitter way Loki was more used to seeing on Anthony’s or his own face. “Yes,” he said, “unfortunately, some of those renegades were rather...fanatical.”

It took Loki a moment. “They tried to summon Dormamu?” He asked then with horror.

“Not only tried, they succeeded.”

“If they had succeeded, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” Loki pointed out.

Strange’s bitter smile returned. “That is where an Infinity Stone comes handy, yes.”

At first Loki understood it as simply rewinding the time before the summoning, but then he remembered that Strange had said Dormamu knew about the time stone. Which had to mean a different explanation.

This time it took him much longer, and when he did figure it out, his mouth actually fell open. “You...how old are you?” He asked then.

Strange shrugged. “I actually have no idea. You stop counting after a certain point.”

“Okay, what?” Anthony asked, clearly frustrated.

Loki only shook his head. “I am sorry, Anthony but it is unrelated to Thanos, and something that
should likely only be discussed between me and Dr. Strange. Suffice it to say that Thanos might know about the time stone as well, though not from Dormamu – not even his children are that insane. Now, if that is all, I would like to speak to Dr. Strange alone.”

The others looked a little confused, but nodded, and Loki led the way out.

Strange followed him, but as soon as they stepped outside, he lightly touched his shoulder. “I can’t remain to speak with you now, not for the time this would require,” he said. “I had to let the Avengers know the moment the Masters have decided I could share the information, but we have much to do in Khamar Taj with this new knowledge. The last time we knew of a threat, we neglected preparing any kind of defence, and our Sorcerer Supreme paid with her life. At this point we do not even have a Sorcerer Supreme, so...we need to be diligent.”

Loki reluctantly nodded. “But do come here later,” he said with emphasis. “This needs to be discussed.”

“Is it urgent?” Strange asked.

Loki considered. When he discarded his alarm at hearing the name… “Not truly,” he said. “Not in the same immediate way Thanos is.” Hopefully, at least. They most certainly could not take on both Thanos and Dormamu at the same time, but if Strange truly had done what he implied, then Dormamu should not bother anyone any time soon.

“Then I will come during your next visit to Earth,” Strange decided. “By that time, our first measures should be implemented, and I might have the necessary time to talk about this.”

Loki reluctantly agreed. It was true, after all, that he himself had plenty of other things to worry about.

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He and Anthony returned to bed after Strange left, to sleep for a while and then have the leisurely morning the aftermath of their first anniversary deserved, morning sex included. In fact, they only dragged themselves out for a late lunch, because Loki was too hungry to stay among the sheets.

Anthony ordered his usual piles of take-out, and everyone present in the Compound at the time gathered in the communal space to share it between themselves.

Which was when Vision appeared.

Upon setting eyes on him, Drew groaned. “Come on,” she said, putting her head on Brunhilde’s shoulder next to her. “I said I gave up on Maximoff, is it really necessary that I go back to the NY base? I like it here.”

Danvers poked at her from the other side, from where she sat on the armrest. “You don’t see me shirking my duties because I want to meet up with Jim,” she pointed out.

“It’s not just that. All right, it’s mostly that,” Drew admitted when Brunhilde squeezed her thigh, “but I also can’t stand Maximoff and Rand and have very little in common with Thor or Jane, so…”

“It truly might not be necessary any more,” Vision interjected, coming closer to them. “I will discuss this with Tony. But first, I wished…” he hesitated a little. “Loki, may I speak with you?”

Loki was a little surprised, but inclined his head. “I needed to talk to you as well,” he explained as he rose and followed Vision to his room. “Any trouble with the Mind Gem?” He asked once they
were inside.

“No. It is a problem of a more personal nature. You gave me good advice before, so I thought...” Vision trailed off.

“Of course,” Loki said, though he was, in truth, even more surprised. He wasn’t famed for giving good advice, except for when it came to strategy, politics and diplomacy – and then it was usually good advice no one listened to. “May I sit?”

“Naturally, forgive me. I am...anxious about this discussion, I suppose.”

Loki tried to think about what Frigga would have said. “Can I make it easier in some way?”

“No, I do not believe so.”

There was a short silence.

“Would it perhaps be better if I said what I needed to say first?” Loki wondered.

Vision looked unsure, but gestured with his hand for Loki to continue.

“My information is about the Gem,” Loki began, and then summarized the entire horrifying plan of Thanos’ once again, and all the plans and decisions the Avengers had made so far.

“Are you certain destruction of the Stones would be dangerous?” Vision asked him when he was finished, in an entirely too placid tone of voice.

Loki frowned at him. “Vision-”

“Perhaps it would be best,” Vision mused.

At that point, Loki gave him a very stern look. “If the Avengers ever considered this, and that would only be as the last resort, I am completely certain that unless in the heat of battle, it would be only after finding a way to preserve your consciousness in some way. There would likely be no way to preserve your powers if the Stone was destroyed, but from what I have seen, I am almost certain that Anthony, with the help of some of his other scientist friends, would be able to recreate your mind.”

“As you have said, there might not be time for that,” Vision pointed out in the same placid tone.

Loki felt woefully out of his depth, but at the same time his mind kept – very unpleasantly – going back to a certain moment above the rainbow bridge, or more accurately, just off the bridge. He would have never believed he could see any aspect of himself in an android created on the basis of the Mind Stone, and his own decision to...let go had been mired in overwrought emotion, not this kind of placidity, but in spite of all that, in Vision’s quiet acceptance he could see exactly the place his mind had gone after Odin told him “no”.

So, with the knowledge that there Vision did come to him to talk after all, he quietly asked:

“Vision...do you wish to die?”

“Given that I am not, technically speaking, alive, dying is not the proper term,” Vision replied evenly.

Loki only gave him a look.

“I do not so much wish to die as I am dubious about the point of my continued existence except for
my direct involvement in Avengers business, which is rare enough,” Vision explained after a short silence. “I would not actively try to permanently end my consciousness, but I do not consider the idea of it ending any great loss. Especially as, if it was to be preserved at the cost of my powers, I would lose the chief reason for existing.”

Loki took a moment to take that in, trying to find the best approach to untangle it. “Is this why you wished to talk to me?” He asked.

“No,” Vision replied. “I do not consider that a particularly significant fact.”

Loki was quite certain this was a textbook example of what Anthony would call a red flag. He filed it away for now, and asked: “What did you wish to discuss, then?”

The android took a deep breath. “It is about Wanda.”

Yes, Loki had rather feared so. “Has something happened between you?”

“No, not exactly,” Vision said slowly. “Or at least it is not any one thing. There are more and more friction points between us, and lately I have been wondering if it was reasonable to keep the relationship, if I am not causing her more pain than benefit.”

Loki almost smiled, thought here was nothing remotely humorous about the situation. But it had been a very long time since he gave relationship advice. Recalling his talks with Fandral from his youth, and doing his best to be a little more objective now and put his feelings about Maximoff aside, he said: “That has to be her decision, Vision – or yours, if you decide to end it for your own sake.”

“I understand that, but what I need is an advice regarding whether what is happening between us is normal or usual in relationships, or if it is serious ground for concern.”

Loki exhaled. “I can try to help, but you should know that Anthony is my first long-term relationship, and even there, it has only been roughly two months for me. I might not be the best person to give advice in this.”

Vision inclined his head. “I have considered that your experience might not be regular, but of those available to me, only Jane Foster, Colonel Rhodes and Captain Danvers seem to have something approaching a normal dating history. I do not wish to speak to Jane, for she lives with Wanda. The Colonel and the Captain are possibilities I have considered, and I might consult with them later, but I do not know her very well and he is here so rarely that I do not wish to take away from his time with his girlfriend, so I decided to speak to you first.”

Loki wondered why Vision said he hardly knew Danvers even though she’d been living at the compound for over half a year. If it was he who avoided her, or she who avoided him. “I will do my best to assist, then,” he said simply.

“As I have said,” Vision began, “I believe I might be causing Wanda more harm than good. We are frequently at odds.”

“What do you argue about?” Loki wondered.

“She feels I do not enter into our shared activities with enough enthusiasm, and that I am not...creative enough in coming up with ways to spend time together.” Vision hesitated. “I do try,” he explained, “but I suspect my nature limits me in how successful I am.”

“Have you told her that?”
“I have.”

“And what was her reaction?”

Vision seemed to hesitate once more. “She did not react much,” he said then, “She often does not listen to me.” He frowned at his own phrasing. “I do not mean that in the sense of obeying me,” he clarified, “I would not expect that and I realize that there are gendered connotations which.”

Loki interrupted him by putting up his hand. “I realize you inherited JARVIS’s programmed voice and so we all call you ‘he’,” he said, “but apart from that, do you think you even have a gender?”

Vision was clearly taken aback at the question. “I...assumed I was a man? Everyone treats me like that, or approximately like that...”

Loki sighed. This was whole another topic he was woefully unqualified to discuss, especially as it concerned Midgard. “I am not sure what the human understanding of these matters Is precisely,” he said, “but I have come across terms like agender or genderless in my time here. Perhaps that could be something for you to find information on, at some point? It might be relevant for you. But even if you do end up identifying as a man in the end, you were not exactly raised with the accompanying expectations, so I wouldn’t worry about you mistreating Wanda based on your genders. But I have interrupted you, forgive me. Please continue.”

Vision inclined his head. “What I mean when I say she does not listen,” he went on, “is that she frequently does not take my opinions into account. It makes sense, I suppose, since I have so little experience with the world.”

This was still communicated in Vision’s even tone. Loki, on the other hand, was gradually tensing. “Does this happen regarding things she does, things that affect you, or things you do?” He asked.

“Thing she does, things that affect me and things we do together,” Vision clarified.

“As in, you suggest something to do and she ignores you?” Loki probed.

Vision blinked at that. “That has been the issue between us, as I have said: I suggest things only rarely.”

“And when you do...?”

“Wanda is usually unhappy with the sort of thing I suggest. As I have said, she sees a lack of creativity there.”

“Very well,” Loki muttered, though it was not well at all. “And for the things that affect you? You tell her you dislike something she does, for example, and...?”

“Again, I do that only rarely. I do not have opinions about most things, after all, or not strong ones.”

And wouldn’t that just be the perfect partner for someone like Maximoff. Loki resisted the urge to rub his eyes. “So when does this disregard of your opinions arise, then?”

“From time to time, she asked me my opinion on various things she did or we did together, while complaining about the lack of enthusiasm, as I have said. Frequently my opinion was not wholly positive, if it existed at all. That tended to upset her, so I now do my best to avoid sharing my thoughts on such matter.”
All sorts of alarms were ringing in Loki’s head now. He hesitated, but he simply had to ask: “Does this concern your sexual life as well?”

“No,” Vision said perfectly evenly, “but that might only be because she never asked there, and I naturally never share any impressions of my own.”

The alarms were blaring now, and Loki very carefully asked: “Why is that?”

“I do not have much interest in sex,” Vision replied. “I do not mind it, but the only reason for me to do it is because it pleases Wanda. So it is perfectly indifferent to me what we actually do, therefore I can do whatever she wishes.”

“All right...” Loki said slowly. “Does Wanda know this about you?”

“She is aware, yes. We assume it is an effect of my non-biological origin – I have no reason to have a sex drive. It does not bother me to have sex with her, but it is one of the reasons for her complaints about my lack of enthusiasm.”

“Hmm.” Loki was severely out of his depth and knew it. This was more than unique. “Is there something equivalent on her side?” he asked at length. “Something she is indifferent to, but you enjoy doing, and so she does it with you?”

“No,” Vision said simply.

Loki took a deep breath. “And your worry here, if I understand it correctly, is that you are making her unhappy?”

“Precisely.”

“Vision...as far as I can tell from your side of the story, the fault absolutely does not lie with you. I would recommend you end the relationship, yes, but for your own sake. Wanda is using your inexperience to her own benefit in a manner that is frankly disturbing. I know this is not what you expected to hear, but...please think about it at least? I will consider what you told me in turn, and perhaps we can return to this topic tomorrow, or at some later date?”

Vision seemed extremely taken aback and about to protest, but Loki put up his hands. “Please,” he said. “Just consider it. At least until tomorrow. Will you?”

Vision slowly inclined his head, and with an exhale of relief, Loki speedily left his room. He had to talk to Anthony, and perhaps to Bruce. The other man could have some useful therapeutic advice, but chiefly, what was needed was ensuring that Vision did not return to the New York base.

Chapter End Notes

That escalated quickly. When I sat down to write this chapter, I had no idea Vision would come down and say all that...but here he is.

The gallery date was fun to write, I browsed the MoMA catalogue and thought about stuff Loki would like!

I really hated the implication in Iron Man 1 that because Tony doesn’t know what Pollock’s Springs period was named after, he doesn’t know shit about art and is faking
his interest. Like, he’s clearly not buying it as an investment because Pepper tells him it’s overpriced and he doesn’t care. And he’s not buying it just to be a snob who boasts he has a famous painterTM because he actually knows what painter he is talking about and all that. For me, the only remaining option is that he actually cares about the art, but has been made to feel like he can’t. So, here you go.
Loki had meant to go to Anthony first regarding Vision’s situation, but when he encountered Bruce in the corridor, he decided he should not ignore signs from the Norns.

“Do you have a moment for me?” He asked.

“Of course,” Bruce said immediately, turning his steps towards his room. “You want to continue the conversation about Asgard’s incredible physics defying qualities?”

Loki grimaced a little. “No, sorry. Or rather, we may, but primarily I need something else.”

“Sure,” Bruce said, now looking surprised and confused, and opened the door to his room.

They settled down, and Loki considered the fact that he was likely breaking a confidence for a moment, but this was an emergency, or at least he fully believed so.

“I just spoke to Vision,” he began.

Bruce nodded. “Yeah, I did hear him say he wanted a conversation.”

“Of course.” Loki had completely forgotten their departure had been public. He considered how to continue. “He told me many things, most of which I will not share,” he said at length, “but there is one I believe I need to tell at least someone, someone who does not spend only one week out of three in Midgard. Vision...showed an alarming lack of will to live.”

Bruce frowned. “How do you mean?”

“He said he did not wish to actively end his life, but showed complete indifference to its ending, and in fact implied slight preference for it,” Loki explained.

Bruce’s frown deepened. “Just out of curiosity, why did you come to me, specifically, with this?”

It was Loki’s turn to frown. “Because I understood from Anthony that while you are not a mental health expert, you are the closest to such a person among the Avengers.” Was he wrong?

“I’m really not,” Bruce said, sounding slightly exasperated, “but that’s fine. I just wondered if Tony’s been...babbling.”
“Babbling?” Loki enquired with a raised eyebrow.

Bruce gave a long exhale. “I did walk into that one, didn’t I? Well. I suppose you must have seen at least hints of this when you were in my head, so no point tiptoeing about it.” And before Loki could tell him that he was under no obligation to tell him anything, Bruce continued: “I tried to kill myself some years ago, before the Avengers were formed. The Hulk was what saved me, though he was also what drove me to that point, so my gratefulness here is not exactly overwhelming.”

“Ah.” Loki thought of a broken bridge, an adoptive father’s disapproving face, and the endless void below him. And the monster that had saved him. “That does bring some of Anthony’s hint into context,” he said simply. Namely, the times Anthony had insisted that while all the Avengers would be sympathetic, Bruce would be the one who would understand the most.

Bruce only nodded. “At any rate,” he said, “I do have enough medical knowledge to have something relevant to add to this, I believe. Chiefly...Vision does not produce hormones, nor anything that would simulate them. So if he is depressed – suicidal, even – it is not endogenous.”

Loki furrowed his brow at the word. The All Speak translated it for him, but he was still uncertain of the meaning in this context. “I am not sure I follow.”

“There is a form of depression in humans that is caused purely by internal factors,” Bruce explained. “Quite simply, the body does not produce enough serotonin – the happiness hormone – for the individual in question to be happy. But that will not be the case with Vision.”

Loki ran that through his mind. “Can Vision even experience happiness, then, given that under normal circumstances it requires hormonal support?” He wondered.

“Good question,” Bruce acknowledged. “But he does do things beyond what we would expect from a purely utilitarian AI, like his entire relationship with Maximoff. He must have some motivation for those.”

Loki grimaced. “I am not sure to what degree it was purely manipulated into existence by her, but yes, he does appear to care about her to some degree.”

Bruce sighed, taking off his glasses to clean them. “Yes, I’ve thought about that before. Tony doesn’t like discussing it, but...JARVIS was programmed to take care of him. I think Vision retains very strong protective tendencies from that. I think it’s a little like...how the way someone was raised influences them later in life. And I think he focused these protective...instincts, for the lack of a better word...on Maximoff.”

Loki inclined his head in agreement, but then his eyes widened as an idea occurred to him. “Do you believe,” he asked slowly, “that this caring for others might form the purpose of his existence?”

“I am not sure I follow.”

“He confided in me that outside of Avengers mission, he does not feel there is much point to his continued existence, which is likely related to him feeling he is worsening, not improving, the quality of Maximoff’s life. Could this, do you think, be related to JARVIS’ original programming?”

“Yes,” Bruce said slowly, “it very well could. It might have even been the reason why he got together with Maximoff in the first place – whatever I think of her, she definitely needed help, so...”
Loki nodded. “I will not go into details,” he said, “but from what he told me, I fully believe the relationship is detrimental to his mental health.”

Bruce mused about that for a moment. “He should relocate back here, permanently,” he said. “There are more people here that might perhaps distract him or give him a sense of purpose, at least in some small ways. We can keep an eye on him.”

Loki was entirely in agreement. “I wonder if that will be enough,” he thought aloud. “As much as I consider it necessary as well, his removal from Maximoff might potentially make him feel worse. I do not suppose you can think of any particular ways he could regain his purpose?”

Bruce shrugged. “Working with the Avenges helped me, but he’s already doing that, so...”

“He should definitely go on as many missions as possible,” Loki said, thinking aloud. “He does not tire, anyway, so it should not be detrimental. He could also be asked to create solid mental shields for all of the Avengers – it can only be useful, and no one can do that as well as him. But I would rather not tie his whole identity to the Mind Stone powers, so...”

“If he is anything like humans in this, he needs social ties, first and foremost. He needs to be certain he is wanted here, and that people would miss him if he disappeared.”

“And would they?” Loki asked pointedly. “Beyond missing his powers?”

Bruce grimaced. “It’s true that given his...specific personality, he does not truly have friends here, perhaps aside from you, which, as you’ve said, is of limited usefulness when you are gone a large portion of the time. How long do you have left?”

“I leave the day after tomorrow in the early morning,” Loki replied grimly, and Bruce groaned.

“All right,” he said, “never mind then. No point in rushing this. I will try to think of something, and in the meanwhile, to at least make sure he is kept occupied. The shields are a good idea in any case.”

“I will speak to Anthony,” Loki replied. “But now, if neither of us has any more ideas about Vision, I believe there was a scientific conversation we needed to finish?”

That evening, Anthony contacted both Sikorski and Magneto. The councilman was told the situation was urgent and needed personal attention, and so the next morning, they were treated to the man's presence in the Compound.

“You tend to do your best to keep me away from here,” Sikorski observed once they were settled, “so I'm actually rather worried.”

“And with a good reason,” Loki agreed heavily. “But first, I am afraid this will require even further spellwork.”

Sikorski frowned at him. “More Asgardian secrets?”

Loki gave a small shake of his head. “No. This time, it is a secret of Thanos,” he explained. “The key to his plan, and therefore extremely sensitive information. We need to make sure no one whose mind is not protected against magical interference knows. So this will require another geas, as well as creating a mental shield. When you consent, we will call Vision here to take care of it.”
Sikorski gave him a measuring look. “And if I don't consent?” He asked at length.

Loki gave a careless shrug. “Then the preparations will continue without anyone from the Council being the wiser. Do not forget, Councillor, that I am not, in fact, under your jurisdiction.”

Sikorski raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, I am never quite confident in how in accordance with those under whose jurisdiction you are your plans are, so...”

Loki grinned. “Both entirely and not at all,” he replied completely truthfully.

Sikorski exhaled. “I was rather afraid it was going to be something like that, yes.” He paused for a moment. “Under normal circumstances, I'd insist more of us needed to know, if only because something might happen to me, but the last time you looked for volunteers in the Council to be put under a geas, I was the only one willing, so... But I will insist that if more of them are willing to be put under the geas, you will bring them into your confidence.”

Loki gritted his teeth. He didn't like it, but he didn't have a leg to stand on when it came to his protests apart from his bad feeling. He knew it, and from the look Anthony gave him, he knew it too, and so Loki reluctantly nodded.

“Call Vision, then,” Sikorski said simply.

After that, it was quite straightforward, and within the hour, Sikorski was leaving with a promise to contact the Avengers later regarding security.

With an unexpectedly free day on their hands, Anthony remembered his idea from their date. “Let's go for a road trip,” he said, standing up and clapping his hands, looking at Loki.

Loki blinked up at him from his sitting position. “Come again?”

“Not a long one, obviously,” Anthony elaborated, sitting back down, “but... My storage is in Jersey at the moment. We can take it through some great places on the way, you know, nature and stuff. I'll take you for a ride in one of my nice cars, which I can’t believe I haven't done yet. You'll pick the paintings you want, and we go back a different way. What do you think? ”

Loki, he had to admit, was intrigued. He could easily teleport them to the location and they would be there and back within the hour, and part of him was saying that that is what he should do, that he should try to speak to Vision once more before he left the next morning, that he needed to arrange so many other things...but on the other hand, he had not take more than an evening off for so long, the draw was irresistible. Especially when Anthony’s puppy eyes were added to the mix.

And so they went.

Loki had to admit the car was, indeed, very impressive, and while it apparently couldn't fly – something Anthony bemoaned – it was otherwise fully comparable to Asgardian transport.

“I can't believe I haven't build a flying car yet,” Anthony was muttering. "What have I been doing with my life?"

Loki let him muse about that while he considered the topic he needed to bring up. After a moment, he determined that there was no way to soften the blow, and so he simply said: "I do not think Vision should return to the New York base."

Anthony gave him a quick look before focusing on the road again. "Jessica won't be happy about
that,” he pointed out after a moment.

Loki gave a small sigh. "I didn't say she should return instead of him. Their presence there is not truly necessary, is it?"

"No, but it would basically leave Thor alone with Maximoff,” Anthony pointed out. “He wouldn't be happy about that.”

"That is indeed a problem that needs solving, but not at the disproportionate cost of one or two Avengers,” Loki said a little chidingly.

Anthony gave a long exhale. "You're right,” he said. There was a short silence. "What did Vision say to you?"

Loki looked at Anthony out of the corner of his eye. The man had his eyes fixed on the road with an intensity that made it clear it was very purposeful. “I do not believe he would wish me to disclose most of it,” Loki said slowly, “but he needs companionship and a purpose, and he does not find that in New York.”

Anthony hesitated. “He was at the Compound half the time already, I’m not sure...”

“Can you try at least?” Loki asked.

Anthony turned with the explicit purpose of frowning at him. “This has to do with Maximoff, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but Anthony please do not push me to break confidence.” Loki knew perfectly well Vision would mind Anthony knowing anything much more than he would mind Bruce. “Just trust me that Vision should be relocated here, and that Maximoff should be dealt with otherwise.”

“Will he agree?”

Loki exhaled. “That...is a question, yes. I hope he will, but...it might take time.”

Anthony only nodded, and they concentrated on the road and the countryside around them for a time.

Anthony hadn’t been exaggerating, it was beautiful. They went around lakes and rivers and through forests, and though Loki had never been a particular nature enthusiast, he was still used to seeing more of it than he had since he took on the role of Odin. It was...refreshing.

Anthony stopped in a few places, to take in the nature at a closer distance, and compensated for it by the periods on the highway where he used the maximum speed potential of his car. They stopped for lunch at a hut on the edges of one of the forests, Loki temporarily taking on the form of Shazad, and as they sat down with their hot dogs – a name that would never stop seeming strange to Loki – Anthony muttered with his mouth full: “So, is this a good time to explain the soul stone versus mind stone stuff to me?”

Loki had completely forgotten about that. “I can try, at least,” he said. He considered the best way to phrase the matter, then began: “In a way, souls are the prime example of the saying that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. All living creatures have some kind of mind. Usually it is very primitive and cannot process anything more than the basic survival-related matters, but it still is a kind of mind. They do not, however, have souls.”

“You’re lucky I am not an animal lover,” Anthony muttered.
“Well, considering the way Thanos means to use the stones, this is actually good news for animals,” Loki said drily. “They, at least, would survive his plan intact, as long as we discount all those who depend on sentient life for their survival.”

“Which is an awful lot of animals,” Anthony pointed out.

“Fair point.” Loki shrugged. “In any case, this might simply be a problem of translation. I do not know the connotations of the word for soul you have in English...”

Anthony shrugged. “We don’t really know what it means either, to be honest. But what you’re saying is one of the interpretations, so yeah, I guess it makes sense that the All-Speak translates it this way.”

“You can use a different word for it if you wish,” Loki said with a wave of his hand. “It is not my intention here to make any...metaphysical claims. But what the...orange stone, let’s call it? What the orange stone affects is sentient beings, in short.”

Anthony mused about that for a moment. “So...once a mind becomes complicated enough, there actually is a new quality which appears out of nowhere for the soul stone to influence?” He asked then.

“Effectively, but in truth it is the potential for this that is enough for a soul to be present,” Loki clarified. “Think of babies, for example: as they are, they are not exactly capable of any greater feats of thought than animals, but they will be one day, and that is enough.”

Anthony spent another moment in thought, finishing his food and washing it down with some soda. “From what you say...Vision must have a soul, right?” He asked then.

“Of course,” Loki said, taken aback by the question.

“So...isn’t it weird that it was the Mind Stone what gave it to him?”

Loki gave him a look. “Anthony...it wasn’t the mind stone what gave Vision a soul. It was you.”

Anthony choked on his gulp of soda. “What?” He asked, coughing.

“Yes,” Loki said, discreetly waving his hand to clean the droplets of the brown liquid that had landed on him from Anthony’s coughing fit. “JARVIS had potential, though he might not have reached the stage of full sentience for decades, perhaps even centuries, more. But that means the soul was already there. The mind gem only helped him realize the potential.”

Anthony put his elbows on the table in front of him, staring. “I create AIs with souls?” He asked again, incredulously. “Is FRIDAY the same?”

“Yes, but she is in very early stages of development,” Loki explained. “A newborn, if you will. Her potential will likely not be realized for a very long time...but yes, she must have a soul.”

Anthony was completely flabbergasted.

They got back into the car in complete silence, and the rest of the drive they kept to the highway, with no extreme feats of speed, as Anthony was clearly deep in thought.

They arrived at their destination in the early afternoon, and Anthony pointing it out were the first words he spoke in over an hour.
It was an enormous building among other enormous buildings, and once they entered it, Loki could see that it was absolutely packed with things. “All of this is yours, and you do not use it?” He asked incredulously.

Anthony looked deeply uncomfortable with the question. “Yeah, I...used to really like getting stuff.”

Loki could only shake his head. Asgard had its royal treasury, which served a similar purpose, but it was nothing compared to all this material one man had gathered. Asgard was opulent, but it was not wasteful in the same way Midgard could be.

“Well,” Anthony said, sounding rather embarrassed, “the art’s over there.”

He led Loki through the narrow lanes among piles of boxes and things that were left unpacked towards shelves full of wrapped paintings. Fortunately there were labels on the shelves, alphabetized, and Anthony soon nodded to one section. “Pollock,” he said simply. “Take your pick. Anything else, too, if you wanna look though it.”

They began to unwrap the paintings. Loki knew it was going to be difficult as soon as he saw the first one – they were all amazing, and he was sure he could never make a pick.

That was, until Anthony unwrapped the penultimate painting.

“That one,” Loki said immediately, as soon as he saw it. “I want that one.”

Anthony smiled a little. “Of course you do,” he said. “That’s nr. 5. It’s really only sheer luck that it wasn’t in Malibu when the house exploded. It’s the most valuable painting I own – one of the most valuable ones in the world, to be honest, going by what I paid for it.”

“Well, you have it here?” Loki repeated himself, now even more incredulous.

“Well...it had a lot of bad associations for me, for...a complicated array of reasons. But looking at it now, I think I’m gonna be fine.” There was a pause. “Yep. Definitely fine. Anything else you want?”

Loki cast a longing glance at the other works by Pollock.

“Do you want all of them?” Anthony asked him with a grin, clearly amused.

“I do not wish to clutter your walls...” Loki said hesitantly.

“It’s fine. We can take all the Pollocks, there isn’t that many of them anyway. Anything else?”

Really, Loki did long to look through the rest, but he also felt that he had imposed on Anthony and his preferences for his room quite enough. “This will do for now,” he said simply.

“Then let us ride back!” Anthony called with a winning smile.

They did. Anthony put on some music – originally, he tried to go for classical by Loki’s preference, but after a short argument he put on something he called “classic rock” and that Loki, already used to this unusual kind of music, was actually able to enjoy relatively well. They mostly didn’t talk, only sometimes commenting on something they were passing.

It was...pleasant. Relaxing.

Loki could feel it in himself, and he could sense it in Anthony too. The man had seemed tense after
the revelation about his AIs, and then uncomfortable in his storage, in spire of the bright grins he had tried to plaster over his face. But now, sitting in a fast car on a highway in afternoon light, listening to his favourite music, Loki could almost see the discomfort seeping out of him.

Darkness gradually fell as they left the main roads, but Loki knew there was still an hour or so of the journey ahead of them when when Anthony turned onto something that was not a road at all, but more akin to a dirt path.

He gave Anthony a quizzical look in the dim light of the dashboard.

"I thought we could get out for a moment and enjoy the solitude before we get back,” Anthony suggested, opening the door.

Loki followed without an argument, and they settled on the hood of the car next to each other.

Anthony leaned back, then chuckled. “You can even see stars from here!” He said, as if it was something very strange, then added with a grin: “Can you point out Asgard to me?”

Loki looked up at the sky, did a few quick calculations and realignments in his head, and pointed.

Anthony blinked at him. “What?”

“You wanted me to show you Asgard,” Loki said, confused in his turn.

“Yeah, but...how can you know where it is?” Anthony insisted. “How can you recognize it among the hundreds other stars, when you’re looking at it from a completely different angle?”

Loki gave him a look. “Do you really believe that finding my home from every realm I could access would not be one of the first things I would learn to do when I started to travel?” He shrugged. “One is curious, and likes looking for familiar things. There is Vanaheim just a little to the right, and Alfheim all the way there to the left...”

“Seriously?” Anthony seemed completely fascinated, as if trying to peer through the night sky and thousands of light years to spot some details of the distant systems. “Wow, this is the first time I actually find stargazing interesting. I am totally getting a telescope, and I’ll get you to tell me our scientific names of all these stars of the Yggdrasil planets so that I can check them out...Can you point out Jotunheim as well?”

Loki did, and as Anthony put his head on his shoulder, began to talk about how their instructors taught them how to find Asgard in the skies and orient themselves when they first stepped out of Asgard. “It was only to Vanaheim first, naturally,” he muttered, “the safest of all realms...”

He trailed off, and they sat in silence for a while, before Anthony turned to kiss him.

It was slow and languid for a while, but then, as Anthony slid down tot he ground and turned to stand between Loki’s legs, it turned more heated, and soon Anthony was pawing at Loki’s trousers, impatiently trying to get them out of the way.

Loki obliged with a wave of his hands, and Anthony grinned at him and kissed him again.

It turned out the car was exactly the right height, and they arrived to the Compound only much, much later, when everyone else was already asleep.

All in all, it was a most successful day.
Unfortunately, in spite of that lovely day, the next morning, it was still time for Loki to leave.

Loki had given his goodbyes to everyone but Anthony the previous night, because they met with Magneto and Mystique so early it was barely light outside to arrange the departure.

“Before we get to the trip to Jotunheim,” Anthony said once they met in the middle of an industrial zone that their usual method of establishing places of their encounters generated, “there is one other thing to discuss. Maximoff.”

Magneto frowned. “What about her?”

“She is alienating her last friends among the Avengers,” Anthony said bluntly, “and best I can tell, there’s soon going to come a point where there won’t be any place under our jurisdiction where she’d be both accepted and willing to go. I’d like nothing better to just send her to you, but unfortunately I do have that pesky thing called responsibility, plus the Council would kill me.”

Magneto did not seem to care overmuch about the opinion of the council, to no one’s surprise. “So what do you suggest?” He asked flatly.

Anthony sighed. “I know you want nothing to do with that pesky Accords business, but would you maybe consider striking some kind of a deal for Wanda’s sake? So that they don’t lose their shit if we do let her stay with you, and I don’t have to lose sleep over what villainous plans you’re hatching?”

Mystique seemed amused by that. “And you think an agreement with the Council would be enough to prevent the second?” She asked.

Anthony pointed his finger at her. “No, but see, then it wouldn’t be my problem any more, it would be the council’s.”

Loki wondered whether his lover expected that to be a believable argument. Mystique might fall for it, but he very much doubted Magneto would.

Indeed, the man gave Anthony a sceptical look. “Leaving that aside,” he said then, “are you certain my daughter would agree to this? We are not on particularly friendly terms.”

Was there anyone Maximoff was on friendly terms with, Loki wondered.

Anthony seemed to be asking himself the same question, as he gave Magneto a surprised look. “I thought you’ve been meeting?”

“We have,” the man conceded, “but the meetings haven’t been exactly cordial.”

“Huh. So you don’t want her either?”

Really, sometimes the bluntness was refreshing, but sometimes Anthony truly should control himself better, Loki mused.

“I did not say that,” Magneto replied sharply. “But I will not enter negotiations with the Council only to then be rejected by her.”

Anthony gave a long exhale. “I’d tell you to deal with your family issues on your own time, but yeah. Under the circumstances...All right. World security and all that. I will send someone to float
the question by her, though I’m afraid you won’t avoid the discussion entirely.”

Magneto inclined his head. “We will discuss this further once you have some kind of answer for me,” he said. “If that is all, can we move to the subject of Jotunheim?”

Anthony and Loki exchanged a look, then both nodded.

Magneto looked at Mystique by his side, who took a step forward to take charge of the conversation. “First, when would I be coming back?” She asked.

“Either in a few hours or in a few weeks,” Loki said.

She frowned at him. “These are the only options?” She asked.

“Yes,” Loki replied simply. “Unless, I suppose, you can talk my contact there into bringing you back, but I cannot guarantee it. I have other matters to attend to when outside Midgard, and time passes differently in Jotunheim. Much slower. Unless you can be satisfied within an hour or so, I will not have the time to come back for you sooner that what equals about three Earth weeks.”

Mystique considered that for a moment, then half turned towards Magneto, saying: “I can’t decide that in advance.”

Magneto frowned. He clearly didn't like it, but there wasn’t much he could do, because Mystique was right. “Very well,” he said. “You know how to contact me – I assume the travel will not destroy electronic devices or anything of the sort?”

“No, but the cold could,” Loki replied. “If you will allow me, I could protect it.”

Rather reluctantly, Mystique gave him her phone, and Loki waved his hand over it before returning it to her.

“Call me when you get back, and we will come to pick you up,” Magneto reasserted.

Mystique nodded. “What should I expect?” She asked Loki then.

He shrugged. “Snow, ice, and locals who look much like you, only intersex. The one I am bringing you to, Angrboda, is relatively friendly, but also very powerful, especially magically. Do not offend her under any circumstances.”

“Jotuns can do magic?” Mystique asked, surprised.

“Not usually,” Loki clarified, “but she has some elven blood. Anything else you wish to know? We should be going, and I am afraid I do not know more about Jotunheim than what I’d already told you.”

Mystique shrugged. “I suppose this will do,” she said.

“Bring her back in full health, or you will regret it,” Magneto said grimly.

Loki had to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. “You asked for this journey, did you not? Angrboda is the one person I trust most on Jotunheim, but that is not saying much. I am relatively confident she would not harm Mystique without a reason, and I can promise I will not. That is the most I can give you.”

Mystique gave a sharp nod. “That is good enough for me.
Wordlessly, Loki extended his hand, and Mystique took it.

Loki had already bid Anthony proper goodbye before they’d left the Compound, so at this point he only exchanged nods with both men before he teleported himself and Mystique to the nearest portal and then stepped between worlds.

And then, they were in Jotunheim.

Mystique looked across the dark expanse of the planet, her eyes widening as she took it in.

“This is...amazing,” she muttered.

Loki smiled a little. He remembered thinking as much when he first came here. “Wait until you see it in daylight,” he told her. “But now, take my hand again, please. We must head to the appointed meeting place.”

Taking one last look around herself, Mystique did as he bid her, and in one quick teleportation they were at the spot Angrboda had showed Loki. Loki took out the painting and brushed his finger over it. “We are here,” he said.

In no more that two or three minutes, as Mystique was looking at the landscape once more, fascinated, Angrboda appeared.

They took one look at Mystique, and instead of a greeting, began to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger!

I thought long and hard about how to explain souls. What you got here is basically official Christian theology, and believe me I am super uncomfortable with making it the “objective truth” in this story, so I tried to get around that with language explanations etc. The thing is, Infinity War made it obvious that plants (except for the sentient Groot) were not affected by the snap, and at the very least we didn’t see animals dying. So while Thanos says he will eradicate half of all life, it seems clear to me that he can only control the sentiment life. Thus my leaning towards this interpretation, even though in the comics the souls stone can absolutely control all kinds of life, be it sentient or not.

The bit about Tony finally seeing the point of stargazing was inspired by me discovering some purpose in it once I figured that, based on the new Star Trek films, Vulcan would have to be somewhere near Vega, so now I’m always waving at Spock.
Angrboda took one look at Mystique, and instead of a greeting, began to laugh.

There was a rather tense silence.

“If you would explain what is so amusing,” Loki said tensely when it went on for some time, “perhaps I would be less inclined to test my magic and Mystique’s fighting powers against you.”

Angrboda clearly did their best to stop themselves, but it took them some time. When they were finally finished, they said, still a little out of breath: “It is just that you, Lady Mystique, look very much like your Jotun parent.” The they turned to Loki and said with a grin: “Prince Loki, meet your half-sister.”

“What?” They both barked.

“You’re half-Jotun?” Mystique asked incredulously.

Loki waved his hand. “I can explain later, next time we are on Midgard. Now I want answers from them.” He turned to Angrboda. “This is all a little too convenient to be believable,” he said in a hard voice.

Angrboda, however, shook their head, casually shaping ice to make chairs for the three of them to sit down. “There is nothing accidental about it,” they said, growing serious as she settled, gesturing at the remaining places. “Skywalking, as you know, is a rare ability. In our generation, Farbauti was the only one who possessed it naturally, and they were able to teach me and one other mage, with much effort on our parts. That is all. As far as I know, there is no one in the younger generation who can do it – the realm has fallen into disrepair, as you know, and so there are no good systems for finding the children who have the potential in place – and in the generation before us, there were two who knew the skill, as far as I am aware. Unless Lady Mystique was a daughter of some wayward Jotun who was stranded on Midgard, there was a good chance she would be Farbauti’s daughter, but still. It is, I have to admit, amusing.”

Loki was not so certain of that. He was also not so certain he had ever wanted to know his birth mother’s name, or anything at all about her, but now that the information was here, he could not make himself turn away.

Especially as Mystique would no doubt wish to know, which she proved immediately by sitting down and asking impatiently: “You knew my father?”

Angrboda shrugged. “Not all that well. Farbauti was my distant relative, as it happens with nobility – everyone is related to everyone else. But it was before Jotunheim fell to its present state, and so any magical ability was carefully searched out and nurtured. Skywalking was much sought after,
even before Asgard took the Casket of Ancient Winters from us and so destroyed our ability to easily travel between worlds in large numbers. Farbauti was roped into teaching anyone who showed any potential, be they noble or common.”

Mystique seemed taken aback at the phrasing. “Roped into? Did he – they – not wish to help?”

Angrboda shook their head. “Farbauti wasn’t enthusiastic about their magic, in spite of the enormous natural talent they had. They enjoyed the comforts it offered, all the ways in which it made their life easier, but resented any responsibility that came with that. They resented responsibility in general, in fact – thus why you never heard from them despite them being one of your parents, no doubt. Perhaps more of us could have learned skywalking had they been more devoted to teaching us, but they resented it.”

“They could travel between worlds,” Mystique said incredulously as Loki leaned on the back of his chair in interest, still too mistrustful to sit but too curious to pretend otherwise, “and they preferred to spend their time doing...what?”

“Ensuring the most comfort for themselves, as I have said,” Angrboda explained patiently. “They spent their youth scheming to become the royal consort, which they achieved. Of course, not that long after that the war with Asgard came, so it wasn’t exactly all they’d hoped it would be. After the war, when Laufey began their slow descent into madness, Farbauti could have done a lot to keep the realm afloat, but they simply did not care. In fact, when the throne lost the ability to offer them anything, they effectively disappeared. I assume they live on a different realm now. Technically, they were the consort until Laufey’s death, but no one had seen them here for a long time before that.”

“Well,” Loki said drily, “at least I do not have to worry that knowing about my biological mother would take any love and respect away from my adoptive one.”

“Mother?” Angrboda said with a raised eyebrow, turning her eyes from Mystique to him. “My dear Loki, if there is one firm rule concerning Jotunheim rulers, it is that they always carry their own heirs, so that there can be no doubt about the child being theirs. Farbauti wasn’t the one who bore you. Laufey was.”

For a moment, Loki could not comprehend what he had just heard.

His head was suddenly spinning, the world seemed to be going dark around him, and it took off of his focus to let himself fall into the chair behind which he’d stood, instead of to the ground.

He stared into the distance, unseeing.

Laufey...had been his birth mother.

He knew it should not change anything, that it hardly mattered with the Jotnar, that he was imposing Asgardian ideas of gender on them, but knowing all this did little to lessen the way he felt.

He had not killed his birth father, he had killed his birth mother.

Somehow, the idea was completely insupportable.

“Farbauti would never agree to birth a child in any case,” Angrboda was saying above him. “There is too much discomfort involved.”

Mystique was asking some more questions about her parent, but Loki did not hear her.
He could only think about that little fact over and over again: he had killed his birth mother.

The idea of a father was, in Loki’s mind, forever entwined with Odin: firm, demanding, always dissatisfied, a liar, a manipulator and a hypocrite. As much as he would likely not be able to actually kill Odin, the idea did not sit all that badly with him. Killing Laufey had not been hard when he’d thought of them as his father, because there were no personal emotional ties to him and the idea of patricide was not, in principle, so repulsive to Loki.

The idea of matricide, on the other hand…

Mothers were Frigga, patient and understanding and compassionate, always forgiving, with a spark of mischief in their eye.

Killing one’s mother was impossible, insupportable. He still felt immense guilt over the mere idea that his directions during the Dark Elf invasion might have contributed to Frigga’s death in any way, and the thought that Laufey…

Norns really did have a sense of humour.

He sat there for a long time, his thoughts chasing each other, before he heard Angrboda address him and raised his head: “I am sorry, what?”

“I said, your ally wished to return to Midgard now to contemplate what I have told her, before she considers coming back. Will you take her?”

“Yes, of course,” Loki said weakly, getting to his feet, and extended his arm to Mystique, transporting them to the gateway to Midgard. “I would appreciate,” he said once there, gathering some of his wits and trying to focus, “if you did not speak about my parentage. It is not widely known, though Tony Stark is aware, and I would prefer if it stay that way.”

“I will consider it, as long as you tell me why you never told me,” she replied curtly, and he could see anger in her eyes, even beyond all the wonder of discovering this new side of her heritage.

He shrugged, and opted for partial truth: “It wasn’t particularly relevant – whatever my blood, I was raised in Asgard with all the prejudices against the Jotnar. I knew little of their culture that I could tell you, I was honest in that.”

After some consideration, she nodded. “I suppose that if you really do hate them – and yourself – as much…and Angrboda did confirm we really were hated in the wonderland you come from…you did relatively right by me. In spite of your clear worry when you first saw me, you did your best not to spew any of that racist bullshit Angrboda and you had both hinted at. So I will tell Magneto about you,” she concluded, “but it needn’t go any further.”

Loki had expected this much, so he simply inclined his head. “It is mostly Anthony Stark you should thank for preserving you from some of that…racist bullshit, as you said,” he felt compelled to add. “He made me see many things differently.”

Mystique raised an eyebrow. “I’ll be sure to give him my thanks.”

Without commenting further, Loki took the necessary step to Midgard, dropping Mystique’s arm and, with two simple spells, returning to Angrboda.

They were waiting for him at their home, as he’d expected. They let him in and led him to their kitchen once more, where they offered him a drink and gestured at their table. They both sat in silence for a while, then Angrboda observed: “You think too much like an Asgardian.”
Loki didn’t bother to try and pretend he didn’t know what they were talking about. “I am aware,” he said simply, “but that doesn’t help me any in overcoming it.”

Angrboda simply inclined their head in understanding. “Now,” they said, “I believe you owe me a trip to Nifleheim.”

“I do,” Loki acknowledged, “but I have duties in Asgard during the day. I will return here when the night falls there, and we will discuss the next step.”

Angrboda frowned: “I suppose I have no choice but to trust your word,” they muttered.

“I did come here as I promised, did I not?” Loki asked.

“Because you needed me to talk to your ally,” Angrboda pointed out.

Loki shrugged. “And now you know about them, and if I stood you up, you could go to Midgard and find them in order to get back at me for breaking my word – or really just to mess with someone who is connected to Odin in some way. It seems we will have to trust each other once more.”

Rather reluctantly, Angrboda agreed.

Loki knew he had a busy day ahead of him. He had been neglecting and postponing his duties for the last few Asgardian days, unable to cope with them, but now he had no choice. He had hoped a long stay in Midgard would revitalise him, but of course, he had not counted on Angrboda dropping another bombshell, as Anthony would say, on him. He had rather hoped they were out of them by now.

So he pushed everything behind his mental shields and got to work, checking over the weapons delivered from Nidavellir and meeting with his spies from Alfheim.

As lunch break was approaching, Loki sent a text message to Anthony to announce his estimated time of arrival. That way, when he appeared on Midgard, he was able to step right into the man’s arms.

They simply held each other for a moment, Loki relieves to be, for the time being, somewhere he was relatively safe. "How did it go in Jotunheim?" Anthony asked once he withdrew a little to look up at him.

"Well enough," Loki replied. He considered talking about what Angrboda had revealed, but he knew that if he opened that wound, he would need more time than he had to close it, and so he decided to leave it for the next time he could actually visit for longer. "Mystique returned here almost immediately, but I assume you know that," he said instead, loosening the embrace further.

"I do," Anthony confirmed, dragging him over to the sofa. “And Hela?”

"I haven't spoken to her yet – it was Asgard time,” Loki explained.

"Oh, right.” Anthony shifted a little uncomfortably as Loki drew him to his side on the couch. “Thanks for coming here in between,” he said quickly, “and I hope it didn't throw too much of a wrench in your day. I wouldn't want you to -" 

Loki put the hand that wasn’t around Anthony’s shoulders on the man’s mouth to stop him. "Coming here is beneficial for me as well,” he said. "I have told you that, and I haven’t been lying.”
Anthony didn’t reply, but Loki could as good as hear his objection.

“I haven’t been doing it all along because it increases the chances of discovery,” he explained patiently. The he hesitated and added more quietly: “Also, lately, because it is very difficult for me to leave even after a week with you, let alone after just an hour or two.”

Anthony exhaled, and gave him a hesitant look out of the corner of his eye. Loki drew his hand from Anthony’s face to caress his face lightly.

“I am here now, though,” he said, and he could see Anthony pulling himself together. It was not, perhaps, ideal – he would prefer Anthony did not feel he had to hide his insecurities – but it was still true that their time was limited, and it was perhaps better if it was not all spent in exposing vulnerabilities.

Anthony leaned into him fully and they just sat there for a moment before Loki asked: “How is it going with Vision and Maximoff?”

Anthony sighed. “Vision has agreed to stay at the Compound, though I’m not sure it was for any sort of right reason, since he’s kept to himself ever since. With Maximoff, it’s more complicated. I had Jessica try and sell the pitch of joining Magneto, but Maximoff doesn’t look thrilled. She’s now loudly declaring that leaving Rogers was the worst mistake she’s ever made, but not enough to leave and go into hiding again, I don’t think.”

“Do you have any further plans in place?” Loki asked mildly, not wanting to sound like he expected Anthony to, but needing to know.

“Honestly, unless she calms the fuck down, I’ll just have to go through the Council,” Anthony said, frustrated. “You know, telling them there is no accommodation for her that would be agreeable to both her and us and no team wants her among them. The Council actually has the power to make her do something. As long as they have Strange to watch their back,” he added, muttering.

Loki nodded. “I will have to speak to Vision,” he said then.

“You need rest,” Tony opposed.

“I do,” Loki agreed easily, “but that will have to wait. Now, would you prefer me to go there now, or just before I leave?”

Anthony sighed as he considered, but then muttered: “Later.”

Loki nodded against his head, and pressed him even closer to himself. “Tell me what you did while I was gone,” he said. “Something...pleasant, or amusing, not Maximoff and her issues.”

Anthony thought for a moment, then began to speak of a dinner he had with Pepper and how they had a waiter who was new at his job and was so nervous at seeing Anthony that he kept making amusing mistakes in their order.

“And we had fish so I ordered Pinot Blanc, and the poor guy brought us Pinot Noir, and I felt so sorry for him I’d have probably taken it, but Pepper is made of tougher stuff—” Anthony was saying, and Loki was chuckling lightly as his hand was caressing Anthony’s side. He wasn’t looking at him, though, he was looking at the walls, which were now lined with Pollock’s paintings. Loki hadn’t have the time to hang them before he left the last time he had been here, but they were all present and accounted for now, making the space that much more beautiful, and that much more...his.
“You hung the paintings,” he muttered when Anthony finished the story.

“Um, yeah, sorry if it’s different than you imagined it,” Anthony said immediately, “you can change it any way you want, just, you know, I thought it would be nice for them to be here when you came back-”

“They are perfect,” Loki assured him, and Anthony settled down, continuing with a story about James, who was at the Compound at the moment and so Tony had been catching up with him, so there were second-hand army stories told in Anthony’s very amusing manner, and Loki could feel his unwillingness to return to Asgard as an almost physical thing.

Nevertheless, when the time came, he dragged himself away with only one searing kiss, and went to see Vision.

“Have you given any thought to what we have discussed?” He asked directly, skipping any social pleasantries, since to the best of his knowledge the android had no appreciation for them.

“I have,” Vision said. “Firstly, I have done research and I have determined that I am likely genderless, as you have indicated, though I do not care what pronouns are used for me, since I do not attach it any significance. A secondary result of that research was the realization that I am indeed aromantic and asexual and that my preferred form of relationship would likely be a queerplatonic one. I admit I was surprised to discover humans had a concept like that.”

Since Loki had no idea what it meant and All Speak was being mostly unhelpful, he did not want to delve too much into it, but he did ask: “Do you know what that means for your relationship with Wanda?”

“I have determined that this being the case, I am indeed doing her more harm than benefit, because I cannot give her what she needs. That is why I agreed to stay out of New York,” Vision said in his usual even tone.

Loki wanted to curse, long and hard. Instead he just took a calming breath and asked: “And have you considered the other things I have told you?”

“I have,” Vision conceded, “but I do not see how I could blame Wanda for wanting what is normal in humans.”

Loki frowned. “Do not focus on you not being human so much. Trust me, how you came to be is less important than how you were raised.” He did his best to keep his bitterness to a minimum, keenly aware this was not about him, but was not sure he was actually successful. “Additionally, you said just now that you discovered that there were humans who had preferences just like you. Imagine if Wanda dated some human her age, which I believe is young enough to not quite understand this about themselves, and gradually they
came to discover what you discovered. What then?"

Vision considered. “Wanda would have the full right to break up with them,” he declared then.

Loki almost rolled his eyes. “Yes, she would, because anyone always has the right to break up with their partner for any reason. But that is not what happened with you.”

Vision was thinking again. “I have never protested any of the things we did,” he said at length, though it sounded a little tentative. Perhaps Loki was getting to him.

“But that is not true,” he argued. “You told me that when she asked your opinion, you frequently expressed your dislike, and she was upset with you for it.”

“I never expressed it so strongly she would have reason to believe I never wanted to do them again,” Vision argued, and Loki felt like beating his head against a wall.

“She still should not have been upset with you about it,” he pointed out.

“I...suppose that is true,” Vision conceded.

Finally, Loki could barely stop himself from saying. “I am sorry I cannot stay much longer to talk with you,” he said instead. “But please promise me you will think about this aspect of it some more. Take the fact that you are not human entirely out of the equation for now, because it is not relevant.”

“I will do my best.”

“That’s all I ask,” Loki replied, and in that moment, he really did feel like Frigga.

He knew Anthony had no desire to say goodbye again, so he teleported to an abandoned spot in the middle of a Midgardian forest to do some calming exercises from his youth before he returned to Asgard.

Because what waited for him in the afternoon, he knew, was the most exhausting task of all – another meeting with the Vanaheim sorcerers including Uncle Frey, spanning the whole afternoon.

Loki felt completely drained at the end of it, and not at all up to a tense conversation with Angrboda, which was why he send Anthony a text message in warning and then dropped for a short visit at Midgard once more.

Anthony was in a less melancholic and more energetic mood this time around, and welcomed him with an enthusiastic bout of sex. When the lay together afterwards, Loki feeling sleep pull at him, he asked in a low voice: “Has anything new happened concerning Vision?”

“No,” Anthony told him, carding his hand through his hair. “There’s nothing urgent. You can rest for now.”

Gratefully, Loki closed his eyes. “Send someone who understands issues of gender and sexuality to speak to him,” he muttered, “and wake me in two hours.” And then he let sleep take him.

Anthony obligingly did. Loki felt like he could sleep for a week more, but nevertheless, he dragged himself out of bed and dressed with a wave of his hand.

“I am not sure when exactly I will be able to make it back,” he said. “I am about to go talk to Hela, and it’s going to be unpredictable, but hopefully it should be in another week or so of your time.”
Anthony only nodded. “Be careful,” he said.

“I always am,” Loki replied truthfully, and bid him goodbye with another kiss.

- Angrboda was waiting for him. “You are late,” they said flatly, standing in the door.

“A little, yes – I apologize, but I needed to recharge,” Loki said firmly, unwilling to be shamed for that.

They nodded at that after a moment and led him inside.

“Now,” Loki said once they were settled. “Before he proceed any further, I need to know: do you wish for revenge on Asgard?”

Loki did not simply assume they would tell the truth, naturally, but hopefully their reaction would tell him *something*.

And it did, the surprised and almost sorrowful look on their face. “Asgard,” they said, “was my home for close to twenty years. I might hate Odin passionately, and some of the other members of the court as well, but I would never wish evil on the entire realm.”

Loki slowly nodded. It made sense, and it fitted well with everything they’d said and done until now. There was the evidence of long friendship with Frigga, there was Brunhilde effectively vouching for them. With a heavy heart, Loki decided to take the risk.

“We will go to Hela,” he said, “but before we set out, I need to tell you why I am not afraid of Odin finding us out.” He smirked a little, he could not help himself, even with how nervous he was to reveal the secret willingly for the first time. “Odin sleeps in Odinsleep for now, my spells preventing him from waking. The one who rules Asgard in his guise at the moment is...me.”

Angrboda stared at him for a moment, then began to laugh once more.

“Oh but this is perfect,” they said when they caught their breath. “So perfect. It is the most perfect revenge. Do you mean to let him wake again?”

“I had planned to,” Loki said honestly. “But after what you have told me, and Brunhilde as well...I do not know. I do not wish to kill him, but...I do not believe he should be allowed to return to rule either. I will have to think about this carefully, since the very last thing I want is spending the rest of my days as the king of Asgard.”

Angrboda nodded in understanding. “This will, indeed, made out travel to Nifleheim much easier,” they said then.

Loki inclined his head. “Shall we, then?”

Instead of replying, Angrboda rose, and they took his offered arm.

The travel through Nifleheim was as unpleasant this time as it had been before, and made all the worse for Angrboda’s clear distress. They had not expected their daughter’s prison to be comfortable by far, but seeing it for themselves was still different, and Loki could feel their anger rising.

Not that he blamed them.
Hela must have been similar age when she had been locked up here as he had been when he let go of the Bifrost. Odin really did have an amazing track record, did he not?

Finally, they were as close to Hela as it was possible to get, and Angrboda called in a broken voice: “Hela? My darling?”

The face Loki was already familiar with appeared, but it seemed a little out of focus, and asked in an uncertain tone: “Mama?”

Before Angrboda could say anything, however, the tone got firmer and sharper. “This is a low trick even for you, Odin,” she said in a poisonous voice. “If you think I will fall for this-”

“It truly is me, darling,” Angrboda interrupted in a soft, broken-hearted voice that made Loki feel like he was intruding on a very private moment. “I know Odin told you I was dead, but...he lied to you, my precious. He lied to you, they all lied to you. It is me. Ask me anything, anything at all.”

Hela scoffed. “Is there anything Odin, with all that all-seeing at his disposal, would not know?”

Angrboda smiled a little, though their eyes were wet with tears. “You know the secrets you whispered to me when I promised you I hid us from all spying eyes, when you were a little girl still. Ask about those, my darling.”

The illusion of Hela’s face gave an evil eye to Loki.

“I am sorry,” he said, putting up his hands. “I would leave you to your privacy, but I am not actually sure your mother can stay here without my help. Apart from keeping you in, your prison was build chiefly to keep her out, after all.”

Angrboda confirmed this, and Hela seemed to hesitate for the shortest moment before she said very quietly, with a sort of desperate hope in her voice: “What did I want to be when I was little?”

Angrboda’s smile broadened at the question, even as tears started to flow freely down their face. “Teacher,” they whispered. “You wanted to be a teacher.”

There was short, astonished silence, then: “Mama,” Hela said once more. “It really is you.”

“Of course it is me, darling. I am here. I am here now, and everything is going to be better.”

They talked and talked, and Loki did his best to stand unobtrusively to the side, but he was still there, and he listened very carefully, trying to find out what he could about Hela.

Everything supported Angrboda's version of the story, which was one important aspect, but he was also interested in tracking Hela’s mental state.

It seemed to be...changeable.

At times she was completely lucid, but she also had bouts of what seemed fanatical, insane desire for revenge, ones Angrboda always tried to calm, rather successfully if Loki was honest.

It was also very interesting to know that when Angrboda asked how she survived with her mind mostly intact for over twenty years alone, Hela told them that she “made friends”.

Apparently she could raise the dead, and while they were not excellent company, they were better than nothing.
Mostly intact might have been overstating it a little, but really, all things considered, her mental state was excellent.

He listened as Hela entered one of her ravings about burning the realms once more, and then listened even more carefully as Angrboda said: “You do know that is what Odin wanted, do you not?”

Hela scoffed. “No. He turned from what was our right, he turned from what was owed to us-”

“Later, yes,” Angrboda interrupted. “And for entirely selfish reasons, I assure you. But before that...this is what he tried to have me killed for.”

The illusion’s eyes widened. “He tried to have you killed?” She asked incredulously.

“Oh yes,” Angrboda confirmed with a bitter smile. “I knew he wanted to conquer Jotunheim – conquer my home, which I loved – and I tried to stop him. So he turned on me, and sent assassins after me.”

Hela looked like someone stole the ground from under her feet. “You...wanted to protect your home?”

“Of course I did.”

“It was me who led the armies to Jotunheim in revenge,” Hela whispered after a moment in horror.

“I know, darling,” Angrboda said softly.

“How could he!” Hela screamed, startling Loki after her previous soft tones. “I will kill him, I will tear him apart, I will-”

Angrboda and Loki both stayed silent, letting her rage. In this, at least, her anger was completely justified.

When she wore herself out, she still repeated quietly: “I want to kill him.”

Angrboda sighed. “I know, my precious. In truth, so do I. But...it might not be feasible.”

No, Loki did not think he would allow that, but a plan was beginning to sprout in the back of his mind. He needed a motivation for Hela to cooperate, after all, to try and be reasonable. “What would you say,” he began slowly, “to locking him up in this prison instead of you?”

Identical smiles of malicious glee bloomed on mother’s and daughter’s faces.

“Oh,” Hela said softly, “I like that. I like that very much. That is better than death, yes. Let him rot for eternity.”

“Is impossible promising anything, mind you,” Loki cautioned. “I have to think this through, and discuss it with my allies. But at a first glance, I like this plan.”

“Who are you?” Hela asked him, as if only now paying him proper attention.

“The son of one of my best friends,” Angrboda interjected before Loki could say anything. “He is also very magically powerful, and has some unique access to Asgardian resources. Yes, if the two of us work together, I do believe this plan might be possible.”

Hela, however, was frowning. “Why does he have access to Asgardian resources?” She asked with
clear disdain.

Loki shrugged. “Another result of Odin’s lies. Not one he’d ever hoped for, I don’t doubt, but then that is simply unfortunate for him, is it not?”

He knew if he went through with the plan, he would have to tell Hela his identity, but there was time for that. First he needed to answer the biggest question here, which was whether Hela was sane enough to be released from prison, even under Angrboda’s influence. So far, he leaned towards no, but it might improve in time. And time was exactly what they needed to give her.

“We need to be leaving,” he told Angrboda, and they reluctantly agreed.

“I will come back,” they promised Hela. “As soon as I can, I will come back. I give you my word, my precious.”

Hela slowly nodded. “You, at least,” she said, “have never betrayed me.”

Chapter End Notes

The morning I wrote the conversation with Vision, I woke up to a gatekeeping discourse on one of the discord servers I’m a member of, so I’d just like to dedicate this chapter as a one big fuck you to gatekeepers of all sorts and, in honour of Vision, especially to those assholes who try to claim ace and aro people don’t have a place in the lgbtq* community.

With Farbauti, I really don’t want to succumb to the racist stereotype of “all Jotuns know each other”, but going with my worldbuilding bit about mages in Jotunheim being rare but valued, and Jotunheim probably having a pretty low population density given it’s not exactly rich in resources, it really did seem like it would greatly increase the chances of mages knowing each other, plus Farbauti and Angrboda both must have been whatever kind of “high society” Jotunheim had to be in the positions they were in, so these things taken together made it relatively reasonable to my mind that two very talented mages would know each other, and I did want Loki to inherit his magical powers from someone, so I did want Farbauti to be a powerful mage, and of course Angrboda had to be to evade Odin.
When Loki came back to Midgard, it was the middle of the night, and he hesitated a little as he appeared in the Compound. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with Anthony, but...would he be welcome, like this, without warning? He thought of the Pollock paintings on the walls, of Anthony speaking of ‘their rooms’ during the last date, but...he was still unsure.

“FRIDAY?” He asked hesitantly.

“Yes?” Came the immediate reply.

“Do you believe Anthony would wish me to join him in his room, or...”

“Boss told me to let him know the moment you arrived, even if he was asleep at the time, so he’s coming to greet you now,” was the answer, and right on cue, Anthony appeared in the doorway of the communal space.

“Hey, Lokes,” he said, his voice rough with sleep.

“Anthony,” Loki said simply, coming to greet him with a kiss.

“Can we go back to bed, or is this some kinda emergency?”

“There is no emergency,” Loki reassured him. “We can sleep.”

“Good,” Anthony muttered, and dragged him to his – their – bedroom, getting under the covers without another word and curling around Loki’s side.

It didn’t take Loki long to fall asleep, exhausted as he was, and he woke late to Anthony already sitting up at his side, looking at his tablet.

The moment Loki shifted in a way that clearly indicated he was awake, however, Anthony turned to look at him with a smile. “Good morning,” he said. “I hope you caught up on your sleep a little. How much time to you have?”

“About three days,” Loki replied, sitting up. “Two and half now, I suppose.”

“That’s better than I expected,” Anthony said, looking genuinely pleased. “Do you have anything
Loki considered the question. “I do have some ideas and plans I need to discuss,” he said slowly, “but they can wait for a time.”

“Good,” Anthony said with a smile, putting the tablet away and turning to straddle Loki. “Because I certainly have plans for you, and I’d much rather not wait.”

Instead of a reply, Loki kissed him. It escalated quickly, and as he deepened the kiss and pulled Anthony closer to himself, he found that he was in the mood to be in charge. He kept being blindsided by new information, there were too many variables in his plans, and the foundation of his identity were being destroyed over and over again. He was tired of it. He wanted to actually be in control for once.

He squeezed Anthony’s ass, hard, and when Anthony moaned in appreciation, broke the kiss to growl: “I remember you saying that you’d kneel for me.”

Anthony gulped, a little theatrically. “Sir yes sir,” he replied, and slid to the ground on Loki’s side of the bed.

Loki looked down on him kneeling there for a moment, and had to forcefully remind himself than contrary to their previous foray into these waters, Anthony was now the one in a vulnerable position, and so he could not simply count on his magic ensuring nothing unpleasant happened.

“If you want to stop,” he made himself say, “tap my knee.”

Anthony nodded, and Loki swung around to brace him with his knees, then stood up and simply gestured at his crotch impatiently. Anthony gave him an insolent grin, but swallowed him down in one go, and Loki carded his fingers through Anthony’s hair, feeling the world settle around him as he draw himself in for the first thrust.

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After, Anthony ordered them some brunch and Loki recounted what he’d learned from Angrboda, both about Laufey being the one who gave birth to him and about Hela, and the journey to Niflheim. Anthony, as Loki had come to expect and, if he was honest with himself, rely on, was supportive throughout.

“Fuck,” he said after Loki revealed the information about Laufey and Farbauti. “I mean, I know mothers aren’t saints and it’s not fair to expect them to be anyway, but just...asshole dad, nice mum, I’ve been there. I get you. And to imagine...just, fuck.”

“Angrboda was right,” Loki pointed out, “it is projecting Asgardian gender roles. And Midgardian and Vanir a little, too, I suppose.”

“Who cares?” Anthony asked. “You were raised with these, and it’s your fucking parents. You have the right to feel-” He trailed off, and Loki pressed his hand, knowing Anthony was thinking of watching that video in Siberia.

They lay in silence for a moment, then Anthony muttered: “That Farbauti must be a real piece of work.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “If I never meet them, it will be too soon. Odin and Laufey provided quite enough asshole parents to last me a lifetime.”
Anthony was kind enough not to point out that Loki didn’t really know how much of an asshole his biological...mother...was.

Anthony was also practical when it came to strategy, so when Loki finished talking about his visit with Hela, he asked: “What are you planning? I can see you are planning something.”

Loki smiled at that a little, even though he should perhaps be disquieted at being so easily read. “I am thinking of Hela’s power, the power that was able to destroy the entire Asgardian elite corps...and thinking how it would measure against Thanos,” he admitted freely.

“You want to have them destroy each other?” Anthony asked curiously.

Loki grimaced. “Not exactly. It is a possibility, and it does not bother me enough to be overly concerned, since she undoubtedly is a piece of work, but...Odin is mostly to blame for what she is, and if I could, I would see her free from her prison and alive both. I want to use her against Thanos, to make use of all the pent up aggression she has accumulated in over twenty years in solitary prison, but after that, I want to see if she can live.”

Anthony hesitated. “Can you risk that? If she is this powerful...”

“That’s what I needed to discuss with you,” Loki pointed out.

Anthony considered. “I think you should mainly run this by the Valkyrie,” he said.

Loki grimaced. He was not looking forward to making that suggestion to her, but unfortunately, Anthony was right. He did owe the woman that much. After all, it was only thanks to her that he knew to stop Hela at all. And if he didn’t consult her and she found out, she would almost certainly kill him.

“As for my personal opinion,” Anthony continued, “Hela’s paid for her crimes. I mean, twenty something years in solitary would be enough to pay for pretty much anything, if we can even talk about being tortured as any kind of paying for something, instead of just, you know, fucked up shit. But in a normal situation, if she was human, the thing to do would be to get her treatment at a high security hospital to take care of her mental health, and then put her out there on some sort of probation. Is that...doable?”

Loki sighed. “I cannot exactly get her treatment, but...I could perhaps try to find a way for Angrboda to go there as often as possible, even without me.” He grimaced a little. “I’d probably have to eavesdrop on their meetings – I don’t trust them enough to leave them alone with Hela – but yes, that might help. Perhaps even...Brunhilde used to be her friend when they were young...”

“And then Hela killed all of her friends, and her girlfriend to boot,” Anthony interjected. “We are not forcing her to make up.”

Loki put up his hands as much as he could lying in bed, realising how close to home that must have sounded to Anthony. “Of course not. But if she showed a desire to talk to Hela, I wouldn’t prevent her, even if she might just spend her time cussing at Hela. It might be helpful on some level.”

Anthony thought that for a moment. “All right. But then instead a high security facility, you want to throw her at Thanos,” he pointed out.

Loki sighed. “I know it’s not ideal, but...”

Anthony mirrored his sigh. “Yeah, I gotcha. Some wars, you just don’t pull your punches.” He paused. “After Thanos, though? If she survives?”
“We cannot just let her roam free, not immediately at least,” Loki said slowly. “In fact, I’d probably have to get an agreement out of her before we attempt any kind of release that she would consent to be bound...I might need some magicians’ help with this, but it should not be impossible to find a way, even with how her power is connected to Asgard...”

“And asking her will give you a good indicator of her mental state, because if she is rational, she will see how it is necessary,” Anthony added.

“She might also just agree to bind her time,” Loki pointed out, “but yes, you do have a point.”

There was a short silence. “What about Vision?” Anthony said then. “He could look inside her mind and see if we could trust her, could he not?”

That...had actually not even occurred to Loki. He should be used to how advantageous it was to have allies by now, really, but sometimes different aspects of it still took him by surprise. “Yes, he could,” he said hesitantly, “but I would need Hela’s consent for that, too.”

“Of course...but it is a way to be sure.”

“Reasonably sure, yes.”

“Only reasonably?” Anthony seemed surprised. “I thought you say Vision can do pretty much any mind stuff with that stone, and that he was already pretty much fully trained with it, at least in theory?”

“Effectively, yes. There is a possibility of creating a mind shield combined with offensive magic that would either attack Vision or destroy the mind of the person being read if the shield was breached, but that is the only way to consciously defend against him. However, if Hela’s mind is more or less gone...it might be difficult to discern exactly what her intentions are. It is still worth a try, however.” It could also be used on Angrboda, which was even better, since Vision was probably the only being in the universe Loki would trust to read that mage’s mind.

“Awesome,” Anthony declared. “So, provided the Valkyrie and Vision both give you the green light, what do you mean to do exactly?”

“That is still in the planning stage,” Loki admitted. “But I do think it would be best to let her out of prison the moment Thanos comes. It will require some very careful planning, especially as I intend to lock Odin up in there instead of her.”


“Yes, I rather thought so as well. But making this plan possible will take some doing, some time, and a large amount of cooperation.”

Anthony nodded and pressed his hand. “Well, you can count on me, and I’m pretty sure Carol will be game if, you know, all those green lights go through. I know our usefulness is limited, but we will do what we can.”

Loki smiled at him and leaned in for a kiss, moved beyond words.

With Anthony’s idea in mind, and wishing to check on his mental state, Loki went to see Vision in the early afternoon.
Once he entered the android’s rooms, he had to fight not to show any surprise.

He was used to Vision looking as a humanoid male sans genitals. What he saw now, however, was the most perfect balance between male and female body type that he had ever encountered even among his lovers and acquaintances on Alfheim, with their skill at magic.

“So,” he said when he collected himself, “I gather you changed your mind about passing as a man?”

“I spoke to Jessica Drew about the problem,” Vision replied in the same voice as before. “She explained some of the structures of oppression this society is mired in. I gathered, from her explanation and my own research, that my keeping my male form was contributing to this system of oppression. I considered taking on a female form, but I am not a woman, and besides, I wished to keep my voice as a sign of respect for JARVIS. So I designed this body instead, and went to Dr. Cho to make some adjustments. I also believe I will ask any new people I meet to use feminine pronouns for me, to counterbalance the masculine voice.”

Loki hesitated. This was outside his very limited experience in these matters, but he did feel he should say something. “I am not certain that is the best reason...should you not choose the ones that fit you best?”

“I did not lie to you last time we talked: I truly do not care, but this seems it could have better consequences,” Vision explained. “You insist I should not focus on my inhumanity overmuch, but the fact remains that I am not human and my experiences are not the same as a human’s. I chose the identities that were closest to how I feel out of what the human experience has to offer, but as I understand it, it is still going to be different, and so the same rules will not apply to me.”

Loki had to concede that point. “Any human experience is unique, in any case, from what I understand,” he pointed out, “but yes, you are probably correct that yours is even more so. Should I start calling you ’she’, then?”

“No,” Vision replied, shaking his head. “As I said, I do not truly care, and I do not wish you to have to go through the effort of changing your habits around me.”

“It might undermine other people calling you by your new pronouns,” Loki pointed out.

Vision thought about that. “If that happens,” he said then, “I will consider changing my approach.”

That sounded like an adequate solution, so Loki nodded. “Now, have you given any thought to what I have told you regarding your relationship with Maximoff?” he asked.

Vision inclined his head and glided a little to the side, which to Loki looked very much like a physical manifestation of wishing to avoid a topic. “I believe Wanda might not have done entirely right by me,” he said slowly. “I hesitate to ascribe any malicious intent to it, but when I take into consideration some of her other behaviour that I have tried to regard in a new light...I simply cannot be sure.”

“You don’t have to be malicious to be selfish or ignorant,” Loki pointed out. “That’s really all I think happened with Maximoff.”

“You might be right,” Vision conceded.

“Out of curiosity, what other behaviour were you talking about just now?” Loki wondered.

Vision glided a little to the side once again. “One year ago, during the...conflict with Captain
Rogers and his allies,” he began, “I was charged with keeping watch over Wanda as she was restricted to the areas of this house pending an investigation of her involvement of an Avengers mission gone badly. Clint Barton came for her, and without any lengthy attempts at convincing me or talking to me, the attacked me – rather brutally, though I was not seriously harmed – to escape.”

Loki could only stare at him. “And you began a relationship with her after that?”

Vision seemed surprised by his shock. “You and Tony had a physical altercation as well, did you not?”

“Yes, but that was before we were friends or lovers!” Loki pointed out.

“True, that does make a difference,” Vision mused, and he sounded for all the world like this was the first time it had occurred to him.

Loki stared a him, and a very unpleasant suspicion was born in the pit of his stomach. “Vision,” he said slowly, “was my and Anthony’s relationship a factor in you deciding to pursue a romance with Maximoff?”

“Yes,” Vision said placidly. “I thought it proved such things could be overcome.”

Well, there was one ting Loki was never telling Anthony, that was for sure. The man had enough misplaced guilt as it was. “And you did not see it as enough of a betrayal of your friendship that you did not lose all interest in pursuing a romantic relationship?” He wondered.

“It was Wanda who pursed a romantic relationship,” Vision corrected him. “Initially, when I first went to see her after the so-called Civil War, I merely wanted to make certain she was well after her stay at the Raft, given that I have been told what happened to her there. But when she showed she wished for more, I considered this, and I believed there were extenuating circumstances to her attack.”

“What would have been those extenuating circumstances?” Loki asked with mild incredulity.

“She felt trapped, and scared, and betrayed,” Vision listed.

Loki frowned. “Betrayed? Isn’t that too strong a word?” He could certainly understand reacting to betrayal with violence, but...was there truly any betrayal here?

“Perhaps. It might have not been a large betrayal, but she felt it all the same.”

“Have you discussed this with her?” Loki wondered.

“I have. She made it clear that she believed by holding her a prisoner, I gave up any claims on our friendship. I am still not certain I agree with that assessment, but based on some of the materials I have read after our conversations, I do believe she was in the wrong in not trying to convince me peacefully for at least some time before she attacked me.” Vision frowned. “Though I do blame Clint Barton for that to an even larger degree.”

Loki shook his head. “I was not present, so I cannot go assigning blame. But as she is an adult, in spite of being young, she must carry some portion of it.” As he did for what he did to Jotunheim, but Loki turned his mind away from that with some effort. He needed to finish his conversation with Vision, and he could nto do that if he fell into the black hole that was his guilt for that.

Vision inclined his head. “Yes, that is what I have determined, but it still makes me...uncomfortable, I believe, to contemplate. It creates a dissonance with my past experience with
Loki merely nodded. He could understand not wanting to as much as think about something, let alone talk about it, any more. “Would you mind if I returned to this next time I come?”

“No,” Vision assured him. “In fact, I believe I would welcome it. It is a way for me to...keep track of how my thoughts regarding this develop, I suppose.”

“Well then, that is settled,” Loki said, switching to his business mode. “Now, would you be willing to travel off planet to help me with some security concerns?”

After Vision agreed, Loki was on his way back to Anthony when he heard someone talking to FRIDAY in the communal space and, when he checked, saw Captain Danvers who had clearly just come in.

“Oh, you’re here, awesome,” she said when she saw him, and Loki raised his eyebrows at her. That was not usually how people felt about his presence, Anthony notwithstanding.

“I spoke to the Guardians of the Galaxy,” she explained. “They want some confirmation about Thanos from Asgard, but once they get that, they’re willing to entrust the Stone to Quill. The question, however, is where we want to put it once he has it. I’m not sure having so many of them on Earth is a great solution, but at the same time it would make sense to concentrate our defence in one place and Nova Prime is willing to lend some forces in defence, though not many, obviously, given that they’re in danger as well.”

Loki frowned, sitting down on one of the sofas. “FRIDAY, call Anthony please,” he said absently, then began to think aloud: “I’ll make sure Asgard confirms it. As for where to put it, we could make Quill taking the stone obvious, make it clear it’s not on Xandar any more, that should considerably lessen the danger. We just need to misdirect where it’s put. We could pretend he flies here, given that Midgard is doomed to be Thanos’ goal with the two infinity stones-”

“-and Quill is half-human, so it would make sense he would fly here, want to see his place of birth once more before Thanos gets us all,” Danvers interjected. “Yes, that would work. But where do we actually put the stone?”

“What about some of the Nine Realms?” Anthony, who had just arrived, suggested. “I dunno which have the best defences, but...”

Loki grimaced. “Asgard is supposed to be the protector of the realms, the idea of purposefully endangering one of them like that...I don’t think I can do it.”

“Wasn’t there one you’ve already wiped out?” Anthony wondered, which made Danvers give Loki an incredulous stare. “Could you put up some defences around it?”

“Not me personally,” Loki said quickly as an aside to Danvers, even as he felt like a hypocrite because it was not his merit that he could not call himself a destroyer of realms now. Jotunheim seemed to be on his mind today. Once again, he forcibly switched mental tracks. “And Svartalfheim would be too dangerous, in case some of the dark elves still survived there...but...there is Muspelheim and Nifleheim,” he realised.

“Right, you said they are uninhabited?” Anthony remembered.

“Close enough,” Loki admitted distractedly. His mind has gone to Hela’s prison, likely one of the
most secure prisons in the universe. “Yes,” he said, “I believe, provided other aspects of my plan work out, I might have our answer.”

At that point, Drew was drawn to the communal space by their conversation, and when she set her eyes on Danvers she called: “Finally! I’ve been meaning to tear you a new one for ages.”

Danvers blinked at her, seeming a little confused. “Me? Why?”

“How’s it promised Vision you would train his use of the mind stone powers with him?” Drew asked pointedly.

“I...did,” Danvers said a little hesitantly.

“Well, I talked to him,” Drew said grimly, “and guess what he told me? You trained with him once, then you left abruptly and never came back! That must have felt really awesome for him, right?”

Danvers seemed taken aback. “I...did not believe he would be...personally affected.”

Loki snorted a little. Here was his answer to who avoided whom between Danvers and Vision. It was rather alarming, in Loki’s opinion, that the newly minted Avengers leader did not, in effect, consider one of her team a full person, because that was what her answer implicated. If even she – an all around good person as far as Loki could judge – acted this way, what did the others do? It was no wonder Vision had such a low opinion of his own value, really.

Going by Drew’s scowl, she was thinking the same. “Tell me you’re shitting me right now,” she all but growled.

Danvers sighed, rubbing her eyes and leaning back into the sofa. “All right, I messed up,” she conceded, and suddenly her voice sounded very tired. “I just...he reminds me of the Supreme Intelligence too much.”

Loki and Drew both winced, while Anthony looked confused. “Supreme what?” He asked.

“It’s what rules the Kree,” Danvers explained, and perhaps for the first time ever, Loki could hear a trace of bitterness in her voice. “And she’s a manipulative asshole who gets inside your head and tries to get you to do what she wants by any means necessary. I thought I would be fine, training with Vision, but...I wasn’t. I should have made it clear to him, but I didn’t want to talk about it, with him least of everyone. But that’s no excuse. I will go and apologize to him as soon as we’re done here.”

Drew nodded grimly, while Anthony seemed a little nonplussed, Loki was not sure by what exactly.

“All right,” the man said slowly, “we will find someone else willing. There’s gotta be someone among us who has no bad experience with mental manipulation, right? I mean, not be, obviously, or Bruce, not after Maximoff, but...”

“Don’t look at me,” Drew muttered. “HYDRA might not have used literal mind powers, but...”

Anthony rubbed his face. “All right, I’ll think about it,” he said. “We’ll find someone.”

In a manner that seemed almost providential, James come in at that moment, looking a little frantic.

“Jim!” Danvers called happily and went to embrace him in welcome, but he kissed her almost
“Hey, Carol,” he said. “I headed over as soon as I heard you were back, but...listen.” He sounded serious, and so she let him go and settled back down on the sofa, with him leaning on the armrest next to her.

“I was in a meeting about some military tech,” he began, “and we were talking about fitting targeting systems with the right types of missiles and I guess Tony’s wandering mind and jumps of mental association have rubbed off on me over the years, because I just suddenly realized – we’re all focusing on the infinity stones, but what about the gauntlet? You said that was some kind of unique tech too, didn’t you?”

Loki stared at him for a moment, incredulous, then he groaned, hiding his face in his hands. “Thank you, James,” he said with emphasis. “I do not know how I could have possibly forgotten-”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate,” Anthony interrupted him firmly, putting an arm around his shoulders. “And hey, Rhodey might not be quite me, but he’s a genius in his own right, it’s no wonder he figured it out.”

James rolled his eyes. “You only keep believing that because it offends you that someone who’s not a genius could keep up with you as much as I do,” he pointed out, then he turned back to Loki: “So what’s the situation, do you think it’s urgent? Or are we too late to get on top of this already?”

“No,” Loki said honestly. “It’s not urgent enough for me to leave immediately, thankfully, though I will address it next time I am in Asgard. Dwarven smiths are the ones who developed the theory for the gauntlet, and to my knowledge they are also the only ones who could build it.”

“Well, that’s a challenge if I’ve ever heard one,” Anthony muttered.

Loki gave him a considering look. “Yes, you might actually be able to do it as well,” he admitted then. “Which probably means there is someone else as well.”

“Hey, I’m a unique snowflake!” Anthony protested.

Loki snorted. “I have no doubt, but I would still dare to venture there might be one or two other people in the whole universe who would be capable of building a gauntlet based on existing theory and schematics,” he said. “Norns, we even have a full-scale model in the vault in Asgard. The dwarves, however, are the safest bet.”

“Can he get to them?” Danvers asked immediately.

“Not without Asgard coming to their defence...” Loki said slowly. “If Hela had been released and Asgard had been destroyed, he could have just marched there,” he realized. “We didn’t just ruin his plans for the Space Stone. But now I don’t know...will he try to look elsewhere? How long can it take to find another such engineer in the galaxy? Or will he try to get the power stone first and then, wielding it directly – he does not need the gauntlet for just one stone – will he try to take on Asgard? I simply don’t know,” he said in frustration.

“So we prepare for all eventualities,” Danvers said firmly. “Make sure the dwarves are well protected. Try to find out if there are any comparable smiths out there. I will put out feelers as well, maybe ask the Guardians. If we find someone, we make sure we protect them.” She shrugged. “We can handle this.”

And the incredible thing about Carol Danvers was that, in spite of everything, in spite of hearing her bitter and self-reproaching just minutes ago, Loki believed her.
Later, when the impromptu meeting was over and Loki and Anthony were alone, Anthony said: “The Vision thing...I can’t believe that was it.”

Loki frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“Danvers,” Anthony elaborated. “She’s the leader of the Avengers now, and Jessica called her out and she just upfront admitted she fucked up and apologized and just...” he shook his head. “With every day I realize more and more how big of an asshole Rogers was. Makes me wonder about the Erskine serum.”

Loki gave him a look. “You are not being very comprehensible today, Anthony.”

“The stuff Rogers got injected with that made him into a super soldier,” the man explained. “It’s supposed to reveal your nature, you know. Rogers was a good guy, so it gave him muscles, Red Skull was a bad guy, so it made him look basically like the devil.”

Loki snorted. “You truly believe that? And you call yourself a scientist.” Anthony gave him an offended look, and Loki rolled his eyes. “It’s a chemical formula, how can it have moral judgements?” He asked pointedly.

Anthony thought about it for a moment, then he looked embarrassed. “What, magic is real! What do I know?” He asked defensively.

“Leaving aside that you seem to have believed that even before you knew magic was real...this is not even about not understanding the mechanics, it is about the underlying philosophy being absurd.”

Now Anthony looked just confused, and with a sigh, Loki explained: “What does being a ‘good guy’ even mean? How would the chemical formula know? Is there an objective standard of morality it could latch onto that the whole of humanity shares? And if so, why would that manifest in muscles? Is that objective standard ‘might makes right’?”

“Thor’s hammer can recognize worthiness,” Anthony was back to being defensive.

Loki rolled his eyes again. “Yes, in an enchantment laid by Odin. You cannot pick the hammer up if you are not someone Odin would consider worthy.”

“Right,” Anthony said, his eyes lighting up with realization. “So given the asshole your not-daddy is, Rogers being able to move it a little is actually an insult. That does make me feel better.” He hesitated. “Could Erskine have done something similar? Made the serum so that it’s biased towards people he likes?”

Loki thought about it. “I suppose it might not be completely impossible, but it would be much more difficult to do this with a potion instead of an enchantment.”

“All right, so what do you think it was?” Now Anthony sounded a strange combination of curious and sullen. Loki supposed that he should remember calling into question Anthony’s scientific approach was a big sore spot.

“I could not guess based on the little I know,” he said. “Do you have any additional information to go on?”

Obligingly, Anthony told him about the Red Skull and Dr. Banner’s alter-ego, projecting images.
Loki frowned at him. “Your good friend was turned into a monster by the serum, and you still believed it was a moral judgement?” He asked incredulously.

Anthony winced. “Well, I guess...I mean I suppose anger isn’t especially moral, so...”

Loki rolled his eyes for the third time. “From what you have told me about it,” he said then, “I believe I know the spell this Dr. Erskine had attempted to replicate. It is considered an inhumane form of punishment in Alfheim, actually.”

Anthony frowned at him. “Why?”

“What it actually does is reveal how you truly think of yourself, underneath all of your masks,” Loki explained. “When you use it on criminals...well, most of them have quite a bit of self-hatred. Most people do, honestly. I believe you would find very few who are so incredibly self-righteous as Rogers, that this would be the result of using it on them.”

They both said in silence for a while, contemplating the horrors they would probably transform into if they ever got a drop of the serum.

“Why do you think it makes everyone stronger though?” Anthony asked after a moment.

“This might merely be speculation,” Loki replied, “but if it truly is the spell I know, then it might be a human thing. You are cut off the rest of the universe and the vast majority of you still believes you are the centre of it on a deep level. This might simply be a reflection of humans, in general, giving themselves more significance than they actually have, even the most self-loathing ones. From what the elves told me, Aesir tend to react the same when the spell is used on them.”

“Great,” Anthony muttered, “so in other words, if I got the serum I’d be a monster, and super weak to boot.”

Loki knew exactly what he meant.

Chapter End Notes

After their encounter with Thanos' forces, neither Loki nor Tony are under any illusion about their importance in the grand scheme of things, in spite of Tony supposed “ego”.

The panicking about the gauntlet isn’t driven by me completely forgetting to deal with that! Not at all! Likewise, Loki believing he doesn’t need a safe word when he is subbing is absolutely not a result of me forgetting to set up a safeword oh my god seriously if my iRL bdsm community pals ever hear about this they’re gonna gut me how could i

One of the things that upset me about canon Vision is that they force him to pretend to be as “normal human” as possible, as if it was any better than his original form. I get it out in the street for passing, but he was like that in the private room with Wanda too, and that makes me all kinds of uncomfortable. So this is a f-you to that. Vision is an android with an Infinity Stone in his forehead, he has no need for passing as a cishetero white human dude.

If you wonder why it was Jessica of all people who talked to Vision about gender and
sexuality, check out the side story about her and Brunhilde.

My thoughts about Erskine’s serum really aren’t driven by hatred of Steve as much as my hatred of the concept of there being an objective way to be “a good person” that a chemical mixture is able to determine, or that there is something like a “true nature” of a person. We can see perfectly well with Steve how unhealthy that idea is – if it doesn’t work out it makes your self-hatred worse, if it does it makes you convinced you’re always right. Not that Steve was exactly humble even pre-serum, see his reaction when Bucky suggested he other ways than enlisting to help the war effort.
Late the following morning, after some time spent relaxing in bed with Anthony, Loki contacted Strange to let him know he was available for their consultation and discussion of Dormamu, and then headed to speak to Brunhilde.

Not very surprisingly, he found her in bed with Drew. He had FRIDAY announce his arrival, but that had clearly not been enough to motivate her to relocate.

Thankfully they were not engaged in anything that would make conversation difficult, though – merely curled around each other, with Drew still clearly half asleep.

“If you need another image from my mind or whatever,” Brunhilde grumbled at him, “just get it and go away.”

“I’m afraid not,” Loki said with genuine regret. “It’s a bit more complicated – and unpleasant.”

“What, even more unpleasant that you rummaging through my mind?”

Loki had hardly rummaged, but he refrained from mentioning that – after all, he had rummaged, a little, when Brunhilde came to him as Odin – and simply nodded.

“Damn it,” she grimaced. “I should probably get up for that, huh?”

“Actually,” Loki said, considering, “it might be better for me if you didn’t.”

“Now I’m definitely getting up,” she declared, extricating herself from Drew, and Loki preceded her to the living room area of her rooms. On the way, he wondered whether she knew he was entirely uninterested in her mostly naked form, or whether she just didn’t care.

That led to him wondering how much she’d heard about him while she’d been living here, and whom she could have talked to, and as he mused about this she found a nice bottle to start the day with somewhere, and then asked: “So, why exactly did you want me to stay in bed?”
“This time,” he said, settling down on her sofa, “I am here with an idea I honestly believe you might try and kill me for. So before that happens, I just have one question my curiosity needs satisfied: have you come across Thor yet? You’ve been here a while...”

Brunhilde scoffed. “There’s been just one fight that required everyone in action, but yeah, I saw him there. Just from a distance, though. You know, keeping away to make sure he doesn’t realize my fighting style was familiar. But I got to tell you, the secrecy pisses me off. I’m used to coming in with a bang.”

Loki sighed. “It’s...not ideal, and I swear I have plans towards gradually lessening it. But the first step...you’re not going to like it.”

“Spill,” she invited him, gesturing with her bottle.

“So, you know Angerboda is alive,” Loki began carefully. “You also probably know I went to find Hela’s prison, right?”

“Right,” she confirmed.

“So, the prison is...not a nice place by any means.”

“She deserves it,” Brunhilde said grimly.

Loki grimaced a little. “I’m not sure anyone deserves a prison like that, but in any case Angerboda is, unsurprisingly, unhappy with their daughter being locked up there. And well, as I’m sure you know, Angerboda could be a very powerful ally against Thanos...”

“You cannot be serious,” Brunhilde said, giving him a look Loki was pretty sure was going to be enough to kill him on its own if he didn’t start talking fast.

“I’m not considering it without any safeguards!” He assured her. “I’d have Vision look into both Angerboda’s and Hela’s mind, to make sure there were no nefarious plans. I’d have Hela bound to Angerboda, making complete certain she couldn’t put a step out of line, if and only if Vision said that was feasible and that Angerboda wouldn’t betray us. And if you were willing, I’d have you talk to both of them to know the situation first hand. And if you still couldn’t agree to it, I’m not going to go through with it.”

That clearly caught Brunhilde off guard, and lessened the intensity of her murderous gaze somewhat. “You won’t?”

“No.” Loki exhaled. “You warning Asgard saved all of our lives-”

“You know I was just playing patsy for Thanos,” she said bitterly, taking a gulp of her bottle.

“Yes, but you didn’t know that,” Loki said patiently, being able to relate to that quite well, “and you came back to warn us even with all the very legitimate reasons you had not to wish to ever return to Asgard. So, I owe you a lot, and you are the only person here who knew Hela. Well, the only one beside Angerboda, and she can hardly be trusted in this, for obvious reasons. If you say it’s not safe to let her out under any circumstances, we’re not letting her out.”

Brunhilde sighed, and took another gulp. “What if I don’t want that responsibility?” She asked then. “I hate her – more than I’ve ever hated anyone, maybe with the exception of Odin, but even there I’m not sure – but...I like Angerboda, and I wouldn’t want to have to tell her that her daughter has to stay in some shithole of a prison because of my choice.” She drank again. “There was a reason I never tried to be anything but a grunt,” she explained in a tired voice. “I saw the toll these
decisions took on my girlfriend, and I don’t want it.”

Loki knew what she meant – he wished he could be free from it sometimes, too. He shrugged. “You can refuse to have any part in it, of course,” he said, “but...you’d lose any right to complain about whatever decision we made.”

Brunhilde gave a heavy sigh, finished her bottle and went to find another one. “Sometimes,” she muttered, “I wish I’d stayed in Sakaar.” She tore off the cap of her find and drank deeply. “You know, before I met Jess, I’d have just told you to piss right off,” she informed him then. “You’re very lucky,”

Loki shrugged. “Before I met Anthony, I wouldn’t have been able to even consider deferring to someone else on a decision of this sort, so...”

She grinned at him. “Humans, eh? Who knew.”

Yes. Who knew, indeed.

Except for Thor, apparently, which was just irritating, really.

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Strange stopped by in the afternoon, and they retreated to Loki’s rarely used private rooms.

“I assume,” he said after they’d settled in opposing armchairs, “that you have questions about the Dormamu incident.”

Loki inclined his head. “First, let us speak plainly,” he said. “Did I understand your hints correctly? Did you truly use the Time Stone on Dormamu?”

It was Strange’s turn to nod.

“That was...inspired,” Loki said, and did not even try overly hard to mask the admiration he felt for that feat. “Also, allow me to add, remarkably self-sacrificing of you – and I say that as a partner of Anthony Stark.”

Strange’s lips twitched a little in appreciation of that comparison. “To be entirely honest,” he said then, “I might have...not entirely realized what exactly that would entail when I made the choice.”

Loki shrugged. “No one ever does.”

Strange frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When I chose to sacrifice my life for my brother, do you believe I knew the exact amount of pain it would entail? I have had...many, many injuries in my life before, but I had never come so close to death, and so I could not have truly known what it would mean. Unless one makes the same sacrifice over and over again – which was your case, I assume – one never truly knows.”

Strange’s eyes glinted with dark humour. “Oh no,” he said, “he killed me differently every time.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “And when he ran out of ideas, he agreed to your terms?”

Strange’s mouth twitched again. “Probably got bored.”

They shared a mirthless chuckle, then Loki grew serious again. “Do you believe there is any danger of him returning?” He asked.
“Him? No, I do not believe so. But...there are others, as you no doubt know.”

Loki nodded. “What have you done to prevent other such attempts?”

“The security around the dangerous books has increased dramatically,” Strange assured him. “Without them, it should not be possible for anyone to do a summoning like that.”

“That is a good basic precaution,” Loki agreed, “but as someone who was almost always most attracted to forbidden books, I can tell you it will not be enough in the long term. What does your educations of sorcerers entail? Are they taught why such magic is forbidden?”

Strange grimaced. “You would think there’d be no particular explanation needed for why it’s not a good idea to summon eldritch monsters from other dimensions.”

“You would think,” Loki agreed. “And yet.”

“I admit I didn’t have a particular lesson on this topic when I was still officially a student, no,” Strange conceded. “But my education ended a little prematurely, so there might be one in the standard course of study. I will ask Wong, and there is not we will work to include it, though I confess I’m at a loss as to what could even begin convince people who would as much as consider it in the first place.”

Loki grinned. “Being the sort of person – in my younger years, at least – who was inclined to try everything once, I might perhaps help with that. I do remember what my mother told me to discourage any such attempts, and she’d been very effective.”

“It might perhaps work slightly less well when not coming from one’s mother,” Strange suggested. Loki’s grin widened. “Perhaps you should recruit the mothers of your adepts for this, then?”

Strange chuckled appreciatively at that. “Barring that,” he said then, “your assistance would be appreciated.”

“Then it will be provided,” Loki assured him. “I will do my best to write up the lesson as my mother taught it to me.”

“I admit I’m curious,” Strange murmured. “What was enough to terrify you away from the forbidden arts? Cautionary tales?”

Loki shook his head. “In my experience, they rarely work, at least on students like me. They will inevitably assume they are smarter than the character in any cautionary tale you present. So my mother, instead, focused on training me very firmly in the knowledge that I wasn’t.”

“Smart?” Strange asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Smart enough,” Loki corrected. “Essentially, she taught me there was always a price in magic – law of energy conservation, you would say, I suppose – and that there are no shortcuts. If I see the price, I can consider whether it is worth it for me. If I can’t see it, or see a very low one, it does not mean I am very clever, it means I am being ignorant.” He smirked. “There were many practical demonstrations to this. As I said, I will write you notes.”

Strange looked honestly intrigued.

“Now,” Loki changed the subject, all these memories of his mother making him too melancholy, “what was the first subject you wished to cover in our session on magic?”
Strange seemed to think about it for a moment. “I had initially meant to start with sheer theory, but in light of what I’ve learned about Thanos’ plans, I think I’d prefer to know more about the Infinity Stones,” he said then. “We do have some information in the library, but except for the Time Stone, it is only very basic. I would like to know more, especially as it is possible that when Thanos gets to us, he will have some of them already.”

Loki agreed to this easily, since it made sense. “Many things about their origin are unclear, or mere speculation,” he began. “Some call them the six singularities, the origin of everything, the reason for the Big Bang. The assumption in this theory – the most prevalent one to my knowledge, though the consensus might be different outside of the Nine Realms – is that the existence of these six aspects of the world was what pushed the world into being. It was them interacting together what created the universe, which is, by its nature, the interaction of these six aspects.”

“But how were they created?” Strange asked, frowning.

Loki shrugged. “No one knows. Those who believe the universe has a creator assume they were his vehicle of creation, of course – some consider them religious relics for this reason. Others believe them to be infinite, but then of course there is the question of why they would only create the universe at a certain point. One possible answer to that is that the universe has also always existed – after all, time, as one aspect of it, is one of the stones, so there could have been no before as such. But here we truly are in the realm of pure speculation. The fact is, the Stones defy any attempt at analysing their composition. We do know they each have their specific properties according to their nature – soul and mind have a will of their own, to a degree, though each in a different sense. Space, before it was captured in the Tesseract, tended to travel from place to place on its own, and the same was true of Time and time-travel – before it was part of the Eye of Agamotto, I assume.”

Strange inclined his head.

“Reality, before it was Aether, was constantly shifting and impossible to contain in any way,” Loki continued, “and Power, when it is outside of its containment unit, simply destroys where it goes. When harvested, though, their power, even individually...” he trailed off, and Strange nodded again.

“About the Reality stone...if I understand it right, there is the greatest chance of Thanos getting that one before he comes here?” He verified, and at Loki’s confirmation, mused: “You said it was the weakest, but Reality does not sound like a weak power, precisely.”

“In truth, the name is not exact,” Loki admitted. “It is the stone of illusion. It was named because it often makes you believe it can change reality itself – simply because it makes you believe an illusion first, so when it falls away, it seems like reality was changed – but that, of course, would make all the other stones redundant.”

Strange nodded in understanding. “Is there a way to see through the illusions?” He asked, practicality on his mind.

“Unfortunately, no,” Loki said with a grimace. “That is its unique power – they are felt with all the senses, they produce all the head and other waves they are supposed to, they are perfect in every way. Though from what I have read, when you keep very firmly in mind what is and is not possible, you might learn to ignore them. It is extremely difficult, though, and only workable in a familiar setting.”

“So unlikely to be useful to us,” Strange summarized.

“Precisely,” Loki confirmed. “As for the more practical aspects of dealing with the stones, well,
you have wielded the Time stone. You know something about it. Perhaps I could call in Vision, so than in comparing to his experience, you would know what are specifics of the Time stone and what are general Stone characteristics?” He hesitated for a moment, then admitted: “I have wielded the Mind Stone as well, but I confess I detest remembering it.”

Strange inclined his head. “I understand, and I would be grateful.”

And so Loki called in Vision, and went to enjoy a relaxing afternoon with Tony.

Or, you know.

It was meant to be a relaxing afternoon, at least. Unfortunately, not two hours into it, they were contacted by the Accords Council, and told that Barnes had...resurfaced, apparently cured of the Winter Soldier conditioning, and that, pending his trial, he was willing to serve as an Avenger to pay for his ‘misguided’ behaviour during the so-called Civil War.

“I know you’re probably not thrilled to hear this,” Sikorski was saying, “but given his history, he’s likely to be cleared and his request granted.”

“Yeah,” Anthony agreed, “yeah, I expected that much. When do you think the trial is going to take place?”

“Under normal circumstances, it could take up to a year, but since we don’t have a time-frame on Thanos, everything related to him has been given priority, so...the UN will do our best to arrange it within a month.”

Anthony blinked, and it took him a moment to answer. “The UN?” He asked then. “He’s going to be judged in, like, Hague or something?”

“Possibly,” Sikorski confirmed. “He has a whole slew of crimes he has to go through the system for, and it would take ages to go through the different countries, and as you know the Accords do contain the idea of the international court judging people who are found breaking them.”

“Yeah, but that hasn’t happened yet, really,” because of the rather shady deal Maximoff had signed, “so...he’d be the first?”

“Very likely, yes. Though the court might end up sitting elsewhere – we feel the association Hague has for crimes against humanity would be...unfair to Sergeant Barnes.”

“Yeah, sure,” Anthony said with a nod, clearly not wanting to discuss that part. “Just let me know when the time approaches, all right?”

“Of course, Mr. Stark. Have a good evening.”

“Yeah,” Anthony muttered, ending the call.

Loki had kept his worried eyes on Anthony the entire length of the call, and the moment it ended, he said: “You can refuse them, you know.”

“Can I?” Anthony asked hollowly.

“Yes!” Loki insisted. “There are actual dangers inherent to this. You can claim the conditioning hasn’t been broken properly, you can claim people will react badly to seeing him, you can claim Rogers will react badly to finding out he now works for the Accords...”
Anthony sighed. “Hardly anyone knows him as an assassin. He was only sent on the most crucial missions, and they were generally covert. People won’t recognize him as HYDRA. They might recognize him from the Civil War, but well, he was on Rogers’ side, wasn’t he? That’s not going to cause a mass panic – as long as he stays away from Romania, I suppose. And as for not being cured of the conditioning...” He frowned. “I’m not going to use that against him. Seeing his face might be the last thing I want, but I shouldn’t have attacked him, and I’m not going to make it even worse by casting his recovery in doubt.”

Loki grimaced. Anthony was too noble for his own good, truly. “And my last argument?” He probed.

Anthony seemed to give that one some thought. “That….might actually be true. Honestly, who even knows, with Rogers? Anything’s possible. But on the other hand, the war is almost here. We need a couple of green lights still, but we have the basics of a plan, and a reasonable timeline, right?”

Loki nodded his assent.

“Well, then we’ll be contacting Rogers soon enough anyway, to work with us,” Anthony pointed out. “If we have Barnes in our corner, arguing for the Accords and the existing structures and all that, it’s likely to make the whole thing much easier than if we tell him to go to hell and he’s sore.”

Loki frowned. “How certain are you that contacting Rogers will even be necessary? I told you to keep the phone at the beginning, because there were only three of you here in the Compound, but...the Avengers have grown, the initiative is truly international now, and Maximoff, who was the most powerful of their group, left them. There is only Wilson, Romanoff and Rogers now, if I understand it correctly?”

Anthony nodded. “It’s not really that crucial,” he conceded, “but still, can we really afford to be wasting soldiers?”

Loki sighed. “No,” he admitted. He supposed he shouldn’t be complaining – using Rogers as cannon fodder against Thanos was the best thing to do with him, really, and as someone would have to end up being the dam that stopped the masses of soldiers Thanos would no doubt bring, it was better if it was Rogers than anyone else.

“Please,” he said at length, “at least tell me you’ll have him living in New York.”

Anthony grimaced. “Er, yeah. Like, absolutely. Not only could I not stand him living here, but it’d also allow Jessica to move here permanently without leaving everyone in New York basically alone with Maximoff, so. Win win.”

Loki gave a relieved exhale, and pulled Anthony closer to himself. At least the man wasn’t entirely self-destructive.

The following morning, Loki took Vision masked as a human with him, picked up Mystique, and took a step to Jotunheim once more.

It was becoming disturbingly habitual for him, truly.

Vision was extremely curious, it being his first time on an alien planet and all, and so they left Mystique talking to Angrboda for a time – in her house, this time, as Angrboda became less wary of mystique, likely due to having read her mind in its entirety – as Loki walked Vision around,
allowing him to take the realm in properly.

As they walked, Vision had questions, but here, as with Mystique before, Loki was faced with his embarrassing lack of knowledge about Jotunheim. He knew a little more about its nature and animal life than about its culture and people, but not by much, and certainly not enough to answer Vision’s questions satisfactorily. In the end, to avoid being entirely useless, Loki made use of one of the few things he did know about the Jotun fauna – namely, that most of it lived underwater - and hid them both in invisibility and a spell of impenetrability before transporting them under the ice to observe some fish.

It was rather worth the trouble, he had to admit, for the wonder on Vision’s face.

He supposed that when one started life with the knowledge of Anthony Stark’s AI, it was a rather special occasion to find something one has never heard of.

When they returned to Angrboda, Mystique declared she wished to stay the whole day this time, and as Angrboda didn’t protest, Loki simply asked for some privacy to talk to the older Jotun before he left her there.

After Mystique left them alone – as usual, in the kitchen – he motioned to Vision standing nearby and said without preamble: “I brought with me the greatest expert in mental magic I know. Let me be plain: If I am to allow Hela out of her prison, I need to be completely certain you will not try to break her of any binding we impose upon her, and that you will not support her plans against Asgard.” He hesitated. “I know this is not...pleasant, but I simply cannot risk it otherwise. I assure you that Vision is completely discreet – I have never heard him talk about what he sees in others’ minds.”

Angrboda was scowling at him, and after a moment, said: “You could have given me some warning. I understand your reasoning, though. I despise it, but I do understand it.” They paused, giving both him and Vision contemplative looks. Likely measuring their chances of getting Hela out without Loki’s help, he supposed. Given that they hadn’t managed in the last twenty years, they must not be high. “Give me a moment to arrange my thoughts,” they said at length.

Loki nodded. He wondered if they would try to mask anything. That was why he’d wanted Vision to pretend to be human for this little excursion. As long as Angrboda didn’t have any clue about the Mind Stone, they would likely be more amenable to being examined.

Finally, they motioned for Vision to approach, and he did, standing in front of them and looking intently into their eyes for a rather long while.

Then he stepped back, and nodded at Loki, making him exhale in relief. More detailed consultation was necessary still, of course, but this meant there was no immediate danger, and so he settled down at the table to tell Angrboda about Thanos, while Loki went outside to keep Mystique company.

Angrboda frowned when they heard the name. “The Mad Titan?” They assured themselves. Loki inclined his head.

“You know of him, then?” Loki wasn’t entirely surprised – Angrboda knew a lot - but still, he hadn’t been sure they would.
“Of course,” they said easily. “He first meant to start his plans for mass slaughter on Midgard, since it was the inhabited planet that was closest to his home world, and not likely to give him much trouble. It was the first time Odin was actually forced to interfere on the realm’s behalf.”

“I’m surprised he hadn’t just conquered it and been done with it,” Loki muttered.

Angrboda scoffed. “The war on Vanaheim was just ending, and he didn’t have forces to spare. Hela, too, was still tied up there. Otherwise, I believe he might well have done so.”

Of course he would have. Loki did his best not to think about how much would be different now. “So he defeated Thanos?” He asked instead. “How?”

Angrboda shrugged. “It was not difficult back then. Thanos was young, and as I said, this had been his first attempt. A few units of the Valkyrie were enough to send him running, and then Odin used the Tesseract to send him to the other side of the galaxy.”

Loki frowned. That didn’t fit with the rest of the story. “That seems a bit too much, for a foe who was that easily defeated,” he pointed out.

“I don’t know any details – we were long beyond discussing strategy together at that point – but I gather he glimpsed some of Thanos’ potential power, and decided that the further from the realms Thanos was, the better,” Angrboda explained.


Angrboda frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“If I hadn’t found out about your daughter, Odin would have died at some point. Had that happened, she would have been released without warning, full of her desire for revenge, and with no guidance to be offered,” Loki elaborated. He had considered that nightmare scenario many times, both awake and in his dreams.

“I can’t quite believe he would be that short-sighted,” Angrboda muttered. “I do think him capable of every vice, but not of stupidity. You might have simply taken him by surprise with his imprisonment – he might have always planned to tell someone before he died.”

Loki shrugged. “He could have easily died during the recent Dark Elf attack, and that would have been that. Truly, people should not assume they were above unexpected death, not even kings of Asgard.”

They arched a brow at him. “Do you take your own advice?”

“Sometimes,” Loki conceded with a small grin, but then he thought of all that would fall apart if he died now and his smile fell. “Back to Thanos,” he said abruptly.

“By all means,” Angrboda agreed. “I am assuming, from your grim tone when you’d first warned me, that the problem of Thanos won’t be as easily solved this time.”

“I’m afraid not,” Loki said regretfully. “He’s grown in power, quite significantly from what you’ve said, and also gathered quite an amassing of supporters.”

Angrboda smiled with soft irony. “When I was younger and more naive, I would have asked why anyone would support someone whose only goal is to kill, but...”
“I have never been entirely clear on this myself,” Loki confessed. “I assume not all of his generals are tortured into obedience, though it is not entirely impossible, I suppose.”

“Some are?” Angrboda asked in surprise.

Loki shrugged. “I was.”

They gave him a penetrating look. “The attack on Midgard?” They asked then. Of course they would know about that from Frigga.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“I am sorry,” they said, sounding sincere enough. “Have you learned anything of strategic interest while captured, at least?”

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “Quite a number of things, in fact.”

Angrboda listened attentively to what he had to say, and was, quite understandably, alarmed by the notion of Thanos using the infinity stones. They immediately alighted on the crucial question of whether he could track them or not. “I do not know if it is even possible,” they said. “But I will find out.”

Loki inclined his head. “Thank you,” he said. “Now, that is the information I wished to share for now, so unless you had more questions...there is a trip to see your daughter ahead of us, is there not?”

Angrboda rose with some alacrity. They gave a few instructions to Mystique when it came to waiting in their house, and Loki could feel the soft hum of protective spells being hastily placed before Angrboda assured him they were ready. As he waited, Loki thought about what they had told him about Thanos. He wondered – wondered very much – if Odin’s use of the Tesseract was what gave Thanos the idea of using the stones for his grand plan.

What did the Midgardians say? What goes around, comes around.

And also: An injured man will want revenge, but a dead man will not.

Chapter End Notes

The last is a Machiavelli quote.

I imagine Titan close to Earth partly because it’s the moon of Saturn in the comics, but also partly because the area of space Tony and Nebula were flying through didn't seem to have exactly a lot of traffic, so I don’t think they were flying through Kree or Nova space, and these are supposed to be relatively close to Earth, so the planet Titan would have to be even closer.

As for the Reality stone, at some points in IW it makes it seem it can truly changed reality, but honestly. Like Loki said in the story, what would be the point of the others then? Thanos could just imagine half of the universe dead and boom, they would be.
Minds

Chapter Summary

Loki runs himself ragged. Also, there's a newcomer at the Compound.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for another two months in between. I had something else as my main NaNo project, which ensured that when I got fed up with it, I relaxed by writing End of a Rope...so here you go. At least it's long.

(A recap for those who need it: the fight with Thanos is approaching. Loki wants to use Hela and Angrboda against him, and so he took Vision to Jotunheim to verify how honest Angrboda was being with his mind gem magic. Also, Bucky is going to trial soon and wants to join Avengers after. There are talks about moving the Power Stone, and Captain Marvel has contacted the Guardians.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vision was, understandably enough, much less taken with Nifleheim than he had been with Jotunheim.

“Using this as a prison is inhumane,” he declared.

“Yes,” Loki agreed easily, “it is. And you have not seen the worst of it yet.”

Once they arrived to the actual prison, Vision was very obviously repulsed, not speaking and simply oozing disapproval in that particular quiet way of his.

Angrboda called for Hela, as she had before, and as before, Hela appeared.

“Mother!” She called, somewhere between happy and incredulous. “You came back!”

“I promised I would,” Angrboda said with a bittersweet smile.

“Yes, but I thought I might have imagined your last visit, and in any case I didn’t think it would be so soon.” Hela replied, unperturbed, and then paused. “I might still be imagining it,” she realized, then shrugged. “Oh well. At least my hallucinations are now taking on a pleasant form.” Then she frowned at Vision. “Well, mostly,” she added. “Who is this?”

“This, my darling, is part of the plan to set you free,” Angrboda replied softly. “You are very powerful, you see, and so they fear you. They need to make sure you do not plan to kill anyone.”

“But I do,” Hela replied in a tone that indicated it was obvious. “I want to kill them all, and Odin most of all.”

“I know, darling,” Angrboda reassured her, managing to make the wince almost invisible. “And
Odin at least would certainly deserve it, but we agreed it would be better to lock him up in your old prison, did we not?"

“Oh, right,” Hela seemed to remember only now. “Still, there’s plenty of others I want to kill.”

Angrboda gave a small sigh, and stepped even closer to Hela, as much as was possible. “Who are they?” They asked.

“Those who put me here,” Hela said, once again in a tone that indicated that much should be obvious.

“They were only obeying Odin. You know that, my dear,” Angrboda pointed out with soft insistence.

“Should I not make them pay, then?” Hela asked incredulously.

“No,” Angrboda replied simply, “you should not.”

Hela did not look like that logic was particularly convincing to her. “They still did it,” she insisted.

Angrboda gave another sigh. “Yes, and you did many terrible things to them before that. Shall we have an endless cycle of revenge, or will you cooperate to be free?”

Hela scoffed. “It wouldn’t be endless,” she said. “I would just kill them, and that would be it.”

Loki couldn’t help feeling that was a very good point.

Angrboda gave their daughter a sorrowful look. “Every time you speak like that, I hear Odin,” they said, and as if on cue, Hela began to rant.

It was long and it was involved, about Odin’s betrayals and lies, and Loki could not help but relate to part of it. Other parts were like looking into a distorted mirror, making him remember the time directly after he had found out about his Jotun heritage.

They were not pleasant memories, and Loki had to purposefully distance himself from what was happening to keep his own emotions in check.

When Hela quieted down, Loki focused on the present again, to hear Angrboda say: “We brought a mage with us who is powerful in mind-reading. He can look inside your mind and see whether this prison has damaged you in any way, and also see your intentions. Would you be willing to do that?”

She scoffed again. “He doesn’t need to read my mind to know my intentions – I will tell him on my own. And I am not insane.”

“Nevertheless,” Angrboda insisted. “We will not get anywhere without it. You do want to get out of here, do you not? To have Odin locked here instead of you?”

Reluctantly, Hela agreed.

Vision spent even longer looking through her mind than he had through Angrboda’s, and he seemed profoundly disturbed by what he found. “It is done,” he said when he was finished, and he and Loki stepped to the side for a while to give Angrboda and Hela some space to talk before they needed to leave.

It was not enough, as it never could be, and Loki had to press Angrboda with hinting at his
responsibilities in Asgard and what the consequences of his discovery would be to get them to leave.

After they returned to Jotunheim, Loki checked that Mystique was still alive and well and interested in staying longer, and then he took Vision back to Midgard.

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“All right,” he said as they settled in the android’s rooms in the Compound, Vision now returned from the human guise to his newly usual form. “Tell me what you saw in their minds.”

„Angrboda is entirely sincere with their intentions,” Vision confirmed immediately. „They hate Odin, but do not hate Asgard, and they care about the fate of their daughter most of all. They are ready to agree to nearly anything to save her – not just from imprisonment, but from insanity as well. They realize why you would need to bind her, and would not object as long as the binding would not be inhumane. What they wished to hide from me, I believe, is that if you set the conditions of the binding as unacceptable, they would agree anyway and then do their best to break it.“

That was not precisely surprising. „And what are the limits of what they would find unacceptable?” Loki asked.

„Effectively, anything more restrictive than simply preventing Hela from doing harm,” Vision explained succinctly.

„Or running away?” Loki probed.

Vision thought about it for a moment. „I am… uncertain.“

Loki sighed. “Well, I will need you there when we agree on precise characteristics of the binding anyway,” he conceded, “so you can make another reading then, to make sure that is acceptable. For now it is enough that the plan is viable at all from this side. What were their thoughts on Thanos?”

Vision did his equivalent of a shrug. „They do not seem to fear him overly, but accept the danger he would pose if he found the stones and is fully determined to help you prevent that happening.”

Again, not surprising. “Perfect,” Loki said. “Now, what about Hela?” That, of course, would be the difficult part.

A series of expressions flickered over Vision’s face. „Her mind is… fractured,” he said then. „There is a corner that is sheer insanity. It simply wishes to rage and burn. But even the rational part of her mind… she fully believes it is her right and duty to kill. I found no traces of actual conscience or compassion in her. Truly the only exception is her mother. As far as I was able to tell, her mind is at this point unable to deal with the contradiction, so she shies away from it.“

Loki blinked, feeling like he lost his track somewhere. „Which contradiction?“

„Her beliefs on one hand, and her mother disagreeing with those beliefs on the other,” Vision explained.

Loki frowned. „Surely she must be used to that from her youth?“

Again, Vision sort-of shrugged. „I am unsure, but certainly she now struggles with it.“

„This is going to be… complicated,” Loki admitted, though once more, it was not unexpected. „I
will attempt to consult Asgardian healing texts and bring some of them with me to Midgard to study if they seem promising…and I would ask you, if you are willing, to try and examine what powers the Mind Stone gives you when it comes to healing minds. It could come in very useful."

„I will do what I can, of course,” Vision promised.

„Thank you. Now tell me, how are you? I do not have much time, but-“

Vision waved him off. „I am fine,” he said. „Truly, I am, or well enough. Go greet Tony before you return to Asgard, we will speak later.”

Obligingly, Loki did, hesitating only for a moment.

He spent just about half an hour with Anthony, but they exchanged news and some comfort before he retreated to Asgard, to do his duties.

The first thing on his mind was contacting Xandar to confirm the message that Thanos was coming for them, and that they needed to find a safer home for the stone as well as get ready for his invasion, and that he was ready to take responsibility for the gem.

„Will you not send people for it, then, Your Majesty?” Nova prime asked him on the other side of the magical projection.

„It would draw too much attention,” he replied, entirely truthfully. Tesseract would be useful for this, of course – instant transportation over any distance – but that, too, would attract Thanos’ attention now. „You know Asgard does not usually involve itself in matters outside of the Nine Realms. Using the group my son has mentioned will have better chances of slipping under Thanos’ radar.”

Nova Prime inclined her head. „As you wish. We will arrange it, and thank you for the advanced warning.”

Loki merely inclined his head and ended the connection, relieved this part was done.

He took care of a few urgent Asgardian matters as fast as he could, and then he retreated to the library, where he looked for likely-looking texts on mind healing.

He took them with him when he went to have lunch on Midgard, where he found out that the first preparations for Barnes’ trial have already begun.

„Rogers had come out of the woodwork when it was made public, too,” Anthony said. „Threatened to repeat the whole Civil War thing if they touched him. Posted a whole long video about it, untraceable origin and all. So then Barnes had to do a public appearance which he addressed to Rogers and assured him he was standing trial of his own volition and no one was forcing him into anything. I’m still curious whether Rogers will believe that or not."

„Let us hope he will,” Loki muttered. „We have enough on our plate even without him.”

Anthony agreed with that, his tone heavy.

Once back in Asgard, Loki called the Nidavellir ambassador into Odin’s study to discuss the problem of the Infinity Gauntlet with him.

The ambassador looked at him with as little respect as he had ever seen anyone give Odin.
„We are aware of the danger, Your Majesty,” he said. „We have been preparing for it ever since you made us aware that the Titan was on the rise.“

Well. There was nothing quite like being made feel a complete idiot to make your afternoon better.

He gathered himself as much as he could and planned some particulars with the ambassador, but he was honestly beginning to feel he might not be in the best shape for this work at the moment.

But, well. No rest for the wicked.

So Loki found some more texts in the library which he put in his pocket dimension for now, got through the evening feast, retired as soon as he feasibly could, and even knowing he was taking a bit of a risk – there was a bigger chance someone would come looking for Odin this early – he went to Jotunheim.

Mystique was still there, seeming full of enthusiasm for the new world she had begun to discover, and Loki quickly took her to Midgard and stopped for half an hour with Anthony – Barnes’ trial was underway, apparently – before he returned to Angrboda to take them to Nifleheim.

He was going to need a large amount of rest once he came to Midgard to actually stay for a while.

He shared the basics of what Vision had told him with Angrboda, sans revealing that he could see behind their shields.

“I am...unsure we can proceed unless your daughter’s mind becomes more stabilized at least,” he said. “As it is, any binding would be dubious at best. Do you know something about healing?”

Angrboda shook their head. “That was never my department, even more so because Asgard expected it of me,” she said bitterly.

“I will find what I can,” Loki promised.

So then there was the visit to Nifleheim, where Angrboda did do her best to convince Hela that her revenge plan was just playing into Odin’s cards, even if it was cards that were two Asgardian decades old already. Loki only allowed them a little over an hour, though, before he took Angrboda back and then departed for Midgard, where he simply collapsed on the sofa in the common space in exhaustion.

“Hello, Loki,” he heard, and turned his head to see James standing nearby.

He made himself, with effort, incline his head in greeting.

“You look beat,” James said, coming to sit opposite to him. “Has something happened?”

Loki shook his head – a little. “Nothing particular,” he muttered. “Just...a number of exhausting spells in a short time-frame. Travelling between the realms, that sort of thing.”

“Ah. Do you want me to leave you alone, then?”

Loki hesitated, and James laughed. “You can say it, you know,” he said.

“Then if you wouldn’t mind...”

“Sure. See you after you get twelve hours of sleep.”

Loki didn’t want to sleep for twelve hours – because of his time in Nifleheim, he only had about
three days to spend here, and he didn't want to sleep for twelve hours of that time – but he conceded it might be necessary, and with effort, got to his feet.

“Is Anthony here?” He asked.

“Nah, sorry, in an SI meeting,” James explained. “Should I call him?”

Loki shook his head. “I am sure FRIDAY let him know I am here. He will come when he can.”

And with that, Loki dragged himself to Anthony’s – their? - room, and collapsed into bed.

It wasn’t so bad being alone for a while, in a place where he felt safe, he thought vaguely before he drifted off to sleep.

-

Having arrived during the day, he woke in the middle of the night, Anthony sleeping beside him, and smiled a little at the man.

He considered waking him, feeling relatively certain Anthony would not mind, but then his last thought from before he fell asleep returned to him.

It truly was nice to have complete peace and quiet for a while.

It made him feel slightly guilty, since Anthony had so limited time with him, but he realized he had been in company almost non-stop for at least a month now, and when not in company, it was because he was having a breakdown of some kind, locked in his rooms or teleported into wilderness.

Well. Now that he thought about it, he had to wonder how he even survived that.

He supposed that after the months of no genuine interaction that had preceded it, he had been parched and soaking it up, but still. It was no wonder he felt like he needed a break, truly.

He pulled out the StarkPad with books from Anthony, let it hover in the air before him, and began to read, getting lost in the worlds of the newest books by his favourite Midgardian authors – though when he saw that one of them wrote a treatise on Norse Mythology, he steered far away. He didn't have to know everything, and he had no desire to ruin his respect for the man.

Anthony woke a few hours later, and as soon as he noticed Loki, he wrapped his arms around him.

“You should have woken me up,” he muttered,

Loki sighed. Here the guilt was pulling at him again. It wasn’t a very familiar emotion for him, and it made him uncomfortable. “I am sorry,” he said. “I was...too tired to communicate.”

“Oh. Of course.”

Loki sighed at the hurt in his tone. “Anthony...you do know it has nothing to do with you, do you not? I was used to being alone a large portion of my time in Asgard. That I would miss the occasional solitude does not imply I am unhappy with your company.”

Anthony gave a heavy exhale. “Yeah, I...know. Rationally, anyway. Emotionally...”

Loki pressed him to his side. “I realize it is more difficult with the time differential,” he said. “And I will try to give you as much as possible, but please do not begrudge me the few hours.”
Anthony burrowed his face in his neck. “I shouldn’t begrudge you anything at all – you do so much to prepare for Thanos, you deserve to rest however you want for however long you want, but I just- my fucking stupid insecurities won’t let me damn relax...”

“It is not only insecurities,” Loki corrected, caressing Anthony’s back. “Though even if it were, it would hardly be anything to be ashamed of. But you truly do not see me often. That is a completely real problem you have every right to feel bad about.”

“Not when you are away doing universe-saving stuff!” Anthony argued. “I mostly get to live my life normally, even with all the Thanos preparations, but you have sacrificed your whole life to it-”

“Because I have no choice, not because I am some sort of hero.” Loki pointed out.

Anthony snorted. “There’s less difference between the two than you would think. And anyway you’ve been here every week at least for a while for this last month, so I really don’t have any right to complain.”

“Perhaps not this time,” Loki conceded. “But it was preceded by a year in which I only came every two or three weeks. It will take time to...even out, let us say.”

Anthony sighed. “I guess you’re right. Plus, Barnes’ trial ended tomorrow, so I’m...not really in a great place right now.”

Loki could only imagine. “What did the court decide?”

Anthony shrugged. “Cleared of all crimes, as I expected. Honestly, I do believe he deserves it, too – I did my best not to follow it in too much details, but I did catch bits and pieces, and what HYDRA did to him was horrifying – but I’m...not feeling that great about seeing him again, so.”

“Will you have to?” Loki wondered.

Anthony gave him a look. “Of course. He’s becoming an Avenger, like I told you, and though he won’t live here, he’ll come here first, to get the official welcome from Carol and all that. I’ll have to see him at least then – might be as soon as today, by the way, or tomorrow at the latest – and then during all-Avenger trainings. Also, Rogers has been bombarding me with emails and calls, telling me ‘not to hurt Bucky’, which is frankly insulting.”

“Will you actually talked to him?” Loki asked, astonished.

“No, but FRIDAY’s been filling me in. Apparently Rogers doesn’t get the difference between affect and deliberate behaviour – explains a lot about him, to be honest – so he doesn’t get that I’m not going to try and punch Barnes as soon as I see him. Additionally, in reaction to the whole Barnes situation, Rogers actually is considering signing the Accords so that he gets to see his buddy again, which...joy.”

Loki pressed him closer. “I am sorry,” he said. “I hope you made it clear that he would not be coming back as an Avenger?”

Anthony heaved a deep sigh. “I am doing my best, and he did play into my cards by threatening to start another Civil War all over again just two ro three weeks ago – doesn’t really show his remorse for what he did, you know – but if they do decide to take him up on his offer... He would definitely go to the US, Captain American can’t really go anywhere else, and all the country’s superheroes who aren’t mutants are being organized through us, so...I think the best I can hope for is him creating a fourth Avengers branch, which isn’t something I want exactly. He should never be in charge of anything ever again. So if he does come, I am thinking NYC. Rand and Thor co-run...
that section, Rogers would get on well with the both of them, and at the same time he would not be in control, since neither Thor nor Rand are the sort of people to cede control easily. It’s a bit too close for my liking, but I wouldn’t do that to Hope, pushing him on her, and besides, he wouldn’t agree anyway. I want to put Barnes to New York, as I told you, so...hopefully it will work out.”

Loki kissed the top of Stark’s head. Yes, he hoped so, too. If these idiots brought Anthony back to the state he used to be in when Loki first began to frequent the compound, he would personally slaughter them all.

When they dragged themselves out of bed for lunch, they found James and Vision in the communal space, James already eating as they discussed fight strategies – and ethics.

“Yes, it would be rather convenient if every bad guy wore a sign declaring whether they preferred to be killed or mind-controlled,” James was saying drily as they entered.

“Shouldn't there be a difference in what you are mind-controlling them to?” Anthony joined the discussion seamlessly. “Like, it’s one thing to be forced to stand still instead of doing harm, and another to be made actually do something against their will.”

“It might frequently not be as easy,” Loki chimed in. “If the person doing harm is convinced they are actually doing good or something essential, for example, they will always regard being forced to stop as a significant offence against them.”

“More than if Vision stopped them by physically harming them?” Anthony wondered.

Loki considered that. “Perhaps not. But not being in control of your own body can be a special kind of terrifying, so that needs to be taken into account as well.”

“I thought it wasn’t like that with you and Thanos?” Anthony asked him.

“No, but I did encounter that type of mind-control before, in some battles alongside Thor. It is extremely unpleasant and should only be used when completely necessary, but at the same time I can, at least for myself, confirm that I would most definitely not rather be dead.”

“Yeah, that’s the difference,” Bruce, who stepped inside the room just then, added. “FRIDAY gave me an echo you were having lunch, and also a conversation I might find interesting,” he added. “And I am thinking of what Maximoff did to me in Johannesburg...if I could chose between her killing me and her doing that to me, I would absolutely choose dying.”

Given the doctor's history with suicide attempts, everyone was a little uncomfortable, and Bruce rolled his eyes. “That’s not me being suicidal,” he emphasized. “I like living these days. But not so much I would be willing to sacrifice civilian population for it.”

Loki inclined his head. “I would have rather Thanos had killed me instead of getting his hooks in my mind as well, even though I am glad to be alive now,” he said, “so I know what you mean.”

“So back to the original point,” James interjected, “which was that Vision was still uncomfortable using any kind of mind control on me during training – everyone thinks it should be fine?”

Loki was chiefly relieved to hear someone was actually taking the time to train with Vision now. “Yes,” he said, “I believe it to be perfectly reasonable to wish to train this, though I understand you might not regard me exactly as the highest authority on ethics.”
James shrugged. “You have personal experience with it, which beats empty theorizing with me any day.”

“I have experience with the other side of it as well,” Loki reminded him.

“Did you enjoy that part?” James asked him simply.

Loki only grimaced in response.

“There you are then. So if no one else disagrees?”

There were shakes from Bruce and Anthony.

“Great, so Vision, I really want you to try it next time,” James continued. “Actually, I’ll talk to Carol about it, but I think this might be a good idea for everyone, or at least everyone without prior experience with mind control that could be triggering – we should go against it in training and find out what it’s like.”

“I’m all for that even with my past experience,” Anthony interjected. “Not so much the other stuff you’ve been doing, having memories thrown up in my mind to distract me really does ring an uncomfortable bell, but I definitely want to try just being stopped in my tracks by Vision. I don’t think that would be triggering for me, it’s so different from what Maximoff did, and I should learn to deal with it, so that I don’t panic if it happens during battle.”

“Me, as well,” Bruce agreed. “Perhaps outside, in case the Hulk doesn’t take well to it, but I will try to explain to him what is going on, and we need to get him used to it, to make sure he doesn’t panic if this happens. In fact, it would be a great way to stop him if an uncontrolled rampage ever happened again, so this sounds excellent.”

“Awesome.” James pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m gonna tell Carol right now.”

He departed, and Vision looked around them, still confused. “I am...surprised by your response,” he said. “I admit that with your strong reactions to Wanda, I rather thought you would be opposed to any kind of mind invasion.”

Bruce sighed. “That might be true with the general public, but you know we don’t have a problem with her because of the sorts of powers she has, right? That would make us the biggest hypocrites, especially me. It was how she used them that was particularly monstrous.”

Vision got a complicated expressions on his face for a moment, and then he simply turned and left the room. Bruce sighed. “FRIDAY, would you call Strange, try seeing if he’d be available to talk to Vision at some point today or tomorrow?”

“Sure thing, doc,” she replied.

“Strange?” Loki asked, surprised.

“He’s been consulting with Vision about the infinity stones,” Bruce explained. “And from what little they said, I gather Strange had also been helping Vision understand the ethical limits normally observed in magic and where Maximoff overstepped them. So I thought he could help. I know you are friendly with Vision too, but your connection to Tony makes it more complicated.”

“Yes, I understand,” Loki said with a nod.

Before he could react further, FRIDAY interrupted. “Dr. Strange says he is busy, but if it was an
emergency he could come. What should I tell him?”

Bruce shook his head. “Like I said, tomorrow’s fine.”

“Perhaps I ca speak to him in the meantime?” Loki suggested. “Unless you think it would be more harmful then beneficial?”

“No, I am sure it’s fine-”

“Sorry to interrupt,” FRIDAY interjected, “but I have relaid the message, and Dr. Strange will come tomorrow. I have also received news from the Accords Council. Sergeant Barnes will be arriving tonight, at eight PM.”

Anthony groaned, and Loki looked between him and the door Vision had disappeared through uncertainly.

“It’s fine, go after him,” Anthony said. “I can do some sconce with Bruce or something to distract myself. Just...come before he’s due to arrive, all right?”

“Of course” Loki confirmed.

Vision was waiting in his room, FRIDAY having announced Loki’s arrival. “Thank you for your willingness to speak to me,” he said, “but I am not certain you can help in any way.”

Loki shrugged. “I am not either, but I did want to offer.”

Vision inclined his head. “I am sure it will please you that I have ended my relationship with Wanda with finality,” he said then.

Loki sighed. “It doesn’t please me, Vision,” he said. “It...sucks, as Anthony would say, that it did not work out for you. However, I do think it is best for you, so in this sense, I am glad.”

Vision nodded again. “Stephan – Dr. Strange – has been helpful,” he said then. “He does not truly say anything I have not heard from others, or not much at least, but with Tony and Bruce both having had personal conflicts with her and you being so close to Tony...it carries more weight when Stephan says it. I hope you do not find it offensive.”

Loki shook his head, a little amused. If he found tiny slights like this offensive, he would have never survived in Asgard. “I am simply glad you found someone removed from the situation enough that you could regard them as impartial,” he said. “I have also heard that you have been consulting on the Stones, and magic?”

Vision seemed to brighten at that. “We have. We have come across some very interesting topics, and I would appreciate it if you were willing to meet with us both at some point during your stay this time. I do realize your time is limited, and I know you claim I do not need any more of your lessons, while Stephan does, but-”

Loki put up his hand. “I will be glad to discuss magic with you both, Vision,” he said. “No need to justify yourself.”

“Thank you,” Vision replied. “Now, I heard the news about Sargent Barnes, and truly, I am fine. Go to keep Tony company.”

Loki smiled ta him.
“Yes,” he said, “I believe I will.”

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Loki joined Anthony and Bruce in the lab, though they kept mostly to discussing theory, recognizing Anthony was too antsy to be trusted with any practical experimentation.

When eight in the evening approached, Loki turned into Shazad and they went up to the communal space, where Danvers, James and Vision were already waiting for him.

“I told Jess and Hilde to stay out of it,” she said when she saw Anthony. “I don’t want to overwhelm him more than necessary, but I feel all the rest of us has to be here.”

Loki agreed with her. She needed to be there as the leader of the Avengers, Anthony needed to face this upfront, and the others needed to be there as Anthony’s friends and moral support. Vision, perhaps, was not entirely necessary, but under the circumstances no one wanted to tell him to go away.

A small plane came in for landing in front of the compound, and Danvers stepped out to greet it, the others following behind her.

The plane’s door opened, stairs lowered themselves, and the man Loki had last seen beating Anthony up along with Rogers stepped out.

Even Loki wanted to punch him the moment he saw him, so he couldn’t imagine how Anthony had to feel. He pressed his lover’s hand.

Barnes turned to say something over his shoulder and then descended the stairs, a bag over his shoulder, wearing simple, civilian clothing.

He came towards them, but stopped good five metres away from Danvers before he inclined his head and said: “Captain Danvers.”

“Sergeant Barnes,” she returned, coming closer and extending her hand, which he shook.
“Welcome to Avengers Compound. Please, come on in.”

She turned, and the others behind her turned as well, to head back inside. In these numbers they could not all fit on the sofas, but Carol did settle there, with James and Anthony by her sides, as she motioned to Barnes to sit opposite to them.

Loki chose to sit on the edge of the sofa by Anthony’s side, pressed to his arm. Danvers gave him a chiding look – for his lack of professionalism, he assumed – but there was no heat behind it.

Bruce and Vision settled on the barstools nearby, watching silently.

“First, allow me to offer our thanks for your willingness to join the preparation for the fight against Thanos,” Danvers began, breaking the mounting tension.

Barnes shrugged. “Figured it was the least I could do, after all the shit I did before. I should start paying my debts.”

Danvers smiled at him, and he felt Anthony slightly relax. “That’s certainly a welcome attitude,” Danvers said.

“I also wanted to...” Barnes shifted, and set a fleeting look at Anthony. “When they told me who
was on the Avengers, I gathered there was someone here who could read minds. So...if you wanted

make sure the triggers were gone, I mean, I am offering. It was tested many times, but...”

Danvers exchanged a look of silent communication with Anthony, who had relaxed even further at

those words, then said: “It will not be necessary, but thank you al the same. Now, we need to

address the topic of which Avengers team you will become a part of. There are currently three of

them, as you might have been informed, and pending your approval, we have put you in the one

based in New York City.”

Barnes smiled a little. “I would like being in New York again, I think,” he said. “Visit Brooklyn

and all that, remember my life...before. But...that’s the team that’s led by an actual space alien,

isn’t it? That’s new. Dunno how well I could adjust to that.”

“The team is co-led by Thor and the Iron Fist,” Danvers corrected. “We can introduce you and you

can make your choice after that. The only other member of that team is the Scarlet Witch.”

Barnes frowned a little. “She was one of Steve’s, right? I don’t remember the fight at the airport

very well, but from what they said at the trial...”

“She was, indeed, one of those who fought on Rogers’ side at Leipzig Airport,” Danvers

explained, ‘but she’s signed the Accords since then and has been operating within the Avengers.

She thus supplies the two physical fighters – and occasional additions from the city – with a
different set of skills, as hers were granted by the Sceptre and are more magical in nature.”

Barnes frowned. “The sceptre?”

“The sceptre that was brought to Earth during the 2012 invasion,” Danvers clarified. “I...do not

know what, if any, information you gained about this when you were in HYDRA’s captivity, but

they had the sceptre for a while and used it to enhance-”

“Wait- that’s her?” Barnes asked incredulously. “Steve’s Scarlet Witch is one of HYDRA’s

Twins?”

“Yes...?” Danvers said slowly, trailing off into a question.

“I am not staying in New York with her,” Barnes declared firmly. “Frankly, no one should.”

Chapter End Notes

So, who’s glad to see Bucky?

Also, it’s hard writing the Hela-Angrboda dynamic, when Hela is an adult now but
Angrboda last saw her when she was a teenager...
Bucky talks about what he knows, the mages discuss ethics, and then Wanda gets some things off her chest.

“I am not staying in New York with the Scarlet Witch,” Barnes declared firmly. “Frankly, no one should.”

There was a long silence after Barnes’ pronouncement, then Anthony carefully asked: “You know her?”

“I haven’t met her,” Barnes explained, “that’s why I couldn’t recognize her – though given how I was at that point, I might not have anyway – but I’ve heard...stories.”

The Avengers all exchanged looks.

“What kind of stories?” Anthony asked tentatively.

Barnes shrugged. “I had a handler who liked to boast. He told me I might not be the strongest weapon of HYDRA for much longer, that they used the Sceptre to create two powerful assets. He said a bit about the boy’s powers, but mostly he spoke about the girl. How powerful her telekinesis was, that while my interrogation took hours she could tear through a subject’s mind in minutes, her potential for mind control...I gathered not all of it was really tested or practised yet, but they did know for sure about the telekinesis, and that she could make people terrified. He talked about that a lot – how that was the easiest way to use her for interrogation, to make people so afraid they would spill anything. They trained her especially for that, from what he told me.”

“My information says Maximoff had not been in the field before the confrontation with Avengers in Sokovia,” Danvers said with a frown.

“Yeah, that’s probably right – the handler only talked about training,” Barnes confirmed. “Like I said, it wasn’t all tested and verified, and they liked to have all their ducks in a row. They didn’t like surprises. I gather they only let them out because they were desperate after you attacked them.”

“So the interrogation...?”

“That was part of the training, yeah.” Barnes looked around at the faces of the Avengers and gave them a sardonic look: “How did you think they trained her abilities? What did you think HYDRA did with their prisoners? You all know my story.”

“I think we preferred not to think about Maximoff in that context,” Danvers replied slowly. “The Scarlet Witch changed allegiance after the fall of HYDRA, First she joined Ultron for a while, and then during the crisis, when it became apparent he wished to destroy the world, she switched sides to the Avengers, where she has remained since, with the exception of the time she was a fugitive with Rogers.”
Barnes scowled. “Well, I suppose super-soldiers are not as useful as people who can influence minds—” he began after a while.

Danvers blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“She was recruited as an asset into the Avengers on the basis of her skills, and so her record was wiped,” Barnes summarized succinctly. “I get it, I do. Her powers are pretty unique from what I heard, and I understand the logic in recruiting powerful enemy assets, so I’ll try not to be bitter about having to go through a trial when one of the god-damned Twins didn’t, but it does rankle a bit.”

Anthony put up his hand. “Barnes,” he said then, “you do know it was Rogers who accepted her into the Avengers, right?”

That brought Barnes up short. “What?”

“That was before the Accords and after SHIELD fell,” Anthony clarified, “and we didn’t have any kind of official supervision at that point. I was stepping back from the Avengers, and so was Barton – the archer, in case you don’t know. Bruce,” he nodded towards the man, “and Thor were off world. It was just Rogers and Romanoff, and a bunch of new people they decided to add to the roster. Maximoff was one of them. So it was their decisions.”

Barnes blinked. “When you say Romanoff...you mean Natalia Romanova? The Black Window?”

Anthony raised his eyebrows at him. “The one and only.”

Barnes whistled. “You keep interesting company. But her being pragmatic doesn’t surprise me at least. Even though in case of someone with mind powers, I kinda have to wonder...is recruiting her as an asset really so smart? I don’t know how far Maximoff got in her training, but if she actually learned to control minds while with HYDRA...How could they ever be certain she was not playing them, influencing them?”

Anthony and Bruce both flinched. “My mind cannot be influenced,” Vision said firmly.

“Also, from what we’ve seen, her magic is always red,” Anthony said reluctantly. “It shows on the people she influenced, in their eyes. We would know if she affected the Avengers beyond the original confrontation.”

Barnes stared. “So she did affect you?”

“Yes, when she was still on Ultron’s side,” Bruce said grimly. “Since then, she’s only tried to put me to sleep once, otherwise I don’t know of any incidents, but she only stayed here with us for about three weeks before we moved her to New York.”

Barnes frowned, seeming to be deep in thought. “What was Steve thinking?” He muttered.

It was probably a rhetorical question, but Anthony answered all the same: “I think he was thinking of you.”

Barnes looked up at him, clearly astonished. “Of me?”

“Yeah. He was sympathetic towards the twins right from the start, and I couldn’t for the life of me understand why, until I found out he knew about what you did. I think you being held by HYDRA was on his mind, and so when he saw them, he assumed they were victims or brainwashed, like you.”
Barnes scoffed. “Not according to what I heard.”

“Yeah, no,” Anthony confirmed. “We know they weren’t, except maybe for some slight manipulation, but I think Rogers, once he got the comparison into his head, never really got it out.”

“Comparing me to the people who volunteered for HYDRA? Thanks, Steve,” Barnes muttered under his breath. He put his head in his hands and sat like that for a while, then took a deep breath. “All right, I understand that her becoming an Avenger was beyond your control, and I understand why the Accords council thinks she is a valuable enough resource not to insist on actually putting her on trial for her crimes as they did me. But...I don’t think I can stay in the same place as her. I don’t think I could trust her.”

The present Avengers all exchanged looks. After a moment, Anthony opened his mouth with a resigned expression.

“No,” Loki said firmly.

They all looked at him, and Anthony blinked.

“You were about to suggest Barnes can stay here instead,” Loki said with certainty. “But you won’t put your own well-being at risk because of her mistakes. You know she was already an issue before – Thor and Rand both complained that with their team being so small, they were uncomfortable with Maximoff on it. At the very least until Rogers and others come back, Maximoff should move elsewhere.”

“He is right,” Danvers said after a moment. “It will be a pain, but he’s right. But it will take a few days, and until then-”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Anthony said firmly. “A few days are...fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Barnes said heavily. “I- I swear I didn’t want to force my presence on you, I asked if it was okay-”

“I know,” Anthony stopped him. “And I know it wasn’t your choice in 1991. I’m more pissed about Siberia these days, to be honest, but I did read the expert report. I know you were still confused, and defending Rogers. Just...might me take a while longer to get over it.”

Barnes nodded. “I understand, and will do my best to stay out of your sight.”

“Thank you,” Anthony got out, and then he rose abruptly and left.

Loki followed him.

Once in their rooms, Anthony poured them a drink and knocked his back before he refilled his glass.

“You should have insisted he stays elsewhere,” Loki muttered, letting Shazad’s form drop off him.

Anthony waved his hand. “I really will be fine – the first contact was the worst to get over. I’m actually more stressed about the whole Maximoff mess. It will be arguments and it will take ages and I just...do not want to deal with her, even more than I don’t want to deal with Barnes.”

Loki sighed. “I wish I could do it for you.”

“You have your own shit to deal with, though it would be nice if we could take each other’s place,
“...have more distance from stuff.” He sighed, swirling his glass. “You know, we actually do need Rogers now. Not that he ever did such a great job at coralling her, but under the Accords, it could actually work. Without it...I think we’ll have to dangle Rogers’ return to get her to cooperate at all.”

“How is it looking on that front?” Loki wondered.

Anthony groaned, beginning to pace around the room. “Rogers has ‘entered negotiations’. From what Sikorski had let slip, they’re tearing their hair out over him, because he refuses to understand the situation he’s in and still believes he can make some kind of demands. Some on the committee are worried he will turn to terrorism unless they give in, but fortunately the majority realizes that with only Wilson and Romanoff on his side, he’s not that much of a threat, and so they’re not giving in. I have a bet with myself about how long it takes him to understand he has no space to bargain about anything. I think a month at least.”

Loki thought about Thor, and nodded. “I agree. How do you plan to integrate them when they come back? All three in NYC?”

Anthony sighed, stopping his pacing to pour another glass. “That’s complicated too. Rogers definitely. Wilson too probably, because flight capabilities are useful and as it stands now, the NYC team has no one who can really do it – Thor a little bit, but he can’t really manoeuvre, as you know. So Wilson is a good fit for them. Plus, Rhodey really couldn’t deal with having Wilson live here, I don’t think.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I thought Wilson was one of the people you had less issues with?”

Anthony shook his head, then nodded, and collapsed to the sofa with a shrug. “Me? Yeah. I barely knew him, and he was always Rogers’ friend. But for Rhodey? They fought side by side for a year, they were friends, and besides, Wilson was military – or ex-military, but still. That was where they found common ground with Wilson, how they became friends, through their experience in the Air Force. For Rhodey, doing so completely AWOL and against all kinds of command structure is always going to be unacceptable, and for someone who used to be in the military, it’s just...”

“Wasn’t Rogers in the army, too?” Loki wondered, sitting down next to Anthony.

“In the war – that’s different,” the man explained. “You have draft during the war, people who are basically civilians fight. But Wilson was a career soldier for a time. That’s completely different. So yeah, Rhodey seethes at hearing about Wilson the way I seethe at hearing about Romanoff.”

“Romanoff? Not Rogers?” Loki asked with quite some surprise.

Anthony leaned back on the sofa, tilting his head so that he was looking at the ceiling. “Rogers made me detest him when he lied about Barnes and left me in Siberia, but that had nothing to do with the Accords. For the Accords, he was the instigator, yeah, and me and Rhodey both can’t stand him for that reason. But Romanoff...that was more personal for me, the way Wilson was for Rhodey. There was no one who really thought like me on Rogers’ side, but she came the closest. She could be pragmatic, evaluate a situation realistically, do what needed to be done. I never liked her manipulation of me from when we met, but I do get she was just doing her job. I noticed the change after SHIELD fell, of course – she suddenly saw Rogers as this holy image, a cure to all her disappointed hopes – but still, she was able to ally with me to explain some practicalities when it was necessary. That she would, in the end, switch to his side simply because ‘he would not stop’...I understand the reasoning, but the long term-effects of letting what is effectively a temper tantrum win...well. Like I said, I feel that one personally.”
Loki thought about it. He thought he knew what Anthony meant: Rogers’ lie about Barnes had been a betrayal, but Rogers’ stance on the Accords had not been. Romanoff, however, was another matter.

“I never truly understand what was supposed to be so special about her,” Loki mused. “I am certain she is an expert at seduction, but that skill is a dime a dozen if you are lucky enough to be what is considered attractive by your culture. It is the easiest kind of manipulation. She is a good fighter, but that was not supposed to be her primary skill, and well...as someone who lives and dies by manipulation...I am underwhelmed.”

“She did get you, though,” Anthony pointed out, straightening back up.

Loki blinked. “She did? When?”

Anthony gave him a confused look. “At the helicarrier? I get you weren’t at your best, but still, she got you to reveal you wanted to unleash the Hulk.”

Loki stared at him for a moment, and then he began to laugh. “Is that what she made you believe? I take it back, then, she is good, at least at faking competence. I as good as outright told you all – Fury and Banner and everyone – that that was what I wanted the moment you locked me in his cell. I wanted you to know, to try and chain him, and watch him react to that, make him hate you. Acting as if she got the information out of me by pretending to be thrown by my performance of a speech? Yes, credit where credit is due, she knows how to make people keep her around.”

Anthony frowned, seeming to think. “You did make a jab at the Hulk straight out, didn’t you? Huh.”

“I understand you not taking note – with the sceptre’s influence...”

“Was I influenced, though?” Anthony now sat even straighter. “I’ve been wondering about that for a while. I mean, I still had the reactor in my chest, and that made me immune to direct control, so...did that make me immune to this sort of indirect messing, too?”

“Hmm, good point,” Loki conceded. “You are almost certainly right – you were not influenced. Still, all the others were, and I imagine that was enough to distract you. Not having known Bruce then as I do now, I was astonished he did not lose control until the explosion. From what Barton had told me...”

Anthony scoffed. “Yeah, SHIELD was always under the impression Bruce had a hair trigger. Honestly, I think I was the only one who wasn’t afraid of him. Even Romanoff was terrified, and she was the one who tried to seduce him!”

“She did?” Loki asked curiously.

“Yeah...shot herself in the foot a bit when she kicked him off a cliff right after she told him she loved him, though,” Anthony said with a snort.

It was Loki’s turn to straighten. “She did what?”

“It was during Ultron and Bruce was refusing to let the Hulk out, but...yeah.”

Loki shook his head. “And here goes my respect again,” he said. “I assume she could not have predicted he would fly through a portal, so...what did she think would happen once the battle was over? Did she think he would ever trust her again?”
Anthony shrugged. “I assume she just thought getting his help for the battle was more important.”

“Oh, I understand why she triggered the Hulk,” Loki explained. “I would likely do the same in her situation – but why did she tell him she loved him just before that? That was completely unnecessary and only ensured he would not trust any such pronouncements from her in the future.”

Anthony shrugged again. “Perhaps she simply said it because she meant it?”

Loki scoffed. “And, as a trained spy, I am supposed to believe she could simply not control her urge for honesty for a few hours?”

“Well, life or death situations, you know...people don’t want to keep things like that unsaid, in case they die.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “She could have told him at literally any other point.”

Anthony considered that, then nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I don’t know why I am arguing with you when I agree. I guess it’s just strange to think of her in any other way than a master spy...probably because she did get me.”

“Did she?” Loki frowned. “How?”

Anthony sighed, swirling the drink in his glass. “She was sent to Stark Industries to profile me, and she wrote a report about me I was meant to see, a report that basically played into all of my issues and insecurities to get me to work with the Avengers, because I’d rejected Fury’s outright request before. I swallowed it hook, line and sinker. And that letter ostensibly from Rogers...if you hadn’t been here, maybe it would have worked too.”

“Perhaps that is more of her strength?” Loki considered. “Written word? Where she has more time to think about how best to phrase everything? Only because of her combat abilities and her honeypot potential, SHIELD keeps sending her out into the field.”

“Hmm.” Anthony tapped his glass with a finger. “You might have a point. It’s a good point to consider, actually, given that her fate is the most uncertain of all the Rogues.”

Loki frowned. “What do you mean?”

Anthony shrugged. “Contrary to the others, she signed the Accords, only to promptly break them, and she also attacked the king of Wakanda after pretending to be his ally. Wakanda is not going to support her rehabilitation under any circumstances, and even others are going to be reluctant, with her track record. But if they could put her in a position where she would technically be contributing to the Avengers initiative by manipulating our enemies, but not be anywhere out in the field...well, maybe that’d be workable. Thanks for the tip!”

“It was my genuine pleasure, Anthony.”

Anthony smiled at him and turned to kiss him. It began as a simple peck on the lips, but as Loki pulled him closer, it soon deepened, and after Loki disappeared Anthony’s glass, they tumbled sideways onto the sofa together, seeking the much needed distraction and pleasanter thoughts.

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The next morning, it was time to shift to Shazad again, in deference of Barnes staying at the Compound, and speak with Vision and Strange about magic.
Loki was expecting Strange to appear in the communal space from the outside, but instead, he came in with Vision from inside the building. “Look, I grant he’s an authority on magic,” Strange was saying, “but are you sure you want to discuss ethics with him?”

“You do not have to agree with what he says,” Vision replied. “But I assure you he has thoughtful input.” They they turned the corner and Vision added, unperturbed: “Good morning, Loki.”

Loki smirked. “May I assume you were talking about me?”

“You may,” Strange replied, deadpan. “Forgive me I don’t trust the general of our first honest to God alien invasion with ethics. I mean, I know all that stuff about Thanos and coercion, but still, it’s hardly the heigh of morality, is it?"

Loki shrugged. “I never claimed it was. Knowing what the most ethical choice is does not automatically mean following that road.”

“Fair point,” Strange conceded. “So you are a theoretician?”

“I read quite a number of books about philosophy while in Asgard,” Loki agreed. “Particularly philosophy of magic, including its ethics. Asgardian views on this are unsurprisingly narrow.”

“Asgard has philosophers?” Strange asked sardonically, coming to sit down on the sofa opposite to Loki.

Loki chuckled. “Good point. It is perhaps too noble a term for what Asgard has, but there are plenty of reflections on morality to be found, they are just not particularly sophisticated.”

“So, magic bad?” Strange guessed as Vision settled down next to him.

“More or less,” Loki agreed, smirking. “Certainly anything that can confuse and entrap honest warriors is completely immoral, naturally. Effectively, most of what is allowed is healing the warriors, and then perhaps when the warriors are fighting a particularly vicious mage, you may help them by curtailing the mage – but only ever using your spells on the mage, naturally.”

Strange raised his eyebrows. “What about Thor, and the spells on his hammer?”

Loki outright grinned. “Never call it that. That is called enchantment in Asgard, and regarded as something completely different, and completely legitimate, because it is done to weapons. And weapons, after all, are a good, honest warrior’s business.”

Strange sighed. “All right, growing with morality like that for guidance, I can understand why you might decide that it was all a pile of rubbish.”

Loki shrugged. “Fortunately, I visited other realms as well. Vanaheim and Alfheim are particularly productive in this respect. From what little I know of Earth philosophies, the prevailing Vanir teaching is similar to some Indian schools of thought emphasizing non-violence. Alfheim is more complicated, as it is as diverse as Midgard, but most popular are those that resemble your Stoicism, Epicureanism and hedonism. Still, there is hardly anything you could not find on Alfheim.”

“So when it comes to magic…?” Strange prompted.

“The Vanir, naturally, say that any magic used to harm is evil. They are particular masters of the healing arts, and of blessings.”

“Blessings?” Strange frowned. “Isn’t that a religious, rather than magical, matter?”
Loki blinked at the strange pronouncement. “Perhaps this is a problem of All-Speak?” He guessed. “By blessings I mean spells that ensure prosperity, fertility and such.”

“Oh.” Strange nodded in understanding. “We do not have such spells – or at least I am not aware of them – and the religious custom of blessing does purport to do something similar, so I suppose that is why the All-Speak translated it this way. Go on, and sorry for the interruption.”

Loki waved the apology away, and added: “On Alfheim, any kind of mind control or mind-compromising spell is considered particularly abhorrent, but apart from that – well, torture, I suppose, but that much is true everywhere.”

“So using my ability to control in a fight would be considered unacceptable,” Vision interjected.

“On Alfheim? By most, yes,” Loki confirmed. “On Vanaheim, however, not at all, as long as you were not causing harm by it.”

“And you grew up with these competing ethical systems?” Strange wondered.

“Not exactly grew up – I grew up in Asgard, as you know – but I have been in contact with them since puberty, yes,” Loki agreed, wondering where Strange was going with it.

“That must have been...confusing,” Strange remarked.

Loki gave him a look. “You have hundreds of competing ethical systems on Earth.”

“Yes, but usually we only find out about that as adults,” Strange explained. “You normally grow up with one, and then perhaps you discover Nietzsche as a teenager and think you found the one true philosophy,” he added sardonically, “but apart from that...”

“With the exception of children with mixed cultural backgrounds, from what I understand, or those raised in a home culture different from the surrounding society,” Vision pointed out.

“Good point...their situation would be similar to Loki’s, maybe,” Strange mused.

Loki thought fleetingly of Jotunheim, and what it would have been like had he known about its culture, at least. “I had my mother to help guide me through it,” he said aloud. “She was always willing to discuss such things with me, and open to listening to my ideas.” He smiled a little. “I was much like your teenagers with this Nietzsche you talked about – every visit to Alfheim, I came home with another definite truth, and it took some hours of debating my mother to realize it was perhaps not as absolute and there were some flaws in my new philosophy.” He sighed. “But we have got far from magic.”

“Not really,” Strange opposed. “Because I wonder which of these approaches you adapted for yourself?”

Loki gave a short, bitter laugh. “I could hardly take the Vanir one as mine – I was a Prince of Asgard. ‘Do no harm’ had no place there. I mostly picked and chose from different systems, used it as inspiration for what was and was not acceptable.”

“So were there lines you would not cross?” Strange wondered.

Loki shrugged. “Harming children, mostly. And I rarely had occasion for torture, but that was chiefly because my magic gave me different ways to interrogate.”

Strange and Vision both stared at him, and Loki gave them a look of his own in return. “What
methods did you think Asgard used to get information? The kingdom does not have a ‘declaration of human rights’ or ‘Geneva conventions’. The king’s word is the law. Torture isn’t common these days, it is not used as a regular method of punishment, but as a way of extracting information from important prisoners? Of course.”

“But if magic can do the job better and painlessly...why?” Strange asked blankly.

“Because the Aesir do not trust magic,” Loki answered simply. “How could they then trust any information gained by it? My mother did all she could to stop torture from happening, of course – she was Vanir, and a powerful mage, so she did her best to always just be by when an important prisoner arrived and offer her services. She was the Queen, they could hardly mistrust her. But it wasn’t always possible.”

“If she was the Queen...did she not have the power to simply change that practice?” Strange wondered.

Loki scoffed. “It shows that you have never met Odin. Suffice it to say, no.”

Strange shuddered.

“Do you know what method of...interrogation your mother used, exactly?” Vision asked curiously. “She sounds like someone with a high moral standard, and I would like to learn how to do this in the best, least harmful way possible.”

Loki did know, and though for a moment he was afraid remembering Frigga in enough detail would be too painful, in the end, when he thought back to her teaching him, all he could feel was fond, though bittersweet, memory. “Yes,” he said aloud, “I can teach you. You too, Strange.” He grinned. “Settle down, children, it’s time for a lesson.”

Anthony joined them for lunch, during which they decided to watch some TV show – there was an argument about which, as Strange found Star Trek mostly stupid, which seemed to enrage Anthony completely, but in the end they settled on something with no actors. It was animated instead, and the style seemed to be made for children at first, so Loki was surprised and a little confused, but it was intriguing and had mages in it – elemental mages, very far from his own kind of magic, but still, mages – and so he was invested soon enough.

In fact, they watched an episode or two more then they perhaps strictly speaking should have, because they all knew what was waiting for them once they were done: Maximoff, and arranging her departure from New York.

After four episodes, Anthony finally sighed and told FRIDAY to pause the video. “No use putting it off any more, I suppose,” he muttered. “FRIDAY, tell the others we are ready.”

“Good luck,” Strange said simply, and disappeared through a portal back to his Sanctum.

Danvers came into the room first, along with James. Bruce came after them, looking hesitant but still insisting he wished to go.

The biggest surprise, however, was Barnes.

“Are you certain, Sergeant?” Danvers asked him.

“I need to see the conversation on my own, to know what happened,” Barnes explained. “After
HYDRA, I have...trust issues, my therapist called it. My brain knows you wouldn’t lie to me about sending her away, but-”

“Say no more,” Danvers interrupted. “You can come, but please remove yourself from the situation if you feel it’s making you worse in any way.”

“I assure you the Winter Soldier triggers are gone,” Barnes said immediately.

“I did not mean it in that sense,” Danvers explained, her voice milder now. “But we all have our own...sensitive areas, let us say, and from what you have said, this is one of yours. Take care of yourself, Sergeant.”

Barnes blinked, as if surprised. “Roger that, captain,” he then muttered with a small smile.

Danvers looked around the group, and she seemed to judge them ready, because she led the way as they all piled into the Quinjet.

It was rather telling that they were all preparing for this as if for battle – no, even more so. Loki had seen them before a battle once, after all, and the atmosphere had been far more relaxed.

“So I’ve been thinking about this,” Danvers began, “and I think I should speak to Maximoff privately-”

“No,” several voiced at once declared, very resolutely.

Loki looked around, interested. It seems it had been Anthony, James, Bruce and Barnes who spoke.

“She doesn’t have the best emotional control, you know that,” James began explaining after they all exchanged looks. “What we’re about to tell her is bound to upset her one way or another, and I don’t want to be the victim of her lashing out. Your powers don’t protect you from that.”

Danvers grimaced. “So I should humiliate her before all of the troops, then?” She asked, looking at James in a way that made it seem she was referencing something.

“It might not be an ideal solution, but it’s better than you speaking to her alone.”

“I could assist,” Loki offered. “You already know I can curtail her magic.”

“That’s a good idea,” Danvers agreed immediately. “If no one has any objections-?”

Everyone shook their heads, and so Danvers gave a sharp nod and turned back to the front of the Quinjet, which was being flown by FRIDAY at the moment. “FRI, let Thor and Dany know we’re coming and we’ll want to talk to Maximoff, all right?”

“Done and done, Captain,” FRIDAY replied in a moment, and then there was nothing left to do but wait.

Loki went to sit next to Anthony in the back, and took his hand. “You might not even really have to see her,” he muttered quietly.


As it turned out, he was right.

When they entered the New York base, Thor and Rand were already waiting for them with Maximoff standing between them.
She took one look at their faces, at the way they looked at her, and scoffed. “Let me guess,” she said. “You’re here to kick me off the Avengers.”

Danvers shook her head. “No, or nor exactly. But we can talk in private – or in more privacy than this, at least.”

Maximoff rolled her eyes. “Like I care what you all think. Say what you came to say.”

“Very well. Based on your history with some members of the team and your more recent behaviour, you are being asked to relocate from New York base to the Los Angeles base on a trial basis.”

“Oh? And by my history, I suppose you mean my time with HYDRA, and by recent behaviour you mean that Stark and his most recent piece of ass have managed to poison Vision against me?”

“Wanda, it was not like that-” Vision began, but Danvers shook her head at him.

“Very well. Based on your history with some members of the team and your more recent behaviour, you are being asked to relocate from New York base to the Los Angeles base on a trial basis.”

“Oh? And by my history, I suppose you mean my time with HYDRA, and by recent behaviour you mean that Stark and his most recent piece of ass have managed to poison Vision against me?”

“Wanda, it was not like that-” Vision began, but Danvers shook her head at him.

“No, actually,” she said. “You relationship with Vision had nothing to do with that decision. The fact is that you have alienated people in the Compound, as you know, and given the upcoming additions to the New York roster, your history makes it impossible for you to stay here.”

Wanda’s eyes immediately went to Barnes. It wasn’t hard to guess, really. “Funny, you didn’t seem to mind me so much when I was helping you out at the airport,” she said, her lip curling. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m done with you fucking hypocrites anyway. Apart from Steve, all of you have always looked at me like I’m scum for joining HYDRA – even though I didn’t know it was HYDRA – because if only I tried to find out a little about them, I surely would have known! Well, guess what? I didn’t give a shit! Steve was the only one who got that. It was someone who was offering me a chance to take control of my destiny, help my country take control of theirs, and just like him back in the war, I didn’t really give a shit who it was! You all pretend like I’m scum for that, but do you think Steve asked that many questions when they offered him the serum? And let’s not even talk about pretending that Rhodes, who’s in the US military, is a fucking hero. Ha!”

“Are you...are you seriously comparing the military to HYDRA?” Danvers asked incredulously.

Maximoff gave a bitter laugh. “How dare I, right? Try doing a body count, I think you’ll find the US military has a much higher one, even just counting civilians. Who do you think ordered the strike that got the Stark missiles in our house, that killed our parents, huh? It was fucking NATO. I blamed Stark because him I could conceivably kill, taking on the whole of the US military was a bit too much even for me. But I fucking hate them. In fact, I hate this whole country with its hypocrisy, talking about freedom and justice when all you bring is death, and I hate the smug western Europe which co-signed on that strike, too. ‘Humanitarian bombing’, that’s what one of the regional politicians called it. He was such a great icon of humanitarianism himself, too, everyone looked up to him. Scum. My parents were dead for all his humanitarianism!”

Maximoff was breathing deeply now, her cheeks flushed with anger, and Loki felt acutely uncomfortable. Suddenly he could see Angrboda, talking about the crimes of Asgard, and he could also see himself, getting his own frustrations with Odin off his chest as his not-father was sleeping, wishing he could wake him just to have him hear what he said.

The last thing he wanted was seeing something of himself in Maximoff, and yet...that bitterness, that feeling of powerlessness in face of someone who controlled the whole world...he knew it well.

There was a long silence among the Avengers, too, before Bruce said slowly: “How does this justify Johannesburg, though?”
She immediately deflated. “It doesn’t,” she conceded, looking away from them. “Johannesburg is the one thing I am truly sorry about. I know I never told you, and I had reasons for that, but...I am. I realize, looking back, that by doing that I became just like Americans, using the people abroad for my own ends and not caring what happens to them. I know it’s no excuse, but I was just...so angry. My protectors were lost and I failed at my one goal of killing Stark because of the fucking sceptre.”

That surprised Loki. “What do you mean?”

“It wanted to be taken by him,” Maximoff replied simply. “Probably sensed the potential of Ultron in him. I could usually resist the sceptre’s suggestions, but if it wanted something this intensely...” She shrugged. “If it hadn’t been for the sceptre, Stark would be dead now.”

“Do you still want to kill me?” Anthony asked with a sort of detached, mild curiosity.

“What does it matter now?” She asked, sounding tired. “I still hate you – I hate that you made weapons for the US military and never thought about the deaths they caused, it only started to bother you when you realized they could get into the ‘wrong hands’ and cause deaths of Americans – but no, I don’t particularly want to kill you. I hate so many people now, myself included...” She shrugged. “There is just no point.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally we get some honesty!

‘Humanitarian bombing’ was a term widely attributed to our first post-Iron Curtain president, Havel. He never said that, but he said something to very similar effect regarding the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia, and is widely mocked for it even years after his death. It made a big stain on his pacifist legacy. About 500 civilians died in that bombing. Since I imagine Sokovia used to be part of Yugoslavia before it fell apart, I also imagine this was the bombing where Wanda’s parents died, even though it messes up the timeline a little (she’d be 25 at the time of Ultron, making his comments about her being young make little sense). But well, this is MCU verse, so maybe the Yugoslavia war happened a little later here.

I have no intention of getting into a discussion on whether the bombing was a good or bad choice, because I don’t think people whose parents died there care overmuch for the big picture, and besides, the way I see it, Wanda would look at the Iraq invasion and think “the US didn’t care about right or wrong anyway, they just invade whoever they want on the flimsiest of excuses, so it’s irrelevant whether the official reasons for the Yugoslavia bombing made sense”. Wanda is, effectively, MCU’s response to people who joined ISIS because they were angry at what happened in Iraq. This motivation of hers had great dramatic potential, too, if it was, you know, ever actually explored. Justified anger that turns to unjust means of revenge is a classic villainous motivation that does have potential for redemption, but the redemption has to be actually written, not just silently assumed.

We are not done with the Wanda conversation quite yet, so the effect of her speech will be felt in the next chapter too.

As for Natasha’s spying expertise, Loki’s convo with Fury:
LOKI: It's an impressive cage. Not built, I think, for me.
NICK FURY: Built for something a lot stronger than you.
LOKI: Oh, I've heard. The mindless beast, makes play he's still a man.

Loki’s convo with Natasha, from the first mention of anything Bruce-related (until
then they talked about Clint and then Loki threatened her):
NATASHA: You're a monster.
LOKI: No, you brought the monster.
NATASHA: So, Banner... that's your play.

Tell me, unless she’s a mind reader, how exactly was she supposed to deduce anything
from that one sentence that couldn’t be deduced from what Loki said to Fury, much
more easily? Like, it’s OBVIOUS from the Fury convo Loki wants to provoke the
Hulk. It’s not obvious it’s his main goal, but it’s there.
Some heart to hearts are had, some confessions are made, and there's a crisis.

Folks I was completely blown away by the response to the last chapter, thank you!

"I hate so many people now, myself included..." Maximoff shrugged. “There is just no point.”

There was another long silence.

“All right,” Bruce said then, slowly. “This...needs to be addressed, but perhaps not right here and right now?” He turned to Anthony, looking apologetic. “Tony, I know you hoped it would be solved as soon as possible, but...”

“Yeah, no,” Anthony nodded slowly, “I’m with you, this needs dealing with. Um, should we go back to the Compound or...?”

“Wanda, do you want to be present at our discussion?” Danvers asked directly.

Maximoff mutely shook her head and left the room.

“...so I guess we can stay here?” Anthony suggested.

“I want to be there when you discuss it,” Rand said firmly. “To have so much hatred in her as a hero...something needs to be done about that.”

They all stared at him for a moment, then Danvers gave a small sigh. “All right then, let’s settle down.” They did, finding various places to sit, Loki regretting he could not use magic in front of Thor to conjure a few additional chairs. “Now Bruce,” Danvers began once they all found a place, though some on the floor, “you had something in mind?”

The doctor, who was of those who didn’t manage to get a chair and so was sitting on the floor, leaning on the sofa with Anthony and Loki, replied: “Yeah, just...I really don’t think she should be based in the US.”

“Yeah, no shit,” James muttered from his perch at the table, rubbing his face. “She’s a goddamned security risk.”

“That’s...not entirely what I meant,” Bruce said carefully.

“What did you mean, then?” Danvers encouraged.
Bruce sighed. “Look, I...know some of you are military, or ex-military, and all of you, apart from those from Asgard,” he looked at Thor with a small smile, “are American. So this might be difficult to really get, but...you know I’ve travelled pretty much around the world, and I’ve seen the attitudes Maximoff has before. Usually, in people who had some quite justified beef with the US. And I don’t think that forcing her to live here and work, effectively, for – or at least with – American law enforcement is doing her any good at all.”

“Are we seriously worrying about her good now?” James asked incredulously.

“She is still a member of the Avengers,” Danvers reminded him in a conciliatory tone. “As such, it is my job to worry about her good. And you have to admit, if a NATO missile really did kill her parents...”

James frowned. “The mission in Yugoslavia was necessary, the atrocities there-”

“Jim, now is really not the time,” Danvers interrupted. “Do you think she cares? Do you think she even should care, when it was her parents who were killed? Can you honestly tell me you never knew of any missions with civilian causalities that were completely unnecessary?”

James fell silent at that, and no one else spoke for a while.

“I thought America protected this world, like Asgard protects the realms?” Thor asked into the silence, and Loki clenched his fists where they were out of sight.

“Yes, buddy,” Anthony said drily. “Pretty much exactly like that.”

Thor frowned. “I don’t understand what you’re implying-”

“Again, not now,” Danvers interrupted. “We need to solve the Maximoff situation. I agree with Bruce, staying in the US is not a good idea for her - both for security reasons and because of her personal mental health. What do you all think?”

She looked around at the others. Anthony shrugged. “You know I’ll be glad to have her far from me,” he said. “That can’t surprise anyone.”

Danvers simply nodded, and her eyes moved to Vision. “The idea of Wanda being out of my reach...saddens me, on some level,” he said after a short hesitation, “but on another level, I recognize it might even be the best for me, at this point in time, and certainly the best for her. I agree.”

Danvers turned to Barnes next, who looked surprised. “I didn’t think I got a vote,” he said. “And I’d say that yeah, getting her elsewhere is a good plan – I’m with Stark on this one – but...she needs supervision. You must be sure she won’t turn against you.”

Danvers nodded sharply, and then turned to Rand and motioned for him to answer. “I feel like we’re not addressing the real issue here,” he pointed out. “Where she lives will not change her heart, and that is the important part. I could perhaps bring her to K’un-Lun-”

“Yeah, no,” Bruce interrupted firmly, getting a surprised look from Rand. “I agree with you that she needs therapy – don’t we all? - but she should receive that from certified mental health professionals.”

Anthony gave a very firm nod to that, and Rand subsided, though he still looked dissatisfied and muttered something about meditation being more help than therapy. Loki fought the urge to set him on fire. He had extensive experience with meditation, and he knew precisely how little it alone
could do for the kind of anger Maximoff had inside of her.

“I do not understand matters of Midgardian political geography,” Thor declared. “I will leave this up to you.”

“So we are decided,” Danvers summed up. “Maximoff should leave the US, but...where should she go? Sokovia would be ideal, but I don’t think they would take her back after her role in Ultron.”

“They wouldn’t,” Anthony confirmed. “They said enough in the Council about her for me to be pretty sure. But...I might have an idea.”

“What is it?” Danvers asked.

Anthony shook his head. “I need to discuss it with a few people, so I don’t want to even mention it before I do. I’ll need a few days.”

Danvers nodded in understanding. “All right, then let me just talk to Wanda.”

She headed to the door Maximoff had disappeared through, and gave a knock. “Wanda?” She called.

After a moment, the door opened, and the witch simply stared at her. “We’ve discussed your situation,” Danvers said, her voice calm and even, “and it seems to us that it would be best both for you and for others if you became part of a superheroes team based somewhere else than in the US. Do you agree?”

Maximoff’s eyes widened, and she was silent for a moment. “Is that...possible?” She asked then.

“We don’t know yet,” Danvers told her plainly. “We will try, but first we need to know if that is something you are even interested in.”

“Yes,” Maximoff said immediately. “That is...yes. I would be...grateful, as long as it’s not- not Britain, or-”

“Don’t worry, we won’t send you to western Europe either,” Danvers reassured her.

Maximoff only nodded, not looking at Danvers. She looked entirely...thrown.

“All right, I think we’re done here,” Danvers declared after a moment of silence. “We’ll let you know as soon as we have news.”

Once again, Maximoff just nodded silently, and there were confirming nods all around.

“Please keep in touch about this,” Rand insisted. “I want to know she gets the help she needs.”

“Yes, that was a good point,” Danvers agreed, “and in fact, Bruce made an excellent follow-up point with therapy being something that would be useful to us in general. I will look into finding a mental health professional who would be willing to take on the Avengers and work exclusively with us, as long as no one is uncomfortable with sharing the same therapist. But it would lower the security risks.”

Rand seemed like that, once again, wasn’t exactly what he had in mind, but he only nodded and bid them goodbye. Thor followed suit, and then the Compound crew piled back into the Quinjet and flew north.

The journey was made in silence.
The moment they entered the Compound, Vision excused himself, and the others just looked at each other for a moment before Danvers just collapsed onto the nearest sofa and James went to the bar to pour drinks.

“So,” he said, his voice just the slightest bit tense, “since we’re on the topic, and just so I know where I stand: is there anyone else who has issues with me being in the military?”

There was a short silence, then Bruce sighed, leaning on the back of a sofa. “I don’t – really, I don’t, it’s your career choice and I do trust that you always try to do all you can to protect civilians, but…I have been thinking about it on the way back. And- as much as I hate to say it, Maximoff did raise a relevant point with this. She must not be the only one who sees your loyalty to the military and does not associate it with protecting the US, but with foreign invasions. The Avengers might be US based, but we are an international force under the UN, and...I do think it might cause problems. It might make some countries less willing to let us into their territory and so on. It’s not my job to decide this for the Avengers, or for you, but in my personal opinion...it would be better if there were no direct ties between us and the military.”

James thought about it for a while, as he brought Danvers her drink. “The Council never made any such demands,” he said then.

“I don’t imagine they would have,” Loki pointed out. “You suffered permanent injury serving for the Avengers, and were one of the very few who remained loyal to them. It would hardly be in good form to ask something like that.”

Anthony scowled. “I don’t want Rhodey to have to leave his job,” he said. “I know you like being in the military, platypus, even though it’s a bother sometimes – often, even.”

James smiled a little. “I’m a big boy, Tony, I know this is not just about what I want. I will think about it, and talk to the Council, and let you know how I decided. Honestly, being on a long term leave, on loan to the Avengers so to speak, wouldn’t be bad at all – I’d enjoy a chance to stay here more and not always have to be in two places at once. It’s the idea of permanently retiring from active duty that doesn’t sit well with me. But...like I said, I will discuss it.”

Danvers pressed his hand. “Thank you, Jim,” she said simply.

There was another silence, then Anthony spoke, his voice breaking a little: “Barnes, if- if you want to know what I’ve thought of for Maximoff, come on along. You too, Bruce. You have more personal reasons to be worried about her, so I’d like you to okay my plans.”

Loki froze, and Barnes looked like a deer caught in the headlight. “It’s fine, Mr. Stark,” he said, “I trust you.”

“Come along,” Anthony said simply, standing up and ignoring him. “I won’t beg.”

Reluctantly, Barnes followed as Loki fell into step beside Anthony, heading to their rooms, and hissed: “What are you doing?”

“This is more important than my remaining issues,” Anthony answered simply.

Once they were in their room, Anthony turned around to face the others and said: “I thought of calling Shuri, and asking if Maximoff could go to Wakanda.” He took a deep breath. “I know they are not a dumping ground for our problems, and it was Maximoff who caused those Wakandan deaths in Lagos, so it would have to be framed as community service or retraining or something, probably, but I thought...I thought she could learn a more productive approach to anti-colonialism
from them than what she gets here. Even though it’s not their job to teach her, and I will probably have to promise them the stars if I want them to even consider this, which is fair, really. I could also call Bobby and send her to Brazil, I guess, but I do think that would be much less productive for her. Besides, Bobby is my friend, and she would hate that on principle.”

“Shuri is your friend too,” Loki pointed out.

“Yeah, but Maximoff wouldn’t spend her time with the princess, would she?”

“I just think it shouldn’t be a reward,” Barnes interjected quietly. “I think it’s a good idea, I do, but – Wakanda is a dream country in so many ways. And Maximoff didn’t even go through a trial. I-”

“You are right,” Anthony agreed immediately. “It mustn’t be seen as a reward my either her or the public – American or Wakandan. If I manage to negotiate this – and it’s one big if – it won’t be framed that way, and it won’t actually be that way. She will have to do her bit there, Barnes, I give you my word. I don’t think the Wakandans would have it any other way, anyway.”

Barnes slowly nodded. “Thanks,” he muttered after a moment, and left, Bruce following after him with a simple nod.

Once they were gone, Anthony followed Danvers’ example and collapsed to a sofa too, and Loki brought him his drink.

“Thanks, you’re a saviour,” Anthony muttered, taking a large gulp.

Loki smiled in response, sitting down next to him.

“If this is to work, I will have to get her out of the country before Rogers arrives,” Anthony muttered. “Once he’s here, he’d never let her out of his clutches again, and if she feels this way about America...god, being so dependent on him, feeling like he was the only one who understood her, must have fucked her up. I hate sympathizing with her, and yet-”

“Yes,” Loki muttered. “I know precisely what you mean.”

They just leaned against each other for a while, sipping their drinks, before Anthony said: “She was right, you know.”

“About what?”

“I never did care if my weapons were used for missions – or even whole wars – that were justified. Not even after Afghanistan, really.”

“If you hadn’t supplied the military, someone else would have,” Loki pointed out.

Anthony gave a bitter smile. “Do you know that this is what people who collaborate in dictatorships and work for shady organizations always tell themselves? ‘If it wasn’t me, someone else would do it, and I can at least mitigate the evil this government or company or whatever does.’ And all the while it’s just an excuse to accept that comfortable, high-paying, prestigious job, in most cases. And still it’s more justified in their case than in mine, because you can actually do some good even in a government of a dictatorship, I suppose. But it isn’t like my weapons were killing less people than other weapons’ designers. On the contrary, they were killing more. And almost all the money I have, I earned by that. It’s like you said months ago: an empire of blood, only I build it up extensively after inheriting it.”

Loki sighed. “Anthony, you finance the Avengers with your money, you have founded several
“It’s a convenient excuse, isn’t it?” Anthony interrupted. “I do need the money to be Iron Man, maintaining the armour is expensive, as is maintaining Rhodey’s and paying for Brunhilde’s drink and many other things that are part of the Avengers expenses. But do you think I would give it all away if I wasn’t Iron Man? Live in a small flat and ride the subway to work?” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. I don’t know how to live like that, I don’t want to live like that. And yeah, it’s about the comfort...but it’s also about the power. Having money gives you so much of it...I wouldn’t want to give that up, either.”

Loki took his hand and pressed it. “You use it for good,” he tried to argue.

“Do I?” Anthony asked archly, and the bitterness and even self-hatred was clear as day in his voice. “Not everyone would agree. Hell, fucking Captain America wouldn’t agree. And even if I do, what’s the guarantee I always will? That I won’t lose my mind when I get old, as lots of people do, and start financing something idiotic? You can’t trust people with power just because they were heroic at some point, Rogers proved that beyond any doubt. Again, it’s the same as when we talked about you, and about what happened after Thor was exiled. The main problem, here, is that no one person should have this much power. And I gave you a pretty speech about how you should dismantle it after Thanos, but will I dismantle mine? Of course not. I could start a trust fund for the Avengers, another one for science and ecology, distribute the money, choose responsible board members...but the long and short of it is that I don’t trust anyone else, except for Pepper I guess, to make good decisions with my money, which really just makes me exactly like Rogers, doesn’t it?”

“You told me you created a fund for the Avengers,” Loki reminded him.

“Yeah, the council administers that,” Anthony conceded, “but I’m the main donor to that fund, and the Council knows it. I tried to avoid repeating the situation from before Siberia, when I simply paid for everything out of my pocket, basically, because I realize how that created an impossible conflict of interests. But it’s really not that different now. Okay, so other people contribute to the fund, but much less than me, and so the Council basically lets me do whatever I want with the money anyway, because they don’t want me to stop financing this. I guess I couldn’t just randomly yank someone’s equipment or finances now, but...”

“I simply meant that you clearly trusted someone who wasn’t you or your friends with you money,” Loki explained.

Anthony exhaled. “Yeah, I guess I do trust the Council.” He snorted. “Maybe I should give all of my money to the UN. They’re inefficient as fuck, but at least I don’t fear them suddenly turning crazy and dictatorial or racist or whatever.”

Loki frowned. “Is that truly such a...widespread concern?”

“Have you seen what’s happening in this country?” Anthony asked. “Well I guess not, you have better things to do than watch our news,” he then answered himself. “But yeah, the kind of people who get into power lately...and it’s not just here, Europe shows the same tendencies, and even some some countries in Asia or South America are getting worse in this respect...nationalist strongmen, the media call them. And I just – one rule I gave myself when I began the whole superhero gig was that I’d stay out of politics. With my money and Iron Man, it would be disturbingly easy to basically run the world through running America, and so I told myself not to touch that. It helped that I was never really interested, of course, but still. I know myself, and know I’m tempted to fix a problem when I see it, so with American politics lately...well. So I stayed out of it, but then when you stay out of it and try not to give too big donations and then an idiot wins...is it your fault? It comes back to having too much power. No one should feel like their one
decision, where one person sends their money, could have changed the election result.” He snorted. “It’s like what Peter says, great power and great responsibility. And there’s a good deal more power in the money I have than in the suit I fly. So following Peter’s logic, when I don’t use that power and something bad happens in politics, it’s my fault.”

Loki just barely stopped himself from groaning. “I am not sure that following a teenagers advice when it comes to the intersection of money and politics is the best decision,” he said a little dryly.

Anthony waved his hand. “No, I know. And I know that if every billionaire followed that logic, our politics would be reduced to nothing but competing interests of one percenters. So, once again. Too much power, but I’m too afraid to give up the reins.”

“So you...” and Loki really hated thinking of this, but he made himself ask. “Do you have a will?”

“Of course I do,” Anthony scoffed. “I fight gods in a flying armour, do you think I am an idiot?”

“Then who do you trust with your money there?” Loki wondered.

“Pepper, Rhodey, Peter...a bunch of people. But it’s easier, because well, after I’m dead, I can’t physically take care of anything, right? So it’s not my responsibility any more, I have to give it to someone. But as long as I am alive...” He sighed, and shook his head.

Loki had no answer for him, or no easy one at any rate, and so he simply pressed Anthony to his side and held him tightly as he thought about the problem. “If the UN came up with a law saying that all billionaires have to redistribute their wealth, would you take up arms to fight it?” He asked after a while.

“What? No!” Anthony replied immediately.

“Then never say you are as bad as Rogers again,” Loki said firmly. “Not being willing to give up the power you have when all the others are keeping it is entirely different from fighting an attempt at a systemic solution. You do what you can, as much as you can, Anthony. You do enough.”

Anthony sighed. “I just-”

“No.” Loki put all the emphasis he could into that one word. “No buts, no exceptions, no caveats. You do enough. You are enough. In fact-” Loki swallowed, but it was time to say it. He felt it in his bones. “You are amazing, Anthony, and I love you.”

Anthony only stared at him for a moment, blinking. “But- you- you do?” He asked then, weakly. “It’s only been like two months for you, I know you-”

“Shh,” Loki said, putting a finger to Anthony’s lips. “Like I said, no buts. Yes, I love you. I realized it a few visits ago. Just the fact that you try so hard to do what is best, that you think about all this...all you do for me, the patience you have-I...”

That was when Anthony stopped him with a kiss.

It was slightly desperate and very sloppy, but Loki couldn’t help feeling it was the best kiss he had ever received.

Because everything Anthony felt, everything they both felt, was in it.
Anthony, apparently, had originally planned a date for that night, but they were both too exhausted to even think of it even before the mind-blowing sex they had, and so after dozing in bed for a little while, Loki instead reluctantly got up to talk to Brunhilde. It was the last thing he needed to do on Midgard, and he would have to leave very early the next morning. He had FRIDAY contact Mystique to that effect, and then with a sigh, headed to the Valkyrie.

She opened the door for him and he could see in her eyes that she hated it with the entirety of her being, but nevertheless, as she motioned him inside where Drew was sitting on the sofa, she told him: “Next time you go to Jotunheim, I’ll go with you, to talk to Angrboda. Depending on how that goes, I might go to Nifleheim as well, but I don’t know if—”

Loki only nodded in understanding. He would certainly not force this. “I go early this morning,” he said instead. “Do you wish to go with me, or wait for the next visit?”

She gave a world-weary sigh and looked at Drew for a moment. “I’ll go with you,” he said then. “but...I make no promises about what’s going to happen.”

“That’s fine,” Loki assured her. “Thank you.”

She only nodded, and Loki took a moment to enjoy the relief that his plans would not collapse immediately at least, before he remember the other business he wished to discuss – or, more precisely, needed. “I brought some books on mind healing from Asgard,” he said. “I know little enough about it and don’t have the time to study it, but...may I leave them with you?”

She gave him a look. “Do you expect me to learn healing magic?”

Loki snorted. “No. But I don’t have that much time before I leave, and...Strange used to be a doctor, didn’t he? It should be his field, more or less, and even though Midgardian magic is different, I do believe he has more of a chance to make this work properly than I do. But as I said, I do not have the time to meet with him about this, and you know enough about Asgard that you should be able to explain anything that’s unclear to him from that end.”

Brunhilde grunted. “Sure, I’ll help if needed, but I’ll be going away with you now, and you know it’d be best if he started on it as soon as possible.” She shrugged. “Give them to Vision. He’s been seeing Strange all the time lately, and with the stone in his head, he might even understand them himself, Asgardian or not, healer or not. They could work on it together.” Her lips twisted. “If there is someone I would trust with controlling Hela, it’s Vision.”

“You and me both,” Loki agreed, and after some thought, added: “It’s a good idea, thank you. See you at five in the morning before the compound?”

“Joy,” she muttered, and turned to Drew with a clear intention of making the most possible use out of the remaining time, giving Loki his cue to leave.

Obediently, he headed to Vision’s room to explain the problem.

Vision, thankfully, was not only willing, but intrigued as well, looking over the books Loki gave him. “I am certain Stephan will be very interested in this,” he said. “Is there a chance this could be used to heal others than just Asgardians? I found Bruce’s comment about therapy today as important as Captain Danvers did...”

Loki frowned. “I suppose there is no reason why it should not, but I am not certain the spells have the same effect Midgardian therapy does. I believe it is more along the lines of what medication is used for here? And additionally, physical damage to the brain, which from what I know
Midgardians cannot heal at all.”

“Hmm.” Vision frowned a little. “Well, I will consult it with Stephan – that is his speciality, after all,” he noted. “Thank you.”

“No, I thank you. And please ask him to focus on healing damage from trauma.”

“I will,” Vision promised, and with that, Loki departed.

He contacted Angrboda to let her know he would be bringing Brunhilde with him – they seemed thrilled by the news – and then there was only saying goodbye to Anthony left.

It was never a cheerful occasion, but this time Loki was particularly troubled.

“I do not like that you will be dealing with Maximoff without me,” he said. “I will try to come as often as possible, but-”

“Hey, Loki, no,” Anthony interrupted him. “I saw how tired and stressed you were when you came last time. Just...take it easy, okay? Whatever you need. I can handle it for three weeks if necessary, and with Vision and Strange on my side, I can definitely handle Maximoff. Not to mention that it will be Carol doing the actual handling, so I am absolutely not worried. All right?”

Loki reluctantly nodded, and they went to embrace.

Loki unfortunately needed to sleep to be able to function the entirety of the long day that awaited him, so he could not spend the whole night with Anthony in more pleasant ways, as he wished. Nevertheless, they did make time for a – well, a quickie, as Anthony would say, before they went to sleep, and in the morning Loki tiptoed out of bed with only a light kiss to Anthony’s forehead.

Brunhilde was already waiting for him, looking as grumpy as Loki felt as he took her to meet with Mystique.

The Jotun immediately froze. “What is she doing here?” She asked.

“She is travelling with us to Jotunheim, like Vision was last time,” Loki said impatiently. “Now come on.”

A little reluctantly, Mystique did.

Angrboda welcomed them as they always did, but soon enough they dragged Brunhilde away for a private conversation, leaving Loki alone with Mystique for an extended period of time for...the first time, he realized.

They sat in front of the house on an ice bench, both in their Jotun form. “We’re siblings,” she said after a very long silence. “Should it mean something?”

Loki shrugged. “I have two full-blooded Jotun brothers I have never met.”

“I know,” Mystique said with a nod. “Angrboda told me. I think I would like to meet them too at some point. They’re my brothers too, after all.”

Loki thought about that. “After the war with Thanos,” he said then.

Mystique nodded again. “There is no rush,” she said. “I am still getting used to this, to there actually being people similar to me, not just ‘similarly weird’, as the mutants on Earth are.”
Loki had not even begun to think about it that way, but… “Angrboda is a good first Jotun to meet, I think.”

“I think so too – I wish they were my father instead of that idiotic Farbauti who abandoned me.”

Loki almost choked at how similar those feelings were to his own. “Yes,” he said. “I have seen them with their daughter and...yes, they are a good parent, I think.”

There was another silence. “I have never really had a family, at least to as long as I can remember,” Mystique said then, staring off into the distance and trying and failing to keep her tone matter-of-fact. “Magneto and the others are my family now, of course, have been for a long time, but still...the idea of relatives who are not ashamed of me is...curious.”

It gave Loki a pause. He had been mostly ignoring his connection to Mystique ever since finding out about it. But then, he remembered his adoptive family very well, and had a score of bad experiences to make him cautious. He supposed that in her case, he would have been curious, too.

After Thanos, he told himself firmly. This, too, would have its time after Thanos. If he did not survive, after all, it would just make everything more complicated if he tried to form any...family attachments.

They sat together in silence for a while longer before Brunhilde emerged. To Loki’s astonishment, her eyes were red-rimmed. “Let’s go,” she said gruffly.

“To Midgard…?” Loki asked a little uncertainly.

“No, to Nifleheim,” she managed to get out.

Loki only nodded, grateful but knowing this was not the time to voice it, and turned a questioning look to Mystique.

“You can stay,” Angerboda, who came out after Brunhilde, assured her. “Actually, now that I know I do not have to fear Odin so much, I can take you back to Midgard myself at any point you wish, you do not need to depend on Loki.”

Mystique gave them a grateful smile and nodded, and Loki extended his hands for his two travelling companions, stepping over to Nifleheim.

As they set out, he saw Brunhilde look around and then set her teeth against the hostile atmosphere of Nifleheim. Their journey continued, and he could almost see her hardening her heart and repeating to herself that Hela deserved all this.

He wondered how long that would last.

Finally they reached the prison, and there was the by now familiar sight of Hela rushing to welcome her mother...and then pausing when she saw someone else.

Loki watched her eyes widen, and then there was such a complicated play of emotions in them Loki could not understand it.

“Hilde?” She asked at length, and her voice was dominated by incredulity.

“Yes,” Brunhilde replied, and though she tried for a hard voice, other things could be heard behind it, too.
Hela’s mouth spread in a parody of a smile. “Isn’t that supposed to be ‘yes, my princess’?” She asked.

Brunhilde spat on the ground – or tried to, anyway, since there wasn’t anything exactly like a firm ground in the borders of Hela’s prison.

Hela saw that and frowned. “Why are you here?”

“They want to get you out of this prison and in a more comfortable one,” Brunhilde replied directly. “But given that it’s owing to me they even found you at all, I get a veto right. So I came to see if I thought you deserved it.”

Hela’s face contorted. “How dare you,” she said. “You have no right to judge me! You! I should be your queen-“

“Shut up,” Brunhilde barked. Hela was so surprised she actually did. “Let me make one thing clear,” the Valkyrie continued, “if I agree to let you out of here, it won’t be because I don’t think you deserve to spend the rest of your life rotting in prison, and it definitely won’t be because I have any respect for you left. It will be solely because there are now people in my life I don’t want to think me a heartless monster.”

Hela stared at her, apparently speechless.

“My darling,” Angrboda said softly into the silence, “you really must understand. There is no kingdom waiting for you...But there might be freedom, or more freedom than there is now. There might be a chance for me to see you whenever I wish, for however long I wish. You might have a chance to ride again, to read books again, to spar again...”

Hela just continued staring.

“Do you know you were almost used as Thanos’ tool?” Brunhilde asked.

That, finally, woke Hela up. “What?” She spat.

“Yes – if Loki and his lover weren’t smart enough to see the trap before it was fully sprung, you might be doing his work by now. He planned to set you free, let you destroy Asgard, and then when it was done, simply kill you and take the treasures of Asgard for himself.”

“He would not have killed me,” Hela said dismissively.

Loki scoffed. “Have you ever heard of Infinity Stones?”

Her lip curled. “Who do you take me for?”

Loki judged it safer not to answer that. “Then it might interest you that Thanos collects them,” he said instead, “and that he would already have had the power stone when he came to Asgard, almost certainly.”

That brought Hela up short. “The power stone?” She asked uncertainly.

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “Asgard’s defences at full stand a chance against it, as you know. After you ravaged the realm in your fight for power and revenge? He would be through any remaining defences like knife through butter, and then you would have been dead and it would all have been his. It might still happen, if you insist on your plan.”
There was a long silence. “Why should I trust you in this?” Hela asked then.

Brunhilde shrugged. “You don’t have to – he used me as a tool as well, and I chose to get my revenge, but if you prefer to stay in his employ...”

Hela bared her teeth at that.

“At any rate, we will not let you out unless you give up your plans, so really, it does not matter to us overmuch,” Loki added, lying through his teeth. “Just think about it.”

And with that, he withdrew, Brunhilde following him, to give Angrboda some time with their daughter before it was time to return and bring Brunhilde back to Midgard.

As always, it came too soon for Angrboda and not soon enough for Loki, who had too much work to be spending his time in the oppressive atmosphere of Helheim doing nothing. Nevertheless, Angrboda went without an argument, and once he delivered her to her home and stepped to Midgard, Brunhilde asked for some more time to think, leaving Loki free to go and see Anthony.

He found him exhausted in their rooms, nursing a glass and mustering a tired smile when he saw Loki. Loki came to kiss him, then asked softly: “What happened?”

“Nothing unexpected,” Anthony replied as Loki led him to the sofa and settled them down. “Just...I’ve been negotiating with Wakanda about Maximoff, and it’s a pain. Not that I blame them,” he hastened to add, “they have every right to ask for what they’re asking, but it’s still exhausting.”

“Will they take her?” Loki went straight to the point.

“They will,” Anthony confirmed, “if I can deliver what they are asking for – which is, essentially, rounding up any stray bits of vibranium outside of Wakanda and bringing it back to them. Including Rogers’ shield.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I thought they liked the Captain?”

“T’Challa does, and he might even give him the shield back at some point, but I have it now, and that they don’t particularly like, given how my father got it. But anyway, this of course causes issues with the Accords Council, who want Rogers in top shape once he signs, and while Wakanda could sort it out with them on their own, since this is something I, primarily, want to happen, they’re mostly leaving it up to me, so...like I said, exhausting. But hopefully the next time you come, it will all be done with.”

Loki smiled at that and pressed Anthony closer.

“What about you?” the man asked, and Loki retold their trip to Nifleheim before they watched a few episodes of Star Trek – all they had time for before Loki had to go to Asgard.

His day as Odin passed in the usual exhausting blur of diplomacy and court matters, and once again Loki retired as soon as it was feasible at all, only to depart to Jotunheim and then to Nifleheim with Angrboda.

It was there that his Asgardian alarms reached him.

There was an emergency.

Someone was entering Odin’s chambers, needing to speak to the king.
And Loki was in Helheim, a place that, by its nature, made it impossible to teleport out of.

Damn.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently I’m into cliffhangers now. Sorry.

Also, so maybe I thought we should address the fact that we have a billionaire as our hero at some point.

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